

## These Ghostly Archives

Gail Crowther, Lancaster University  
& Peter K. Steinberg

*Why do some people, including myself, enjoy in certain novels, biographies and historical works the representation of “daily life” of an epoch, of a character? Why this curiosity about petty details: schedules, habits, meals, lodgings, clothing etc? Is it the hallucinatory relish of “reality” (the very materiality of “that once existed”)? And is it not the fantasy itself which invokes the “detail”, the tiny private scene in which I can easily take my place?*

Roland Barthes (1975)

Archives are very magical places.

Carolyn Steedman (2001) describes how archives are full of dust. Dust of long gone eras and people, dust of the past. Carrying out archival work for Sylvia Plath studies is especially magical. As Barthes states above, we can indulge our curiosity for petty details, we can understand the more practical side of Plath sending poems and letters to magazines. We can see the day-to-day life of a writer, the manuscripts, the drafts, the rejections, the triumphs, and the odd and curious glimpses into a domestic life running parallel to the writer’s life.

The following will explore the experiences of two Plath archival professionals. Peter K. Steinberg’s work carried out in Smith College, in America, and Gail Crowther’s work in the BBC Written Archives Centre in England. It aims to show the excitement of planning archival work, the thrill of handling original documents, the utter joy of finding small unpublished details. We wrote this paper in the spirit of what Anita Helle proposes in “Archival Matters”, “Research on Plath is not conducted merely to produce new academic commodities – it is conducted out of love for her

writing and a desire to do justice to the complexity of her art.”<sup>1</sup> We also aim to show how working in an archive impacts the researcher. There is something very moving about placing yourself back in time, into somebody else’s life, a shifting of perception, a blurring of identity. We both felt very strongly the spectrality of Plath during our studies and Julian Wolfreys claims that “the question of spectres is therefore the question of life, of the limit between the living and the dead, everywhere it presents itself” (2002:x). Each folder we opened was full of Plath’s *dust*, her presence. Each letter read and manuscript handled brought about an uncanny revivification. The subsequent paper is written in our own voices, it is a direct conversation between the two of us at our opposite ends of the Atlantic spoken directly to you, the reader, as we share discoveries, places, papers, a life.

GC: I had not imagined in all my emailing and planning and scheduling that



the BBC Written Archives Centre in Reading<sup>2</sup> (pictured, left) would be housed in a small, white bungalow.

I had exchanged emails with my assigned archivist, booked a desk in the reading room and requested the

full correspondence between Sylvia Plath and the BBC between the years 1957 and 1963. This was all arranged months in advance in collaboration with Peter, so then I had to organise travel, find a hotel, and sort out time away from the university. I read Carolyn Steedman’s book on her archival work entitled Dust; her descriptions of long days hunched over a desk rooting

<sup>1</sup> Helle, (p. 11).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/contacts/wac.shtml>



through files, and the insular inward looking study that suddenly makes the outside world a very real shock. Nights in crummy hotels, mind abuzz with the day's findings, the grotty food, the scribbling, the Derridean *archive fever* of it all! I worried that my expectations would not be met, that handling Sylvia's letters would mean nothing, that I would feel nothing. Surely a large part of archival research is the anticipation. What is there? What will I find? How will I feel?

PKS: The most difficult question when visiting an archive is this: "With what materials do I start?" Even after eleven years of conducting research in the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College, I still struggle how to begin each trip.

In assembling information about Plath's archival materials for an updated bibliography, I wrote to many archives with smaller holdings, asking for photocopies of what they held. Some archives do not or cannot supply photocopies based on donor restrictions, copyright laws, or other institutional policies. The BBC Written Archives Centre in Reading, England, would not supply photocopies without the permission of the copyright holder, the Estate of Sylvia Plath.<sup>3</sup> A string of requests to the Estate for permission to receive photocopies went unanswered.<sup>4</sup> As Gail resides in England, I asked her if she had the time to go to Reading to see

---

<sup>3</sup> The BBC Written Archives Centre will not supply photocopies of materials originated through their employees and their offices.

<sup>4</sup> On December 10 2008, the request was finally answered – and denied. Permission to obtain photocopies of unpublished materials is something the Estate will not grant as they plan for future publications.

what they held.

GC: According to Derrida, archives are places where things begin, where power originates, where people can indulge their obsession with starting and finishing points. I agree they are certainly places of power, but the real power emanates from opening a file, handling a signed piece of paper, gaining an insight into unpublished letters and works.

