

‘The long wait for the angel’: Sylvia Plath’s ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath’s poetry is at times tortuous: she practiced her craft with deliberacy and seriousness, and the complexity and difficulty of her life is often painfully registered in her writing. Yet her poetry at times also reflects a *joie de vivre* that enlivens and responds with whimsy and humour to these travails. In ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’ we see something of this: her experimenting with form in order to render a response to a particular instance of the natural world; the rook that is *arrivant*, that is harbinger of fleeting meeting. What is most arresting in this, my favourite of her poems, is her tone: the tongue-in-cheek sass of her relation with the bird and the context which casts it up in a sublime light.

Keywords: Sylvia Plat, Rooks, representation, *arrivant*, suspension of disbelief.

Sylvia Plath, who must stand as one of the more important women writers of the last century, is also a poet of rather unfortunate renown. Her marriage to the British poet Ted Hughes ended in heartbreak, and she committed suicide in 1963 at the age of 31, leaving behind two small children and an *oeuvre* of intense and powerful poetry. Following the birth of her second child, especially, her writing entered a phase of profuse output and arresting quality, and in the last weeks of her life she was writing three or four accomplished poems a day. Intense and tortured as these later works may be, her entire *oeuvre* is remarkable for its craftsmanship. It is also often characterised by a self-awareness, a sense of wry humour that is very engaging. Of them all, it is one of her earlier poems that is my favourite, perhaps because it accommodates the free play of such wit; perhaps because

it demonstrates a sense of the natural, and of its speaker's relation to the natural, that is in line with the emerging green consciousness of the last few decades. In the brief study that follows, I wish to offer a close reading of this poem, prefaced by a brief consideration of two others she wrote on the same subject to supply a comparative context.

A rook, according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, is a 'gregarious crow with black plumage and a bare face, nesting in colonies in treetops'. The origin of its name is 'Old English hroc, probably imitative and of Germanic origin'. Widespread throughout Britain, Asia, and Europe, this common bird has a few outstanding characteristics. One is gregariousness: it nests communally in rookeries that can accommodate up to 65 000 birds. It is omnivorous, and has the habit of digging into the ground in search of insects; it also has the adaptive intelligence to bury food for consumption later. During courtship, the male engages in ritual display and may feed his female before mating with her. A member of the crow family, the rook also figures in folklore: the sudden desertion of a rookery is said to be a bad omen for the landowner; and rooks are believed to be able to predict rain, and to smell approaching death¹.

Since much of Plath's poetry is inspired by or responsive to the natural world around her, it is intriguing to see which qualities of rooks she emphasises in the three poems she writes about them—and which she doesn't. It is also intriguing to see how her representation of rooks works to shape and position the consciousness of her speaker in each case.

'Winter Landscape, with Rooks'

'Winter Landscape, with Rooks' appears as the second poem in the 1956 section of the *Collected Poems*.

Water in the millrace, through a sluice of stone,
 plunges headlong into that black pond
where, absurd and out-of-season, a single swan
 floats chaste as snow, taunting the clouded mind
which hungers to haul the white reflection down.

¹ Information from www.arkive.com, authenticated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

The austere sun descends above the fen,
 an orange cyclops-eye, scorning to look
longer on this landscape of chagrin;
 feathered dark in thought, I stalk like a rook,
brooding as the winter night comes on.

Last summer's reeds are all engraved in ice
 as is your image in my eye; dry frost
glazes the window of my hurt; what solace
 can be struck from rock to make heart's waste
grow green again? Who'd walk in this bleak place? (1981:21-22).

Besides its title the poem deals with rooks only by analogy and by contrast. Opening with 'water', which it traces through 'millrace', through 'sluice of stone' and into 'black pond', it comes to rest on the 'absurd', the 'out-of-season' swan whose 'chastity', it seems, is what haunts 'the clouded mind / which hungers to haul the white reflection down'. Unlike the speaker, the swan is 'single', and hence impervious to the 'chagrin', the 'hurt', the 'waste' of the broken coupling of 'I' and 'you'. Here rook serves as emanation of the 'I' who 'stalks', 'feathered dark in thought', 'brooding as the winter night comes on'. The bird is used emblematically, instrumentally, to represent a response to the pain of damaged or disrupted relationship. The 'ice' and 'frost' create a 'bleak place', a blanched snow-scape in which the bird's haunting presence is an iconic 'dark' 'black' blot. It is the aspects of colour and mood that are emphasised, with perhaps a play on pregnancy in the bird's 'brooding'. The effect is imagistic: the bird stalks on the ground, its blackness a contrast both to the snow and to the swan's snowlike chastity; its blackness a figure on the ground of white, with the orange 'scorn' of the sun and the imagined, sought-after green 'solace' completing the palette. Stanza three shows the speaker back inside, the 'window of [her] hurt' 'glazed' with 'dry frost'. Her final question, 'Who'd walk in this bleak place?', conceives of human presence that might replace the 'stalking' black rook. Its finality lends it rhetorical force, however, marking both human presence and 'solace' as elusive, unlikely.

