

Gabriela GLĂVAN
Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, West University
Timișoara, Romania
gabriela.glavan@e-uvt.ro

**FEMINIST DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND THE HARRIET ROSENSTEIN
SYLVIA PLATH ARCHIVE**

Recommended citation: Glăvan, Gabriela. “Feminist Digital Humanities and the Harriet Rosenstein Sylvia Plath Archive”. *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 10.1 (2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjst.2024.17.13>.

Abstract

The paper focuses on reinterpreting the Harriet Rosenstein archive, containing a vast amount of previously unavailable materials concerning Sylvia Plath, as a source of feminist literary recovery. It also investigates the digitization of this archive in the larger context of a digital turn in Plath studies, and a potential connection with feminist digital humanities. The archive contains a vast number of Sylvia Plath-related documents that have been recently opened to the public at Emory University after almost five decades. Rosenstein was a young researcher with feminist critical interests at the time she documented a projected Plath biography, and her work bears the mark of her ideological options and of a distinct intention to reshape the cultural discourse around Plath’s status as a feminist icon. My aim is to investigate the feminist itinerary Rosenstein created in her archive in order to reveal Plath’s essential role as a female writer articulating innovative perspectives on women’s issues, mythologies and fundamental themes.

Keywords: feminist recovery, the digital turn, literary archives, digital humanities, biography.

Introduction

The effort to integrate the Harriet Rosenstein Sylvia Plath archive into a dynamic research circuit involving the American writer has become visible in recent years, as new biographical endeavours (Clark 2020; Rollyston 2020) relied on some of its most significant documents. This archive has reframed important narratives and biographical accounts concerning Plath's final years, and, had it not been dormant for over four decades, it would have most likely contributed to the assembling of a different literary biography of Sylvia Plath. My intention is to articulate a critical itinerary of feminist literary recovery by which the Harriet Rosenstein archive is mapped as a place that intersects feminist digital humanities and Sylvia Plath studies. The strategy of feminist literary recovery (Goodspeed-Chadwick 11) enables researchers to access and recontextualize, possibly opening new interpretive avenues, lesser-known works of women writers. I also propose to explore the Rosenstein archive as a digitised archive about the writer, rather than one containing the writer's manuscripts, prints, and realia. The connective character of this archive is equally relevant: as the unfinished work of a female researcher on Plath's work and biography, Harriet Rosenstein's archive is an important resource for other scholars who can access the corpus she had gathered. No less relevant is Rosenstein's status as a feminist researcher, despite the limited number of publications that could justify this assimilation. Her essay on Plath, "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath," published in the September 1972 issue of *Ms.* magazine, reflects both Rosenstein's feminist approach to Plath and her critical interest in demystifying the writer's status as a swiftly assembled feminist icon. Although it is an almost entirely posthumous construct, this critical appropriation has been debated intensely in the decades following the rise of the second and third waves of feminism.

The core feminist dimension of Plath's work lies in the writer's involvement with women's themes and issues, being an intellectual project rather than a biographically rooted construct that represents her as a perpetual victim—of the social patriarchal order of the 1950s and 1960s, of her abusive husband, and the other myriad contexts that oppressed her. A closer look at Rosenstein's *Ms.* essay is illuminating and integral to the feminist frame of her archive. The researcher clearly isolates her initial argument, denouncing, on the one hand, "the sectarian fervour with which Plath has been taken up by

feminists here and abroad” while also signaling the deeper significance of Plath’s creative impact on women’s writing—“she is the first female poet to create a body of verse about women” (Rosenstein 1972, 44). Harriet Rosenstein embarks on a risky critical adventure, meant to distinguish between Plath’s larger vision of women’s roles and relationships and her subjective treatment of her own crises and processes. There is, thus, a generic approach to a female universe and a personal, often violent and contradictory, one. Rosenstein proceeded to a comprehensive analysis of this conflict in Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), where the complex tension between biography and fiction defines the intellectual frame of the book. With this consistent critical enterprise, Rosenstein established herself as a feminist critic targeting the problematic feminism of an author who had, in fact, structured a coherent vision of women’s issues in her work. It is important, however, to question if the archive she gathered to reveal Plath as a writer of the feminine could be regarded as part of a feminist project, too. Despite her reluctance to respond to Sylvia Plath-related issues later on, Rosenstein remains a central character in the trajectory of early Plath studies. Moreover, if feminist literary recovery aims to revive significant female figures of historical intervals when their voices were not properly heard, this should include scholars who made the same effort—to reveal the work and biography of an important woman writer in a comprehensive, demythologizing manner. In the 1970s, when Harriet Rosenstein carried out her documentation on Sylvia Plath, her work was a pioneering act that deserves recognition.