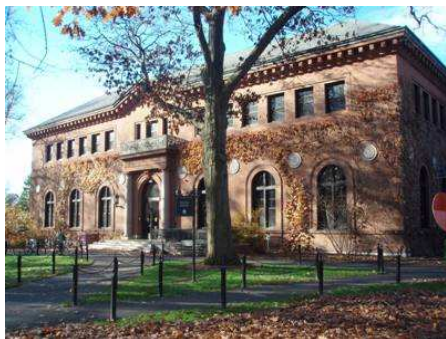
The small white bungalow that houses the BBC Written Archives is a little like a small white house from a fairy tale, set in a wide, leafy street near Caversham Park. I remember a white clapboard front and shutters on the windows, but now I begin to doubt my memory, begin to suspect that my fantasy is turning the building into an unreal scene from a Brothers Grimm story. Peter tells me that it sounds as

though I am describing 26 Elmwood Road (pictured, right). I had spent the night in a spectacularly seedy hotel up four flights of threadbare, carpeted stairs. The room



held traces of the last occupant, a vague lingering smell of illicit food and drink. The curtain hung from the rail at a sad angle and I sat typing at the desk under a sloping roof thinking it was a little like a destitute writer's garret. I let Peter know I am here. I pick up his anticipation. Arriving in an unknown place at night is always unnerving. Each street seems to hold menace. My hotel window looked out onto a back parking lot lit by an eerie orange light. It was slightly misty. I spent my evening re-reading all the archive rules, the terms and conditions, how to handle the files, what to do upon arrival.

PKS: I moved to Massachusetts – in part – to be closer to Smith College and its Plath Collection. Since then, my research trips have been day trips, leaving Boston before sunrise and returning after sunset. I arrive earlier than necessary to load up on caffeine and enjoy the campus before its day gets going. Of course, at Smith, there is more than the Sylvia Plath Collection in the Mortimer Rare Book Room. Plath’s presence is all over the campus and town: Haven House, Lawrence House, Child’s Park, and other places familiar before they were ever seen. On this cool November morning, the dawn is wet and mist floats over Paradise Pond, enjoying its brief life before burning away by whatever heat the sun musters. The leaves vary in color; I shuffle through them like a child.



The Mortimer Rare Book Room is on the third floor of the Neilson Library (pictured, left) overlooking a quad. The room is rich and warm, the walls are glass-fronted bookcases and the tables are rarely in the same set-up from visit to visit. They have a shelf of books by Plath: first editions, limited editions, and some original periodicals. Recently, they began displaying books from her personal library in the case.

GC: Morning brought a very different view to my whole scene. I arrived at the archives at the same time as another researcher and once again Steedman’s

account of her work made me smile – the huddles of researchers at opening time ready with their pencils. I had become one of them. I was introduced to my archivist, given a locker and then led to my desk in the reading room.



Despite the small appearance of the archive from the outside, the reading room (pictured, left) was open and airy, quite vast with long tables and shelves of books. I saw my desk with three light brown folders laid neatly out, SYLVIA PLATH written on the front. As always at these moments, you get a monumental jolt when in a slightly clichéd Hollywood movie way, everything around you shrinks, so that the one object in front of you, the one thing looming larger than everything else, takes up your entire field of vision. This is how I felt the first time I read a poem by Sylvia Plath. My school library and the dark afternoon and the deepening skies of Northern England, shrank to the black ink on the page. “I am silver and exact.”<sup>5</sup>

PKS: I am now on a first name basis with the staff at Smith. What a long way I have come from my first visit, in May of 1998. The night before my first visit, I had a dream that the archivists would not let me into the room. Ted Hughes was there and looked upset and distracted. I asked if he was all right, and he said, “Fine, thank you.” I felt like a poser – hardly like a scholar – and out of place, nervous and ridiculous. I did not know what to do, how to act, what to say. I misread and misunderstood the schedule of fees thinking I had to pay \$50 per hour to conduct research!

---

<sup>5</sup> “Mirror.” The Collected Poems (p.173).

Karen Kukil, used to dealing with newcomers, brought out Plath's journals to acclimate me to the experience. Although now published in full, they remain the best introduction for the neophyte to what Smith holds.

The journals were a jumping off point to the *Ariel* drafts and their double-sided narratives, the short stories and drafts of *The Bell Jar*, and the correspondence, both personal and professional. Smith has "realia", too.

Among these items include: her typewriter – used between the ages of 12 and 22 – a hand-painted baby cradle, and the elm plank desk (pictured, right) where Plath became something more than a poet – where she became history. Plath's teal



green address book and her 1962 Lett's Royal Office Tablet Diary for 1962 provide a wealth of biographical information and curiosity. A close reading of the diary reveals how busy her life was once she returned to London in December, 1962. Financial materials include her checkbook stub for that damned oven. The audio recordings give Plath her voice. Listening to her recorded poetry you can hear – between words, lines, stanzas – inhaling and exhaling. And, of course, there is much more. Archives hold the evidence – the "stuff" – of life after breathing ceases and dust settles. Leaving the archive, "I cannot help smiling at what it is I know."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> "Three Women," *Winter Trees* (p. 40).