'Prospect'

We find a similarly imagist effect in 'Prospect' (8th poem in 1956 section).

Among orange-tile rooftops
and chimney pots
the fen fog slips,
 gray as rats,

while on spotted branch
of the sycamore
two black rooks hunch
and darkly glare,
watching for night
with absinthe eye
cocked on the lone, late,
passer-by (1981:28).

The white of swan and snow and ice of the earlier poem are replaced, here with the gray of the 'fen fog' which slips, rat-like, among 'rooftops' and 'chimney pots'; it is the tiles of the roofs, not the sun, that is orange; and green is registered by implication only, in the 'absinthe eye' of the birds. Where before the speaker is like a lone bird that 'stalks', here 'two black rooks hunch' on a 'spotted branch / of the sycamore'. They are elevated above the ground to look down on the 'lone, late passer-by'. Their colour lends mood, as they 'darkly glare / watching for night'. At the same time, the birds are part of a scene that is at a remove from the speaker. The reference of the title might seem to attach to the birds' 'absinthe eye', yet the vantage point we are offered takes in rooftops and chimney pots, and so could as easily be the 'prospect' of an observer looking out of an upper-storey window. The looseness of the visual perspective contributes to a sense of emotional detachment, of impersonality. Although the rooks are malevolent, they are not looking at the person looking at them. Unlike the earlier poem, then, they are not figured as emanating from the consciousness of the speaker, nor do they reflect it back upon her. Rather the poem serves to render, with irony and detached humour, the intensity of the birds' 'eye cocked' upon the person who passes by, quite unaware.

'Black Rook in Rainy Weather'

'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' is the last poem, number 44, in the 1956 section of *Collected Poems*. The figuration of the rook it offers is rather

different from the earlier two poems: one, because of the intellectual and emotional engagement of its speaker; and two, because of its rendition of the otherness, the singularity of the bird, and of its implications for the speaker's state of mind, her state of being.

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Lean incandescent

Out of the kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then—
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine

As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent (1981:56-57).

The rook features twice in this poem: first in the opening stanza, where it is described statively, 'hunching' and 'arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain'; and then in stanza six, where these actions are reprised as 'ordering its black feathers'. For much of the poem the rook seems to be absent from the surface awareness of the speaker, who ponders her own expectations, her admissions, her desires, her wariness, her scepticism, her knowledge. Some nine, that is roughly half, of the clauses in the poem have 'I' as their subject:

I do not expect
nor seek
but let ... fall
I admit
I desire
I can't honestly complain
I now walk
I only know
I shall patch together...

The effect is to foreground the meditative consciousness of the speaker, to make the poem very subject-centred. Also noteworthy is the mood of the verbs she uses, which are predominantly assertive. By contrast, five of the remaining ten clauses are modal:

a certain minor light *may* still lean / incandescent
one *might* say
it *could* happen
whatever angel *may* choose to flare
a rook ... *can* so shine

and two more are rendered tentative, conditional, by the use of ‘if’:

as *if* a celestial burning took possession
if you care to call.

It is, of course, these clauses, the ones that are not subject-centred, that lend the poem its overall air of speculation and consideration.

The verb forms given to the rook, by contrast, are positive, definite: it ‘hunches’, it ‘arranges and rearranges’, and then ‘orders’ its feathers; releasing, as it does so, the ‘shine’ whose impact renders the speaker object to its actions: they ‘seize’ her senses, ‘haul’ her eyelids up, and ‘grant’ her brief respite from fear. It is this impact that leads her to her correspondingly positive concluding statement. ‘Miracles occur’, she says, and reflects, ‘The wait’s begun again’.

Thus the poem is not, specifically, ‘about’ the rook. As might be evident from my earlier brief overview, there is much more that Plath could have chosen to say about the bird but didn’t; and the two glimpses we are given of it are fleeting and transient. The effect of her rendition, rather, is to engender an image caught in the corner of the eye, in the peripheral vision; evanescent, scarcely there; something that will disappear if it is looked at too hard, if it is focused on directly. We might recall, perhaps, the ‘other echoes’ that inhabit T.S. Eliot’s garden in ‘Burnt Norton’: the ‘unheard music’, the ‘unseen eyebeam’, the empty pool (1963:190).

And yet the bird’s presence is powerful because it is subliminally registered and sustained, bringing about a moment of the sublime that is transformative, although it is transient and can only be grasped tentatively, self-effacingly. I am reminded of Keats’s ‘negative capability’—‘that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (1962:257)—or, though couched in negative terms, of Derek Attridge’s concept of the *arrivant*, which he draws

from Derrida in his reading of Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg*. Attridge translates the concept as both 'arrival' and 'the one who arrives' (1996:27). Most of Coetzee's novel, he says, 'occurs in the time before the *arrivant*' (1996:30); it is a novel of waiting, 'and waiting without any clear sense of what would constitute the longed-for arrival' (1996:25). The spectre in the room, the *arrivant*, takes shape gradually as a 'phantasm' the main character is responsible for bringing into being: 'It is himself, it is Nechaev, it is Pavel, but it is also none of these; we know that it will eventually reach written form as Stavrogin' (the figure, edited out of Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, who violates his landlady's eleven-year old daughter, and does nothing to prevent her suicide by hanging) (Attridge 1996:34). Thus, concludes Attridge (1996:35), the path to the *arrivant* in Coetzee's novel, 'lies through the younger generation, and ... what is required for writing, for literature, to begin is the sacrifice of their innocence'.