The other significant dimension of this investigation concerns Digital Humanities, a dynamic domain that intersects digital culture and technologies with the broader paradigm of the humanities. This field has emerged in recent decades as an important tool for supporting and disseminating women’s studies and knowledge. The effort of digital humanities to integrate feminism into a complex gallery of collaborations has resulted in the affirmation and growth of feminist digital humanities. Literary archives of women writers have significantly benefited from the digital turn in the humanities. I aim to explore the Harriet Rosenstein archive to identify the potential relevance of this corpus to feminist digital humanities. Drawing from recent theories concerning literary archives and their digitization, I will discuss the impact of the digital turn on the dynamics of the archives and the relevance of the Rosenstein archive within the larger feminist dimension of Sylvia Plath studies.

The Archive and the projected biography

In 1970, Harriet Rosenstein was a young feminist researcher who prepared intensely to write a biography of Sylvia Plath. She interviewed a large number of people who knew Plath closely, including doctors Ruth Beuscher and John Horder – Dr. Beuscher was Plath’s American psychiatrist and Dr. Horder treated her in her final weeks in London. Due to the vast number of documents and recordings included in the archive, I shall primarily focus on Dr. Beuscher’s contribution. The young researcher also spoke with family members, friends, and collaborators, gathering a vast amount of material – over ninety hours of interviews, a solid correspondence with editors, and an intense exchange of letters with Olwyn Hughes, the writer’s sister-in-law and the executor of the Plath estate. When she began her documentation, Rosenstein had the opportunity to explore a rich, almost uncharted territory that appeared both stimulating and immensely promising. Most notably, the archive initially included fourteen letters Plath had sent to Dr. Ruth Beuscher, covering a period from February 18, 1960, to February 4, 1963, one week before she died by suicide. In 2017, when Smith College, Plath’s alma mater, was informed that Rosenstein had put the letters up for sale along with the rest of her archive, they filed a suit to claim them, as they already owned both Plath’s and Beuscher’s archives. These new letters were technically part of the Beuscher correspondence the College already owned. They won the case and, as a result, the letters were separated from the rest of the Rosenstein archive and included in the Sylvia Plath archive at Smith College. The greater part of the Rosenstein archive was sold to Emory University, where it was opened to the public in early 2020, and subsequently, digital copies of archival documents became widely available to international researchers.

As the work of a researcher interested in feminism, coagulated in the early stages of her postgraduate career, the Rosenstein archive bears the mark of a scholar interested in a broader horizon of Plath’s life, one that aims beyond the barriers of a critical biography indebted to literary criticism and academic rigour. Although she finalised her Ph.D. thesis on Plath’s life and work, she never finished the biographical book derived from it. Rosenstein’s 1973 thesis, defended at Brandeis University, is a critical biography of the writer, yet it never entered the public circuit, as the Plath estate made significant legal efforts to prevent this. As her correspondence with Olwyn Hughes clearly outlines, despite the long, convoluted negotiations she had with the Plath estate, Rosenstein was not granted permission to access essential Plath documents or to quote from Plath’s work. For

almost four decades after Rosenstein abandoned her project of writing a biography of Sylvia Plath, the archive she had gathered remained out of the circuit of Plath studies, unavailable to scholars and researchers. After 2020, as Emory started to offer digitization services for archival materials from this collection, the Rosenstein archive re-entered the circuit of Plath scholarship. Besides its democratising effect, digitization will be discussed in this case from the perspective of its intersection with the feminist foundation of this particular archive.

Harriet Rosenstein didn't explicitly articulate a feminist standpoint in the interviews she recorded, or in the notes she took on the various documents she gathered, but throughout her various interventions, a unifying thread is visible: she was trying to shape the then-emergent Plath literary cult in a manner that would highlight her intellectual and artistic status, involving the biographical as reflective background. The elements that validate the feminist potential of the archive are derived from Rosenstein's subjective approach to Plath's position as a woman artist and intellectual of the American post-war era and are evidently rooted in an ideological climate that identified a larger unfavourable context for intellectual women in Plath's troubled familial relationships and difficult professional affirmation. Her interventions bear the mark of an enveloping familiarity with Plath's life story and career challenges, with dialogues reflecting a personal connection that transcends the requirements of a scholarly enterprise.

Plath's female friendships, her paradoxical relationship with her mother, and the multifaceted bond she shared with her psychiatrist can be explored as the perimeter that nourished the writer's evolving stance on women's struggle to overcome the family/career divide, aiming for a complete, articulated balance between the domestic and the intellectual realms. A two-hour interview with Dr. Ruth Beuscher reflects Rosenstein's interest in exploring Plath's significant relationship with her psychiatrist, a woman she viewed as a liberating surrogate mother figure, and her intention to reveal a conflicted influence coagulated on the fine edge between salvation and disintegration. The accents on Plath's sexuality this interview explores could also contribute to the articulation of a feminist framework in the archive.