GC: I imagine there is something very different to handling personal artefacts in an archive. Peter tells me about desks, cribs, journals. I imagine the smudged traces of much handling, the warmth of a domestic setting, the crib by candlelight. Business correspondence is a little different, brisker, oddly more removed. And yet, the domestic does peek through as though it simply cannot help but spread itself onto the page. Since the files in Reading were stored from 1963 backwards to 1957, I read the Plath/BBC story in reverse. It somehow seemed relevant that the messiness of time should impose itself in this way. Here I was reading and handling correspondence over forty years old, conjuring up people who were dead and gone. Time was not chronological anyway, it was disrupted and out of joint. But it stopped abruptly, right here at the start with the final letter from the BBC to Plath written on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1963. It was a letter from Leonie Cohn, of the Talks Department, who was dealing with Plath's long prose piece on the landscape of her childhood, later known to us as "Ocean 1212-W." The first revelation, made public by Robin Peel,<sup>7</sup> bears repeating: Plath did not name this piece herself – Leonie Cohn suggested the title, but she worries that perhaps the numbers make it too obscure?<sup>8</sup>

PKS: Smith College holds only four letters Plath received from staff at the BBC: one from B. H. Alexander, two from Douglas Cleverdon, and one

---

<sup>7</sup> Robin Peel in *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*, (p. 109). Much correspondence was exchanged between the BBC and Sylvia Plath. In just the time period between December 11, 1962 through to February 8, 1963, the BBC sent nine letters to Plath and Plath responded with six letters of her own.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Leonie Cohn to Sylvia Plath, February 8, 1963. Copies held at BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, England, and the Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.



from Leonie Cohn. The date on the letter from Cohn is Friday, February 8, 1963. Could this be the last letter Plath received? According to an archivist at the British Postal Museum and Archives, there was Saturday delivery in London at this time.<sup>9</sup> Given the short distance the letter had to go, it is likely the letter would have been delivered to Plath on Saturday, February 9 while she, Frieda, and Nicholas were staying with Jillian and Gerry Becker.<sup>10</sup> Did Plath get this letter when she went out that Saturday evening, or did she read it upon returning to Fitzroy Road on the evening of the February 10?

GC: My archivist was concerned that I only had three folders to look through and asked me if she thought Plath might be referenced in any others. Of course, I mentioned Ted Hughes and a stack of more light, brown folders were placed in front of me. Now I had a labyrinth of sources. Now I had a story to weave together. Of course these stories do not come together immediately but after hours of transcribing, of jumping the years, of puzzling over wrong dates and undated letters. But here is the story of “Ocean 1212-W.”

PKS: Plath’s “Ocean 1212-W” spans decades and continents. Conceived in North Tawton and written in London, the story takes Plath back more than twenty years to her childhood in Winthrop, Massachusetts. It blends people and events, presents personal history, and adopts and adapts

---

<sup>9</sup> Email to the authors from Emily Gresham, Archives/Records Assistant, The British Postal Museum & Archive, February 3, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Jillian Becker in Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath, (pp. 9-13).

others; exhibiting Plath's mastery of the playfulness with time.<sup>11</sup> While Plath's readers are familiar with "Ocean 1212-W," they are likely less familiar with its back story.

On the surface, "Ocean 1212-W" is Plath's childhood reminisces. To realize fully why the piece was written, one must understand that this was a professional, commissioned assignment. This was not something spontaneously created, like a poem<sup>12</sup>: Plath thought about the idea for upwards of two months. This is a story told through correspondences between Plath, Hughes, and the staff at the BBC from the fall of 1962 and winter of 1963.

The story behind "Ocean 1212-W" now includes archival work, collaboration, inquiry, and internet searches. It involves friends, scholars, and strangers. It asks more questions than it answers. Archival research puts the living in contact with the dead, and occasionally the forgotten. This story brings to light a manuscript mystery as well as an instance of textual meddling. Of the many possible conclusions, the extent of this meddling is simply not known.

GC: "Ocean1212-W" first makes its appearance in a letter from Sylvia Plath to Leonie Cohn on November 20, 1962.<sup>13</sup> It was sent from Court Green in Devon. In this letter, Plath says her husband has "written" her about providing

---

<sup>11</sup> For more information on this aspect of "Ocean 1212-W" and other works by Plath, please see Richard J. Larschan's "Art and Artifice in Sylvia Plath's Self-Portrayals." In Life Writing: Contemporary Autobiography, Biography, and Travel Writing: Proceedings of a Symposium Held by the Department of American Culture and Literature, Haliç University, Istanbul, 19-21 April 2006 (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2007), 141-157.

<sup>12</sup> Of poems, Plath wrote in her journals, "Poems are moment's monuments." The Journals of Sylvia Plath, (p. 268).