Setting aside the grimness of this variant of it, the concept captures, for me, something of the quality of waiting, of receptiveness, that Plath brings to her rendition of the brief, flickering, evanescent appearance of the rook-as-angel. It requires from its speaker a kind of willed suspension of disbelief. Hence the negative assertions in the poem: the measured concession in the first stanza—'I do not expect'—the reluctant relinquishment in the second—'nor seek / Any more'—the colloquial quip in the third—'I can't honestly complain'.

What makes the poem hard to gauge, hard to pin down, is both its structure, with the rook featuring in stanzas one and six as if placeholding, and the form and the tense of the verbs that make tracing sequence difficult. Some readings treat the poem as containing contradictions that undermine the express stance the speaker takes at the outset: she may say she's not looking for miracles, but in fact she is. I don't read the poem this way. Contrary to the predominance of the subject-directed sentences noted above, I believe Plath does indeed achieve a setting aside of the self that enables her to register desire and yet to achieve patience at the same time. Hence the sequence,

'I do not expect [...] but let';
'nor seek / Anymore [...] some design';
'Although [...] I desire [...] I can't honestly complain';

‘At any rate, I now walk / Wary (for it could happen)’;
‘I only know that a rook [...] can so shine’;
‘With luck [...] I shall / Patch together a content / Of sorts’;
‘Miracles occur’; and, ultimately, ‘The wait’s begun again’.

And hence the tone of the poem that is deprecating, self-effacing, gracious. Infused with the spiritual language of radiance and inspiration, the process of the sublime must still work through and against the resistance of the ordinary: the ‘incandescent’ light leans out of the ‘kitchen table or chair’; the ‘celestial burning’ takes possession of the ‘most obtuse objects’; the interval it ‘hallows’ is ‘otherwise inconsequent’; the ‘landscape’ in which it happens is ‘dull, ruinous’. The speaker, too, is at once receptive and resistant: her fear is of ‘total neutrality’; she walks ‘wary’, treks ‘stubborn’; she is ‘skeptical, / Yet politic; ignorant’. Her scepticism, nevertheless, is expressed through whimsy: having renounced expectations, she ‘lets’ processes happen around her; although she desires acknowledgement or response, she belittles it by calling it ‘backtalk’ and by labelling the sky from which she seeks it ‘mute’; the ‘incandescent’ light is a ‘minor’ one; it is ‘with luck’, she says, that she shall ‘patch together a content / Of sorts’. Dismissive as this account might seem, she ‘can’t honestly complain’, because, for the ‘largesse, honor’ this light bestows, ‘one might say love’; and ‘those spasmodic tricks of radiance’ are ‘miracles’—‘if you care to call’ them that. The knowledge she has is sparse, but it is incontrovertible: ‘I only know that a rook [...] can so shine’; and the knowledge is hers by dint of its impact on her senses and by the definite though ‘brief respite’ it brings from fear.

This tone, I think, is key to the nature of the experience she recounts—it is also key to her choice of rook around which to cohere the experience. I outlined to start the range of things she might have said about the rook if she had chosen, and didn’t. Nothing about its young; nothing about its call; nothing about its flight; nothing about its feeding habits; nothing, really, about its habitat. Only that it ‘hunches’, on a ‘stiff twig’, ‘up there’; that it is ‘wet’ and ‘black’; that it ‘arranges’ and ‘rearranges’ its feathers ‘in the rain’. It does not look at her, nor does it cock the ‘absinthe eye’ of her previous rooks. In fact colour is suppressed in this poem, refined to the monochrome of the rook’s black and the light that seeing it shine

momentarily ignites. The shine emerges as the rook arranges, rearranges, orders its feathers in the rain. Is this an image of endurance against the elements? An example for the speaker to follow? An image of beauty? An association of order with the 'design' she eschews? Certainly the rook is separate from her, since she offers no comment or interpretation that might fix its meaning. Its shine links it with the light, the incandescence, the flare, the burning, the radiance that illuminates the moment for her and that she calls, casually, coolly 'miracle', that she christens 'angel'.

Part of my interest in the poem is in this sense that the bird is not defined, not fixed, not aesthetically used. Its presence is registered, and its action triggers an epiphany, but it is itself untouched by this. Its autonomy is respected; it does what it does; it keeps its self to itself. The speaker's response is revelatory because momentary and involuntary: because it cannot be called up, nor can it be hastened. It can only be awaited, and the wait is long.

I have endeavoured, in this brief study, to offer a reading of poems by Plath in which she depicts, or renders, or responds to rooks. My attempt has been indicative rather than exhaustive; a reflection on one particular poem that has lived with me for a long time. Far more than being just words on the page, Plath's rook has a life of its own. Her rook measures, for me, the power that poetry has to mean, to be.

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