Filtered through more than one lens, as Rosenstein collects reflections from Plath's psychiatrist and a former lover (Peter Davison), Plath's sexual emancipation also highlights tensions with the traditional foundation of her relationship with her mother,

Aurelia Plath. Although recent biographers (Clark 2020; Rollyston 2020) included this component in their approach to Plath's more intimate persona, Rosenstein tackled the issue in a rather different ideological environment. Rosenstein boldly questions Peter Davison, whom Plath dated briefly during the spring of 1955 while studying at Smith, about their sexual chemistry:

-Did she have fun when she had sex?

-It was more athletic... Cognitive.

To which Rosenstein replied, ironic and amused: "Cognitive coition" (Rosenstein 1970).

In the interview she gave Rosenstein, Dr. Beuscher discusses Plath's sexuality, emphasising what she considered to be an unusual manner of relating to others. She commented on the ways in which her former patient constructed her discourse: "The vocabulary was wrong, and the emphasis was wrong and the context was wrong"; "She talked about it as though it didn't matter who she was with" (Beuscher in Rosenstein 1970). The psychiatrist visibly avoided giving concrete examples, resorting to a generalising rhetoric, although it wouldn't have been her first trespassing in matters of doctor-patient confidentiality. Later in the interview, Dr. Beuscher read to Rosenstein from the hospital therapy notes she gathered during the four months she was in charge of Plath's treatment at McLean Hospital, following Plath's suicide attempt in August 1953. Beuscher emphasised that she considered her patient's discussion of sex as a vulgar manner of expressing carnal desire, extending the observation to an entire ethos of relationships that Plath projected. The then-young doctor realised that her patient developed filial attachments to her, in a process of transference meant to alleviate the trauma of her relationship with her mother. Once again, Dr. Beuscher transgressed the firm lines of doctor/patient confidentiality and revealed to Rosenstein that Plath's mother agreed to offer her daughter "financial support contingent on virginity" (Beuscher in Rosenstein, 1970).

The psychiatrist was aware of her patient's double discourse and seemed to encourage Plath's displaced maternal fixation, as she directly mentioned it to Rosenstein: "Well, what she said to Mamma was not what she said to me" (Beuscher in Rosenstein, 1970). By "allowing" Plath to hate her mother, that is, in therapeutic terms, to unleash the resentment she felt towards Aurelia Plath's inflexible maternal coercion, Dr. Beuscher set

her patient on a dangerous path neither of them could control. When Plath suggested, in late 1962, that she come home to America and possibly live with Beuscher for a while, as a last resort strategy in a mounting marital crisis that threatened to definitively derail her sanity and ability to function as a parent and working single mother, the psychiatrist ignored her letter, replying only twice to her patient's dense and concerning correspondence. The patient/psychiatrist solidarity, founded on the fact that both were young female professionals, ambitious and striving for intellectual recognition, was annihilated by the explicably vulnerable circumstance that, although Plath saw her as a figure of authority, Dr. Beuscher had her own marital troubles and could not afford to invite her patient into her home.

Reframing a Feminist Archive

Besides her discursively liberated approach to sexuality in her conversations with Dr. Beuscher, Plath later tackled other issues that could be relevant from a feminist perspective. The writer's views on fertility and motherhood, as well as her horror of barrenness, can be evinced in caustic poems such as the preliminary version of *The Other*, where she places her poetic self in opposition with her childless rival – a direct allusion to her rivalry with Assia Wevill, whose personal myth included multiple abortions: “I am thick with babies, ribboned with milk/You carry seven small corpses in a handbag” (Plath manuscript, undated). This is the climax of a recurrent depiction of barrenness that transcends Plath's poetic ages. *Two Sisters of Persephone*, from 1957, vitriolizes a young woman who chooses intellectual excellence over maternity, thereby turning “Bitter/And sallow as any lemon”, while her sister, exuding vitality and reproductive prowess, “grows quick with seed; Grass-couched in her labour's pride/She bears a king” (Plath 235-236). The poem's ending vilifies all young women who prioritise sterile intellectualism over fertile domesticity, depicting the barren sister as a “wry virgin to the last/Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,/ Worm-husbanded, yet no woman” (236). Such examples are meant to illustrate Plath's problematic image as a feminist icon, and also to be engaged in a critical mirroring with Rosenstein's efforts to coagulate a feminist perspective on an emblematic woman writer of modern confessional poetry. Plath's private concerns regarding fertility are also present in her journal, where she expressed her sheer horror at the prospect of childlessness: “All joy and hope is gone” (Plath 500-501) as she feared she

had to subject herself to fertility medical treatment, a “horrible clinical cycle” of “becoming synthetic” (500).