<sup>13</sup> This is the day after Plath wrote "Mary's Song."

a few sentences outlining a programme named “Landscape on Childhood.” However, Plath is unsure of what to do since her husband gave her only the most general idea. There is no further mention of the piece again until January 17, 1963 when Leonie Cohn writes to Plath enquiring about the piece and wondering whether perhaps Plath is waiting to hear from her once more? As readers of this correspondence, we see the gap – did Leonie Cohn not receive Plath’s November letter? Did they have a telephone conversation that was not recorded in the files?<sup>14</sup> These are the tantalising gaps that archives can leave. The silences that we must fill with speculation and with fantasies. Leonie Cohn does, however, in this letter give Plath details of what she would like the piece to contain – significant incidences, elements of action, something to keep the listeners attention. She also requests that the piece last for 20 minutes instead of the original 15, and she hopes that this does not put Plath off completing the piece or making it too long. Plath responds on January 22, saying how helpful the letter was and that 20 minutes was fine. As I hold this letter up to the light, the thick A5 paper shows a Basildon Bond watermark and the black ink of Plath’s signature still glossy after all these years. In a rare glimpse into the domestic life of the writer, Plath apologises for the delay, saying that she has recently moved from the country and has been nursing two infants through the flu, but hopes to have the script to the BBC in the next week or two. In fact, the script is sent six days later with a short letter, this time on thinner paper folded three times and dated January 28, 1963.<sup>15</sup> The paper is creamy coloured and a little like carbon paper with slight damage around the edges and what looks like a possible coffee stain in

---

<sup>14</sup> Leonie Cohn does not appear in Plath’s address book.

<sup>15</sup> On this date, Plath wrote “Child,” “The Munich Mannequins,” “Totem,” and revised “Sheep in Fog.”

the bottom left hand corner. By January 31, a response is posted to Plath by Cohn's secretary Shelia Grant, thanking her for the manuscript and stating that Leonie Cohn will be in touch when she has read through it carefully. Thus we come to the end of the story, for the letter dated February 8, 1963 is possibly the last letter Plath received from the BBC.

PKS: Leonie Cohn states how much she likes the piece but requests that Plath make a few changes to her typescript, because, as Cohn states, "No one can live quite as verbless."<sup>16</sup> Cohn wants the piece to sound less literary and asks: "Would you like me to suggest a few harmless verbs to shove in to make it sound spoken, or do you prefer – if you agree that they are wanted, that is – to insert them yourself?"<sup>17</sup> The letter has a typed postscript, "P.S. I shall also be getting in touch with your husband about his recording."<sup>18</sup>

GC: We know that Plath never replied to this final letter, for internal memos after her death reveal Leonie Cohn deciding to make the changes herself, in a way that she knows Plath would have approved.<sup>19</sup> And so, what do we conclude from this story? That the piece we know as "Ocean 1212-W" was

---

<sup>16</sup> Leonie Cohn to Sylvia Plath, dated February 8, 1963. Copies held at BBC Written Archives Centre and Sylvia Plath Collection. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. Underlining is Cohn's.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The postscript does not appear on the letter held at the BBC Written Archives Centre. Underlining is Cohn's.

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum, Leonie Cohn, dated April 10, 1963, BBC Written Archives Centre. This edited version aired on the BBC on August 19, 1963, and was read by June Tobin. "Ocean 1212-W" first appears in print in the August 29, 1963 issue of *The Listener*, (pp. 312-313). The authors find Cohn's certainty of making changes Plath would have approved of unsettling. What was the nature of their relationship and how could Cohn possibly know how Plath would edit the script? June Tobin, coincidentally, read the role of "She" in Ted Hughes's "Difficulties of a Bridegroom" which aired on February 9, 1963.

not titled by Plath and contains changes that Plath herself did not see or sanction. Furthermore, what did she call it and how would her “verbless” version read? There are internal memos relating to payment for this piece – they assumed the money will go to Ted Hughes?<sup>20</sup>

Yet this is not quite the end of the story, for “Ocean 1212-W” appears again briefly years later in the correspondence between the BBC and Ted Hughes, when it is claimed that the unique and original script was taken.<sup>21</sup> Does an original script of the story exist, or is the supposedly missing manuscript as unique as claimed?<sup>22</sup> Does this mean we have no copy of Plath’s own version of “Ocean 1212-W”?

PKS: Like “Three Women”, “Ocean 1212-W” was commissioned and composed for the radio – for the ear. The beauty and brilliance of these pieces exemplify the shift in Plath’s poetics in the last years of her life. As she said of her recent poems in her interview with Peter Orr on October 30, 1962: “I’ve got to say them, I speak them to myself, ... and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud.”<sup>23</sup> Kate Moses points out that, “It would be a mistake to underestimate the impact that both writing for the radio and making spoken word recordings of her own work was having for her development

---

<sup>20</sup> Memorandum, B. H. Alexander, dated July 31, 1963. BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>21</sup> One name associated with this accusation in the incomplete correspondence between George Macbeth and Ted Hughes is that of William F. Claire. Peter and I contacted Claire in February 2009 regarding the manuscript. He expressed shock over the accusation and has filed a statement with the BBC archives clearing his name.

<sup>22</sup> A typescript of “Ocean 1212-W” does not appear in any known archive of Sylvia Plath materials. It could be held privately.