The writer’s problematic involvement with feminism, crystallised in letters and journal entries, was reiterated by Ted Hughes, who was frequently targeted by feminist critics for his role in Plath’s final breakdown. Dr. Ruth Beuscher was also intimately aware of Plath’s ambivalence towards intellectual independence and domesticity. There is a significant core of feminist-nuanced approaches to Plath from critics such as Marjorie Perloff, Linda Wagner-Martin, Sandra M. Gilbert, Cora Kaplan, Alicia Ostriker, and Jan Montefiore, apart from the primary nucleus of feminist critics who consolidated, in the late 1960s, the feminist Plath edifice that Rosenstein contested and rearranged in her only published intervention on the issue. However, reading Plath in the proximity of feminism is once more relevant and challenging, especially since more recent biographers, such as Heather Clark, reshaped the critical discourse on Plath to shift the focus from the romanticised mythologies of her depression and death to her position as a woman intellectual in the 1950s and early 1960s in America and Great Britain. Plath’s personal involvement with feminism and her posthumous life as a paradigmatic figure of feminist literature are two distinct lanes of discourse and thought. Clearly, the second dimension is vaster, richer, and directly involves my present argumentation. The issues Harriet Rosenstein raised as she gathered the materials, documents, and interviews in her archive resonate with her arguments in her *Ms.* essay, yet they are not radically different from those raised by feminist critics in the long line of books, chapters, and studies dedicated to Plath’s preoccupation with female experience in her literary and personal writings.

In an unpublished poem that would have fit the frame of *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes reinforces his belief that Plath was insensitive to the militant fervour of the vocal feminist current that was gathering momentum in her final months:

When you wrote those poems of Ariel
 Had feminism stirred in its crate?
 Surely it had. But not a murmur of it
 Had reached you, or alerted you, or touched
 Your feminine instinct. Not a hint of it. (Hughes, MS 88993/1/1)

It was not the first time Hughes stressed his belief that Plath was far from embracing feminist ideology – as he wrote to Aurelia Plath in 1975, Sylvia was “Laurentian,” not “women’s lib” (Hughes 1975), meaning that she embraced D.H. Lawrence’s modern, sexually liberated view of femininity and love, rather than joining campaigners in protest and equality reform plans. In her interview with Harriet Rosenstein, Dr. Ruth Beuscher reiterates this notion, stating, “Sylvia was not a feminist” (Beuscher in Rosenstein 1970). Ruth Fainlight, a poet friend of the writer who was familiar with Plath’s stance on domesticity and traditional marriage ideals, expressed her belief that Plath’s desire to excel as a wife contradicts any possible assumptions that she might have harboured feminist ideals, as no feminist “would want to be the perfect wife.” Simultaneously, Fainlight felt that Plath was “terribly oppressed by the masculine principle” (Fainlight in Rosenstein 1970).

Other arguments could arise from the personal relationship Plath and Fainlight cultivated as female poets in a predominantly male literary climate. In a memoir from 2004, Fainlight commented on Plath’s letter dated May 12, 1962, when she asked if she could dedicate her poem *Elm* to her: “Could I dedicate my elm tree poem to Ruth Fainlight? (Or would you prefer your maternal & wifely self, Ruth Sillitoe? I had thought of the poet-self first).” Despite Plath’s mention that she had thought of Fainlight as a poet first, her remark was not well received. Fainlight felt “slightly disconcerted by the suggestion that the dedication be to the ‘wifely self’; we were two poets, Sylvia Plath and Ruth Fainlight, not Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Sillitoe, and our friendship was centred on this crucial reality” (Fainlight 14). Sylvia Plath’s solidarity with feminist principles is not visible in demonstrative actions or in militant involvement, but in her struggle to overcome the gender bias that plagued her academic ambitions in the United States and followed her to England, where she wanted to benefit from the same opportunities to be validated artistically like other fellow poets who were men.

Rosenstein’s archive could be read as a massive repository that reflects Plath’s ceaseless fight for affirmation and success, especially in the last year of her life, when her final creative outburst consolidated her self-worth as a poet and encouraged her to pursue a new life as a working single mother. In her letters to Dr. Beuscher, Plath complained of catastrophic lows but also rejoiced in her newfound, liberated poetic voice. Her letters to Ruth Fainlight circumscribe a similar interior geometry. The climate in which she wrote

the poems and texts that would become landmarks in the modern literary canon was one of ambitious, relentless attempts at penetrating the opaque, hostile membrane that kept women at a distance from the artistic pantheon. Rosenstein's archive reflects the environment that fueled and sustained the violent emotions Plath voiced in her emblematic final poetry.

Harriet Rosenstein and Dr. Ruth Beuscher could be regarded as the female vectors of the archive, the active agents that galvanise the complex feminist issues that motivated its articulation and validate its significance in Plath studies. Through their dialogue about Plath, despite the obvious emotional undercurrent connecting them over their common interest in the writer's personal and intellectual figure, Rosenstein and Beuscher are the cohesive agents articulating and cultivating an exclusively feminine perspective on some of Plath's major biographical plots: her relationship with her mother and dead father, sexuality, motherhood, marriage, and mental vulnerability. Numerous other female voices participate in this process, albeit not entirely feminine: Jillian Becker, Plath's friend in London, where she spent the last four days of her life; Ruth Fainlight, friend and fellow poet; Suzette Macedo, friend to Plath and Assia Wevill; Clarissa Roche, the wife of poet and translator Paul Roche; Elizabeth Compton Sigmund, Plath's friend from Devon; Marcia Stern, Plath's friend and roommate from Smith College. As David Compton, Elizabeth Sigmund's husband observed, "everyone has his or her Sylvia" (Sigmund in Rosenstein 1973).

Digital Turns in the Archive

The digitization of this vast amount of biographical material has stimulated a potential turn in Sylvia Plath studies. The archives of women writers are prime examples of active feminist digital humanities, as the works included in these archives automatically gain accessibility and visibility to a wider, international scholarly audience. As Louise Craven noted, "the identities of literary figures are constructed and reconstructed through the experience of archival documents" (2008). Digitising such archives is a fundamentally contemporary process that relies on the indisputable fact that electronic materials have the potential to reach a great number of readers with minimal effort, bridging important gaps in research and directly contributing to the reshaping of readily established paradigms. I draw from Derrida's commentary on the archive as an unreliable systematisation of memory (Derrida 1995) and on the notion of "archive fever," referring to our desire to

control history and memory, both involving private spaces just as much as their historically bound public dimension. Derrida also commented on the impact of new technologies on storing and preserving archival materials, anticipating the impact of recent technologies on the structuring and dynamics of archives. Equally relevant to my investigation, the three-dimensional approach proposed by Abderrazak Mkadmi concerning the digital storage of archives should also be mentioned, in its “human and social, technical and legal” dimensions (Mkadmi xi).

The feminist matrix and the digital instrumentalization coexist as relevant contemporary dimensions of the Harriet Rosenstein archive. If the former aspect is already historically circumscribed to a finite chronology, the latter is confined to an extended sense of the present, in which digitization has revolutionised research and documentation. The digital turn implies more than accessibility and searchability; it also intermediates complex experiences such as interview-mediated contacts with narratives and life stories, parallel readings of transcripts and correspondence, and a close contact with the open character of an archive that still hasn't fulfilled its potential. Digitization also confronts the presence of the static, inner researcher of the archive, Harriet Rosenstein, with that of the researchers approaching the archive from a distance.

It is equally relevant to reflect on the indirect, mediated contact with material documents concerning Plath's life and work that digitization facilitates. This raises the legitimate question about the actual experience of the researcher's contact with the archive, since the concrete documents and objects remain inaccessible. The archive, as a real place, continues to exist alternatively, as a locus of preservation, radically affected by time. The handling of archival materials inevitably raises concerns about unavoidable degradation and the rules and standards meant to decelerate it. Digitised materials have entered the democratic orbit of universal access, and the experience of archive research has been modified and adapted. Spatial relationships with the archive have changed, since materials can now be accessed from the comfort of one's home.

The traditional form of the archive is defined by its materiality, imprinting manuscripts and documents with the unique quality of concrete, palpable presence. This quality is diluted by the digitised scan, with the physical element remaining distant and partially inaccessible. Remote research is, therefore, conditioned by accessibility and the researcher's willingness to renounce the actual experience of the archive, defined by

contact and materiality. Yet digital archives, much like physical archives, “help us to reclaim and reframe the work and reputations of literary figures, both living and dead” (Stead 2).

These arguments apply to all types of archives, not just those regarding Plath. It is necessary to ask if there are specific coordinates that define the new archival paradigm related to Sylvia Plath. Has digitization affected Plath research beyond the welcome shift in accessibility and outreach speed? The answer lies in the prolonged inaccessibility of a vast archive containing a significant number of documents elucidating her biographical circumstances, her status as a woman intellectual of her age, and ultimately shedding direct light on her work. Without being a singular case, Plath has become the paradigmatic example of a carefully curated literary myth. Plath scholarship has long been plagued by copyright restrictions, and many biographical projects, not only Rosenstein’s, were met with opposition by the Plath estate. Until recently, adversity seemed to be the defining term of most Plath-related critical and biographical endeavours.

In 1998, an unexpected literary event marked several breaches in the fortified edifice the Plath estate had raised to protect Plath’s writings and life story from perceived intrusion. Revelatory events, alluding to important private moments in Plath’s final weeks, appeared coded, disguised, even hidden in the dense fibre of Ted Hughes’ final poetry volume, *Birthday Letters*, published months before his death. The decades that followed marked a slow but constant revisiting of the American writer’s archives. In 2017, Plath scholars Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg published a volume dedicated to the archival preservation of Plath’s biography and work—*These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath*. The authors pleaded for an inclusive definition of the archival space, often reduced to fundamental elements such as manuscripts or private writings. A new understanding of the archive should include objects, houses, institutions, and places of relevance to the writer’s life—“archival holdings are like being granted access to the genesis of a Plath poem or story” (Crowther, Steinberg 37).