<sup>23</sup> The Poet Speaks, (p. 170).

as a writer.”<sup>24</sup>

Sylvia Plath’s papers are widely dispersed between countries. They are held in university and research libraries, in private institutions, and even in personal collections. The whereabouts of Plath’s original script of this piece, one of the last prose pieces she completed, is unknown.<sup>25</sup>

GC: An archive cannot always tell us how a letter was read and received. If Plath did read that final letter, was she in agreement? Upset? Too distracted to care? Yet, sometimes archives are good places to see what goes on behind the official correspondence between writer and publisher. The BBC internal memos were fascinating texts that placed Plath firmly in her cultural and historical context, what people were saying about her then, when she was still alive, before *Ariel*, before the myth-making. This is how she was perceived in her own time.

Anthony Thwaite was not impressed with her poems from 1960. He found them very wordy – “like her husband on an ordinary day.”<sup>26</sup> For their appearance on “Poets in Partnership”, Ted Hughes writes to the BBC on January 1, 1961 confirming both himself and Sylvia will be happy to be interviewed. Next to Hughes’ signature and written in pencil is an internal memo question – “what do we have on his wife?”<sup>27</sup> In January, 1963, Mrs Dorothy Barker thought it was well worth making a programme from Plath’s new poems, although she felt that they were “emotionally overcharged” and

---

<sup>24</sup> “Sylvia Plath’s Voice, Annotated” in *The Unraveling Archive*, (pp. 108-109).

<sup>25</sup> Theft of Plath’s letters and manuscripts has been reported in a number of books about her and may be a contributing factor in the wide dispersal of these materials.

<sup>26</sup> Handwritten note signed ‘Tony’, most likely Anthony Thwaite, to George Macbeth, undated. However, we can narrow down the time scale since Plath sent her poems to Macbeth on July 9, 1960. Macbeth replied by July 23, refusing her poems.

<sup>27</sup> Written letter from Ted Hughes to the BBC, dated January 1, 1961.

therefore difficult to take in large quantity. She is kinder about Plath's Bee sequences however, despite her seeming irritation that Plath mentions Tate & Lyle twice!<sup>28</sup> In March, 1963, the controller of the Third Programme sends an internal memo to Douglas Cleverdon stating his worries about Sylvia Plath's broadcasting. He doesn't want it to build into something that would only be appropriate if someone like T.S. Eliot had died.<sup>29</sup>

PKS: According to records held at the BBC Written Archives Centre, Plath received payment for additional poems that were recorded and broadcast, but never released commercially.<sup>30</sup> On December 18, 1960, "New Poetry" featured seven lines of "The Colossus" and "A Winter Ship."<sup>31</sup>

Plath also read poems, though not her own, on at least two programs. Broadcast on July 15, 1961, the program "Possum Walked Backwards" was a review of recent American verse. Plath read poems along with Marvin Kane and Donald Hall. The poets featured on "Possum Walked Backwards" were Galway Kinnell, Anne Sexton, John Logan, Robert Francis, John Frederick Nims, Robert Creeley, Gilbert Sorrentino, Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, and J. V. Cunningham. Broadcast on November 4, 1962, Plath read Carolyn Kizer's "The Great Blue Heron" on

---

<sup>28</sup> From: Mrs Dorothy Barker, Script Editor Features. Subject: New Poems by SP, dated January 18, 1963.

<sup>29</sup> March 6, 1963 From Controller of Third Programme P.H. Newby to Douglas Cleverdon. This clearly shows in 1963 that Sylvia Plath was not regarded by some contemporaries as highly as other Anglo-American poets.

<sup>30</sup> Most of Plath's recorded poetry was released in the 1970s. For more on Plath's voice and recordings, please see *Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography* by Stephen Tabor and Kate Moses' "Sylvia Plath's Voice, Annotated" and "The Oral Archive" in Anita Helle's *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, pp.89-117 and 269-274.

<sup>31</sup> Ted Hughes mentions Plath being at the BBC recording "A Winter Ship" in a letter to Aurelia and Warren Plath, early December 1960. See *Letters of Ted Hughes* (p. 176).

a program called “The Weird Ones”. Produced by George MacBeth, Plath read with Donald Hall, Basil Langton and John Hall Wheelock. Along with Kizer, “The Weird Ones” included poems by John Holmes, Philip Booth, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, John Woods, David Ignatow, and Alan Dugan.

The catalogue of the National Sound Archive at the British Library indicates that they hold two unreleased recordings of Plath. On July 17, 1961, Plath read “Tulips” at the “Poetry at the Mermaid” festival, held at the Mermaid Theatre, London, July 16-23, 1961. Plath recorded a review with George MacBeth of Donald Hall’s anthology Contemporary American Poetry on January 10, 1963, on “New Comment.”<sup>32</sup>

The BBC paid Plath for four further poems. However, these were not read by her. She received a BBC Fee Form dated March 25, 1961, for “A Life” and “Morning Song.” According to the BBC’s Programme-as-Broadcast (“PasB”) report, the poetry readers for this broadcast were Anne Beresford and Hugh Dickson. The poems were broadcast on April 17, 1961. “The Moon and the Yew Tree” and “The Rabbit Catcher” were paid for on August 16, 1962, and broadcast over the BBC in a program called “New Poetry” on September 16, 1962.<sup>33</sup> The readers for this broadcast, according to the PasB, were Cecile Chevreau, Gary Watson, and Alan Wheatley.<sup>34</sup>

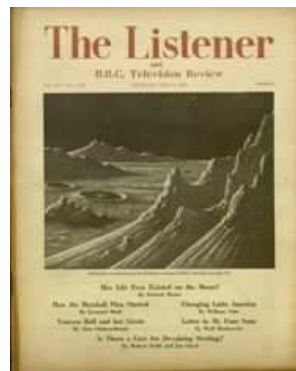
---

<sup>32</sup> Recording and broadcast both took place on January 10, 1963.

<sup>33</sup> Elsie Wakeham to Sylvia Plath. August 16, 1962. BBC Written Archives Centre. Plath annotated her 1962 Letts Royal Office Tablet Diary, held at Smith College, to reflect the broadcast.

<sup>34</sup> Bringing in another archive to the mix, The Sydney Jones Library at the University of Liverpool holds a typescript of “The Rabbit Catcher” with the word “Chevreau” written next to the first line in Plath’s handwriting. This suggests that Cecile Chevreau was the reader. Of the four poems broadcast





In addition to being broadcast on the BBC, “Candles,” “A Life,” “The Surgeon at 2 a.m.,” and “Ocean 1212-W” appeared in the BBC magazine The Listener, which both previews and prints selected broadcasts that air on BBC radio and television.<sup>35</sup>

In the fall of 1962, Hughes paid compliments about Plath’s new poems to Douglas Cleverdon, which led him to suggest a radio program of about 20 minutes with commentary.<sup>36</sup> We know that Plath prepared for this since Smith College holds her selection of these poems, with comments.<sup>37</sup> Plath planned to read “The Applicant,” “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” “Sheep in Fog,” “Ariel,” “Fever 103°,” “Nick and the Candlestick,” and “Death & Co.”<sup>38</sup> If we read the comments above of Mrs. Dorothy Barker correctly, Plath sent additional poems – namely the “Bee

---

but not read by Plath, only “The Rabbit Catcher” was re-recorded by her. The PasB indicates that “The Rabbit Catcher” was 39 lines in length; however, the version Plath read on October 30, 1962, is 30 lines. The could be a typographical error.

<sup>35</sup> See Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography by Stephen Tabor. The images above are, from left to right, November 17, 1960, May 4, 1961, and September 20, 1962.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas Cleverdon to Sylvia Plath, December 11, 1962, Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

<sup>37</sup> To see Plath’s commentary on these poems, see Appendix II of Ariel: The Restored Edition (New York: HarperPerennial, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Please note Plath’s intention to read “Sheep in Fog.” This would have been the earlier version of the poem. Plath first drafted this poem on December 2, 1962, while still living in North Tawton. She revised the poem on January 28, 1963. For more on “Sheep in Fog,” please see “The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’” by Ted Hughes in his Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995: 191-211). It is also possible that Plath intended to read edited versions of “Lady Lazarus” and “Nick and the Candlestick” from those which she read on October 30, 1962.

Sequence” – to the BBC between mid-December 1962 and mid-January 1963.

GC: Where are all the lost documents and recordings? They surely cannot simply disappear into the air like ether? Surely they have a life somewhere? There are, of course, different sorts of losses too. Things that should have happened, plans, plans all lost. There are upsetting moments in the archive, especially dealing with a story like Sylvia Plath’s. The contract form that she had signed and dated to take part in “The Critics,” just days before her death, has to be cancelled by the BBC. The internal memo states cancelled “due to Miss Plath’s death”.<sup>39</sup> Her final letters to Douglas Cleverdon and George MacBeth speak not only of her writing but of her move to London, painting her Yeatsian floors,<sup>40</sup> camping out with little furniture, her children’s illness and her own sickness of which she writes her Doctor has put her incommunicado<sup>41</sup> The sheer vivacity of her determination seeps from these documents. What becomes instantly apparent is however sick she was, whatever her struggles, she continued to work and produce right up until days before her death.

PKS: Plath had a lunch date scheduled with her editor at Heinemann, David Machin, on February 11, 1963. He sent a letter to her dated

---

<sup>39</sup> Contract for “The Critics.” Recording dates May 2, 9, 16, 1963. Broadcast dates May 5, 12, 19, 1963. Contract sent from Betty Proven. BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Douglas Cleverdon from Sylvia Plath dated December 15, 1962. BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>41</sup> Undated letter from Sylvia Plath to George Macbeth. George Macbeth replies to this letter January 9, 1963. BBC Written Archives Centre.