Since 2020, partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, documents, interviews, notes, calendars, and an entire arsenal of private texts have been digitised and made available to researchers remotely. The closely scrutinised and largely explored biography of the writer was once again remapped, partially due to the novelty of the details revealed in these archival documents and also to the facile access that researchers from all over the world gained to them. Crowther and Steinberg’s *These Ghostly Archives* specifically discusses the

ethics of revealing private information that may not be essential to grasping the full meaning and significance of a piece of writing or a biographical event. New technologies further complicate the relationship between public and private as Dever, Newman, and Vickery argue in their study on “the intimate archive” (2010).

The Rosenstein archive and its digitised content can be accessed in two distinct forms: researchers can hire a private freelance photographer to make copies of various materials (including artefacts) or they can buy already digitised copies of some materials. For a larger volume of requested copies, the first method is necessary since not all materials are readily available in a digital format. However, remote access to the entire archive is possible. Other universities (Smith, Indiana) and libraries have also made access to Plath archival materials widely available, not restricted to affiliated researchers. Moreover, access is only partially conditioned financially, as Smith College offers free access to their Sylvia Plath archive. Bearing in mind the difficult (often impossible) task of previous biographers who were not only denied access to private Plath materials but also the right to quote from her oeuvre, a new biographical narrative emerges from the intersection of these discourses—a digital biography, one that is closest to completion.

In her argument concerning the digital turn in archival research, Lisa Stead notes that “the twenty-first century archive is [thus] bounded by two insistent, and often seemingly opposing claims on preservation and the ways in which we make use of its materials; the physicality of the original archival document and the virtual qualities of the digitised, and, increasingly, born-digital content” (Stead 1). The Rosenstein archive was not born digital; it was partially digitised as a response to a wide public’s interest in accessing it remotely. Digitization also includes the public’s response to the democratisation of archival material—a rich virtual content based on Plath’s mythologies has emerged, including her marriage to Hughes and her death. Various websites now function as Plath internet “shrines” (Banita 46). The poet is a figure that prompted cult-like manifestations from generations of readers, and this aspect is reflected in various types of critical discourse too. Heather Clark discusses the Plath/Hughes tension and poetical competition in her seminal essay *The Grief of Influence* (2011), relying heavily on archival documentation. In another relevant meditation on the ways in which media, technology, and the digital turn have shifted the paradigm of Hughes/Plath-related studies, Sofia Ahlberg argues that the complex story of the writers “provides suggestive

guidelines for negotiating the rapidly changing relationship between private and public in the twenty-first century” (Ahlberg 97). The digital turn in Plath studies, therefore, includes a multi-faceted narrative, academic and popular at the same time. Digitising archives and offering access to a wider public to the biographical context of her works are important steps in amplifying Plath’s intellectual status as a woman writer in a challenging 20th-century historical moment (postwar America and England, the Cold War, emerging feminism, the domestic/professional politics in women’s lives, etc).

Part of the digital turn in exploring archives, photographic (scanned) reproductions and audio files entail different types of experiences. The almost 100 hours of audiotape interviews recorded by Harriet Rosenstein during her documentation in the 1970s articulate a time capsule that preserves many elements that structure a distinct atmosphere (car noises, ambulance sirens, children interrupting, crying, etc). The interviewees speak in their young voices, with a certain vivacity that pales in later interventions (Ruth Barnhouse/Beuscher is an eloquent example in this sense). Two directions can be distinguished in this approach to the audio section of the Rosenstein archive—one that contributes to a clearer articulation of Plath’s status as a significant female intellectual in the Anglo-American literary climate of the 1950s and 1960s, and one that reveals important aspects concerning the mental environment of her final months. Sylvia Plath’s death has been a central pillar of her literary myth, and all possible details regarding its circumstances have been regarded as essential. However, issues concerning intimacy, personal dignity, and boundaries need to be brought into discussion. Jillian Becker, one of the last of Plath’s acquaintances who saw her alive, requested and was given access to the coroner’s report on her death in 1974. The report follows the legal prerequisites of documenting a suspicious death, and it contains the autopsy report, performed by Dr. P.M. Sutton, and a handwritten account of the events on the morning of February 11, 1963, when Plath was found dead by carbon monoxide poisoning in her London apartment at 23 Fitzroy Road.

Widely discussed and quoted, misinterpreted and taken out of context, the Plath/Beuscher correspondence, also part of Rosenstein’s archive, deserves a separate discussion. The writer and her psychiatrist had developed a connection that far exceeded the limits of the doctor/patient relationship. In various interviews with potential Plath biographers, Dr. Beuscher declared that her correspondence with her former patient consisted of a much larger number of letters, but she had destroyed them, keeping only the fourteen that survived and were included in the Rosenstein archive. Their 2018 publication

in the second volume of Sylvia Plath's correspondence - *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil – was the culmination of a long and difficult process. Moreover, in her later years, Dr. Beuscher declared that she had received letters from Plath up to two months before her death, which proved to be false. The writer's last letter to Beuscher is dated February 4, 1963, and it was mailed on Friday, February 8, on the difficult day Plath was convinced by Dr. John Horder to accept psychiatric hospitalisation. She would have been admitted to a London mental facility on Monday, 11 February 1963, the day she committed suicide.

In her *Introduction* to the comprehensive volume she edited with Carrie Smith, *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation* – Lisa Stead poses the interesting problem of pushing the boundaries of “existing methodological approaches to textual study” (Stead 2) in an archive. The digitised content of the Plath/Beuscher letters facilitates this type of methodological rethinking. Some were airmailed (April 2, 1960; February 18, 1960; March 27, 1962; September 4, 1962; September 29, 1962; October 9, 1962; February 4, 1962) and were sent to the various addresses Dr. Beuscher had during the two-year period they covered. The rest was conventional mail, but the envelopes have not been included. One significant element readers can notice is the mixture of typed text and handwritten text, attesting to the importance Plath gave to her correspondence. The handwritten additions confirm a second reading, meant to expand arguments and observations, to stress or clarify details. This composite manner offers a glimpse into one of Plath's most relevant archives, that of letters, personal notes, a part of her oeuvre that reflects her drive for authenticity and connection. The Beuscher letters bear an even deeper meaning in the context of Plath's correspondence – the writer sought her psychiatrist's advice and approval, she saw a maternal figure in her, without the fear of criticism or rejection she felt towards Aurelia Plath. Rosenstein's interviews with the doctors Beuscher and Horder contribute to the essential medical contexts of the same period – Plath's enduring conviction that Beuscher was her confidante, a guide during bleak times, a medical professional whom she revered and trusted.

The Horder/Beuscher interviews are, in their digitised form, two separate .mp3 files, extracted from a single two-sided tape recorded by Rosenstein in 1970, when she interviewed Plath's doctors. As it is the case with all other interviews in this archive, they go beyond their immediate documentary purpose and generate the illusion of suspended

time, containing, unaltered, distinct fragments of the past, with their specific atmosphere, their noises, interruptions, rendering the illusion of immediacy and presence. Digitization offers a stronger, if almost immaterial medium that eliminates the possibility of permanent erasure or loss. However, digital technologies pose new challenges to literary studies, as recent explorations have proved. As Katherine Bode (2018) argues, we need to question the implications of researching literary history with digital tools, just as we need to admit that new tools and methodologies are needed when we explore literary history beyond the limited horizon of a given period or age (Underwood 2019).

The Rosenstein archive significantly contributes to the amplification of the voices that offer context and depth to the problematic biographical factor, essential but not determinant for a regenerative exploration of Plath's oeuvre. Plath's doctors, along with close collaborators and friends, form a distinct group that articulates a biographical account of the writer that, despite being far from complete, is nuanced and complex. Hughes' decision to destroy Plath's last diary and possibly the manuscript of her third novel proved problematic for Plath's literary legacy. The decision to have documents sealed and made inaccessible to scholars, along with a firm denial of quotation from Plath's writings shaped many Plath critical eras. At the same time, the openings and unsealings occurring after Ted Hughes' death encouraged new strategies in reading the American writer, especially since they coincided with the advent of the internet.

Conclusion

Harriet Rosenstein's complex contribution to Sylvia Plath studies involves a dynamic intersection between biographical research and a polymorphous feminist dimension that deserves a critical revival. Although the Sylvia Plath biography she intended to write was never finished, the archive Rosenstein gathered remains essential in investigating Sylvia Plath's significant relationships and her social and intellectual environment as she reached her creative zenith. Rosenstein's archive also bears the imprint of a young, enthusiastic feminist researcher engaged in a problematic process meant to identify and dissect Sylvia Plath's contradictions and paradoxes regarding feminism and women's roles and aspirations. Moreover, Rosenstein's feminist enterprise to uncover Plath's involvement with feminist views and practices should be integrated into a larger critical context that questions the relevance of this endeavour in the broader frame of today's intersectional feminism. Plath's long-standing posthumous career as a feminist icon needs to be reconsidered and re-

examined with critical tools that validate an entire tradition of feminist approaches to her life and work, including Rosenstein's unfinished yet consistent and relevant project. The feminist potential of the Rosenstein archive needs to be explored against the background of Plath's inclusion in a gallery of modern women writers who continue to be challenging and problematic as feminist pioneers.