February 12 asking if he got the wrong day in his appointment book.<sup>42</sup> If Plath kept a calendar similar to the 1962 Lett's, its whereabouts are unknown. Such a document – should it exist – might shed light on Plath's engagements throughout January and early February, 1963, and it would provide biographical information where details remain somewhat sketchy. It might also illustrate appointments and other engagements cancelled due to her death. No archive is complete.

What else is there? Can we miss that which we do not know?

These, and other hypothetical questions, are pointless but no less tempting. Steedman remarks, summarizing Derrida, “an absence is not nothing, but is rather the space left by what has gone: ... the emptiness indicates how once it was filled and animated.”<sup>43</sup> There is much more to Sylvia Plath than the body of work, and other materials, she left behind. There are documents such as “Ocean 1212-W” that existed but have simply disappeared.

GC: Archive work is a little like detective work, trying to piece together an incomplete and slightly fuzzy puzzle. Because there are gaps and mistakes, illegible handwriting, queer silences, sometimes an intertextual reading is necessary, and sometimes we simply have to speculate and use our fantasy to fill the gaps. After all, what is the telling of a story if not partly fantasy? One document that Plath signed on July 19, 1962, stood out from the rest. Her signature, with its long, curly “y” juxtaposed against the straight “l”, the dot of

---

<sup>42</sup> David Machin to Sylvia Plath, February 12, 1963. Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

<sup>43</sup> Dust p.11.

the “i” always above the “a”, was almost always signed in glossy black ink. The writing had a sort of flourish to it, a boldness. Yet on July 19, 1962, the signed document was written in a shaky hand, like an elderly person’s writing, and in blue biro.<sup>44</sup> There were recognisable elements that still made this Plath’s handwriting but something was amiss. I cross checked against her calendar – what was happening that day? There, on the calendar, in her usual black ink is her plan to travel to London with a meeting at 11am and next to that in blue biro reserve her mother’s train ticket.<sup>45</sup> Since she travelled to London on the 5.30am train, was this document signed early in the morning while she was in a rush? Was it signed on a moving train that would account for the shakiness of her writing? Of course we can never know. But that, for me, is one of the wonders of the archive. They are as much about what they don’t say as what they do.

PKS: Plath’s 1962 Lett’s diary is a fascinating document: a record of where she was, when, and with whom. There are notations for which radio programs to listen to and when reviews were due to the *New Statesman*. From baking pies to spiking sweat peas; from washing her hair to listening to her or her husband’s broadcasts on the BBC, the diary provides dates and details otherwise lost, destroyed, or misremembered. Once Aurelia Plath arrived for her six-weeks stay, she too used the diary, to assist as a grandmother. In late July and early August, Mrs. Plath wrote extensive notes for feeding Nicholas; there is no evidence of Sylvia

---

<sup>44</sup> Consent Form, BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>45</sup> Letts Royal Office Diary Tablet, Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.



Plath at all.<sup>46</sup> There are the two missing weeks from September 6-15 and October 7-13. Who removed them? We know that in the former, Plath and Hughes were in Ireland and in the latter, Plath asked Hughes to leave Court Green. Before his exit, however, Hughes marks down appointments in black ink on October 2 and 5. Someone scratched these out in pencil. Hughes reappears on November 26, but then it is all Plath. As Gail's research at the BBC Written Archives Centre shows, Plath was busily communicating with the BBC, making plans and commitments and inbetween letters, writing. Plath's calendar shows her painting and furnishing her flat, sending poems, ordering *The Observer* and *Radio Times*, meeting friends for lunch and tea, seeing a movie, and much more.<sup>47</sup> She was getting on with her life.

GC: Just one visit to a Plath related archive unravelled a whole life, a whole narrative and discourse that up until that point had remained stored between the pages of a thin brown file. What if I were to return? I am certain I would find something new, something I had missed first time around. What if I were to combine the findings of this archive with visits to other archives? Surely the

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Plath and Hughes were in Bangor, Wales, for a reading associated with *Critical Quarterly*.

<sup>47</sup> According to Plath's calendar, she planned to see Bergmann's film *Through a Glass Darkly* on December 20, 1962. *Through a Glass Darkly* was showing at London's Cameo-Poly Cinema, <http://cinematreasures.org/theater/21245/>, 307 Regent Street. That day, the film showed at "12:30, 3:00, 5:35, and 8.[0]5." (*The Guardian*, December 20, 1962: 5). A summary of the film, from the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055499/plotsummary> reads, "A young woman, Karin, has recently returned to the family island after spending some time in a mental hospital. On the island with her is her lonely brother and kind, but increasingly desperate husband. They are joined by Karin's father, who is a world-travelling author that is estranged to his children. The film depicts how Karin's grip on reality slowly slips away and how the bonds between the family members are changing in light of this fact." Above the entry in Plath's diary is "6:45" and the name "Doris." This may be Doris Bartlett, whose name, address, and telephone number appear in Plath's address book. Bartlett was a babysitter whom Plath and Hughes knew from their time at 3 Chalcot Square. Links accessed March 27, 2009.

stories we could weave together would become vaster and deeper and reveal a sort of historical connectivity. Caroline Steedman may well talk of archive fever. I am hooked. Once is not enough.