The involvement of digital technologies in the articulation of this new literary archaeology adds to the complexity of the issue of feminist literary recovery. In her study of the archive as a place preserving the closest-to-completion version of Plath that could be articulated by the material traces of her life and creation, Anita Helle mentions the emergence of a digital space in which Plath discourses intersect and create ever-changing, provocative narratives. These various sites, blogs, and forums discussing Plath, publishing fiction and poetry about her, disrupt and reinvent notions of space and time connected to archives. However, Helle argues that, despite the welcome widening of the conversation about Plath, there is an evident drawback in the digitization of an archive on the web—it “hardly promises the kind of stability and authority that traditional scholarly resources and research depend on authenticating” (Helle 649). The discussion around “the inevitability of digitisation” (Dever, Mora 224) of literary archives is complex and refined, tackling difficult questions concerning materiality, transfer, and accessibility. Beyond the obvious advantages of digitisation lie a vast area of uncertainties and potential pitfalls. Researchers such as Kate Eichhorn have raised valid questions regarding the universality of the digital solution as a means to preserve and offer access to archives. Eichhorn signalled that some cases may be less suitable for digitisation, as these archives had been shaped by their very materiality (e.g., photocopied collages or handmade items) or by the political or symbolic context of their physical location. However, digital archives and physical repositories could respond to different research approaches and needs. While literary archives containing manuscripts, private documents, or personal items that belonged to a writer hold a special material value and gaining access to them may facilitate a significantly richer experience than accessing them in a digital format, archives built as critical tools reuniting secondary literature about a writer are less likely to have a similarly distinct materiality.

A place for research, an external memory, an instrument of rereading and rewriting, the archive is the primary depository where all critical revisiting of Plath's work should commence. The digitization of archives is a defining turn in 21st-century research, allowing

remote scholars to immerse in the singular experience of archival work. The digital copy may not preserve the actual materiality of the document or object, but it facilitates contact with their content and meaning, along with potentially unlimited accessibility. This configuration encourages the reshaping of older canonical landscapes in resonance with new sensibilities, stimulating a constant interest in the re-evaluation and fine-tuning of critical tools.

Bibliography:

- Ahlberg, Sofia. *Atlantic Afterlives in Contemporary Fiction. The Oceanic Imaginary in Literature since the Information Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Banita, Georgiana. “‘The Same, Identical Woman’: Sylvia Plath in the Media”. *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* (40.2), 2007, pp.38–60.
- Bode, Katherine. *A World of Fiction: Digital Collections and the Future of Literary History*, The University of Michigan Press.
- Clark, Heather. *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020.
- . *The Grief of Influence*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Craven, Louise. “From the archivist’s cardigan to the very dead sheep: what are archives? What are archivists? What do they do?”, in Craven L. (ed), *What are Archives? Cultural and theoretical perspectives: a reader*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2008, pp. : 7-30.
- Crowther, Gail, Peter K. Steinberg, 2017. *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Fonthill Media.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, in *Diacritics*, 25 (2) (Summer), pp. 9-63.
- Dever, Maryanne, Sally Newman, Ann Vickery. “The Intimate Archive” in *Archives & Manuscripts* 38(1), 2010, pp. 94-137.
- Dever, Maryanne, Morra, Linda. “Editorial: Literary Archives, Materiality and the Digital”. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 42(3), 2014, pp. 223–226.
- Eichhorn, Kate. “Beyond Digitisation: a Case Study of Three Contemporary Feminist Collections”. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 2014, pp. 227-237.
- Fainlight, Ruth. “Jane and Sylvia”. *Crossroads*, Spring, 2004, pp. 8-19.

- Goodspeed-Chadwick, Julie. *Reclaiming Assia Wevill. Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019.
- Helle, Anita. "Lessons from the Archive: Sylvia Plath and the Politics of Memory: in *Feminist Studies* 31(3) (fall), pp. 631-652.
- Miller, Cristanne. "The Marianne Moore Digital Archive and Feminist Modernist Digital Humanities". *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 1:3, 2018, pp.257-268.
- Mkadmi, Abderrazak. "Archives in the Digital Age. Preservation and the Right to be Forgotten". Imad Saleh (ed.). *Digital Tools and Uses Set* vol. 8. Wiley, 2021.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*. Volume II. New York: Harper Collins, 2018.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950–1962*, Karen Kukil, (ed.) London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- . *Two Sisters of Persephone* in *Poetry*, vol. 99, no. 4, 1957, pp. 235-236.
- Rollyston, Carl. *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2020.
- Rosenstein, Harriet. "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath". *Ms.*, September. 1972, pp. 44-99.
- . *Interview with John Horder*, 71. 2.2 MSS 1489, Emory University, 1970.
- . *Interview with Dr.Ruth Tiffany Beuscher*, 71. 2.2, MSS 1489, Emory University, 1970.
- . *Interview with Peter and Jane Davison*, 1.22, MSS 1489, Emory University, 1973.
- . *Interview with Ruth Fainlight and Alan Sillitoe*, 1.25, MSS 1489, Emory, 1970.
- Smith, Carrie, Lisa Stead (eds.). *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Underwood, Ted. *Distant Horizons. Digital Evidence and Literary Change*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.