PKS: Just one visit to an archive is sufficient for some, but as this paper shows, secondary and subsequent visits can be beneficial – if not enlightening. While the documents in archives do not necessarily change, our perspectives do. New scholarship and theory continually challenges our previous understanding and interpretation of Plath's work. The archive is a place of constancy and variety. After more than a decade of visiting the Mortimer Rare Book Room, there are still areas of the Plath Collection that I have yet to explore. The four letters from BBC staff were items of whose existence I was ignorant. I found them fascinating and informative and learned much about Plath's business affairs.

What started out as a simple search to find out what Plath materials the BBC Written Archives Centre held turned into a much broader examination of Plath's life in England after 1960. It required a close and a cross examination of many different sources held in at least three archives, emails to strangers, microfilm, and dozens of "conversations" with Gail. With thanks to Gail's visit to Reading, assembling a much fuller story was possible.

These are just some of the stories we found in the archives, but there are many more. As Anita Helle states in "Archival Matters", her Introduction [The Unraveling](#)

Archive, “Archival histories consist of tales we tell about the archive, and of tales the archive tells.”<sup>48</sup>

In a way, archival documents speak for themselves. However, they are also voiceless in their folders, in their boxes, on shelves, in temperature and light controlled stacks, and behind closed doors. Due to collecting policies, collection foci, and competition, archives are dispersed. This dispersion adds complexity in any attempt to piece together an accurate picture of people, events, and history.<sup>49</sup> However, because of archives, the stories are there waiting to be written.

Thus our conversation ends with many absences and spaces, question marks left hanging. The more you try to grasp something, the further it slips away in its maddening elusivity. Archives may be full of dust and ghosts and seductive petty details. We may lose ourselves, captivated by the past and how we can unearth it. But archives are such magical places – there is nowhere better to be lost.

---

<sup>48</sup> Helle, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Peter’s website for Sylvia Plath, “A celebration, this is” <http://www.sylviaplath.info/index2.html>, lists many of the different repositories that hold Plath materials. See specifically Archival Materials <http://www.sylviaplath.info/collections.html>.

## Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. The Pleasures of the Text. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.
- Becker, Jillian. Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath. London: Ferrington, 2002.
- “Cameo-Poly Cinema.” Cinema Treasures. <http://cinematreasures.org/theater/21245/>. Accessed March 27, 2009.
- Helle, Anita Plath. The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Hughes, Ted, and Christopher Reid. Letters of Ted Hughes. London: Faber and Faber, 2007.
- Larschan, Richard J. “Art and Artifice in Sylvia Plath’s Self-Portrayals.” In *Life Writing: Contemporary Autobiography, Biography, and Travel Writing: Proceedings of a Symposium Held by the Department of American Culture and Literature, Halic University, Istanbul, 19-21 April 2006* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2007), 141-157.
- “London Cinemas.” The Guardian. December 20, 1962: 5.
- Orr, Peter. The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press and Ian Scott-Kilvert. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966.
- Peel, Robin. Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics. Madison [NJ]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002.
- Plath, Sylvia. The Collected Poems. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.
- . Winter Trees. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.
- Plath, Sylvia, and Karen V. Kukil. The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962: Transcribed from the Original Manuscripts at Smith College. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.





Steedman, Carolyn. Dust: The Archive and Cultural History. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

“Plot Summary for Through a Glass Darkly.” Internet Movie Database.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055499/plotsummary>. Accessed March 27, 2009.

Tabor, Stephen. Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography. Westport, Conn: Meckler Pub. Corp, 1987.

Wolfreys, Julian. Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny & Literature. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Rachel Lawson and Louise North at the BBC Written Archives Centre and Karen Kukil, Barbara Blumenthal, and Martin Antonetti at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, for their assistance and expertise. Additional thanks to Dr. Maureen Watry, Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, Emily Gresham, The British Postal Museum & Archive, and Edward Mendelson, Columbia University for assistance given with or without their knowledge. Thanks also to the Sociology Department, Lancaster University for providing funds for the archival research in the UK.

### Permissions

Quotes from letters by Leonie Cohn, Dorothy Barker, Anthony Thwaite, and those in an unidentified hand used by permission of BBC Written Archives Center.

### Illustrations

Photographs of BBC Written Archives Centre and Reading Room, BBC Written Archives Centre, © BBC. Used with permission of the BBC. Not to be reproduced without permission.

Photographs of 26 Elmwood Road, Wellesley; Neilson Library, Smith College, and Sylvia Plath's elm plank desk, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, © Peter K. Steinberg. Used with permission of Peter K. Steinberg. Not to be reproduced without permission.