Hunter ETA Extension 1 Day: After the Bomb: Violence and Reverberation

Plath's Poetry as Frame:

Sylvia Plath's poetry is shot through with images of violence and its aftermath. Whether she is aligning her metaphors overtly with historical events, as she does in 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', or whether she is writing about a baby ('Morning Song') or the experience of illness ('Fever 103'), ripples of violence permeate her work. A motif of violence, vulnerability and – most importantly – resilience is a central strain in her writing, which dramatically and boldly breaks new ground: dropping bombs, in terms of its form and content. Plath describes poetry as a 'tyrannical discipline':

Poetry, I feel, is a tyrannical discipline, you've got to go so far, so fast, in such a short space that you've just got to burn away the peripherals.

Sylvia Plath, interviewed by Peter Orr, October 30, 1962.

In this interview, Plath talks about the importance of connecting the personal to the larger world, which, for her, was Cold War America, and then England:

Personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau.

Transcript:
http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm

(Although this is an authoritative source, it contains some transcription errors.)

Listen to the interview at, for example:

http://www.blinkx.com/video/sylvia-plath-interview-part-1/93_yT24fvCmcyE5PmBxi0w

'After the Bomb': J. Robert Oppenheimer reflecting on the moment when he realized he had succeeded in developing the bomb. See, for example:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8l17libx-c0

We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him takes on a multi-armed form and says: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that then.

Dr Felicity Plunkett: felicity.a.plunkett@gmail.com; March 2014
Justin Fitzpatrick ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’:

‘Words’ experimental piece by Elena Antonenko:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sAIYTJquv8&feature=related

The reception of Plath’s work carries this motif of violence and its reverberations. See, for example, analysis of Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991)

Execreted and idolised, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal; she hovers in the space of what is most extreme, most violent, about appraisal, valuation, about moral and literary assessment as such. (1)

M.L. Rosenthal review of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* for the use of the term ‘confessional’ in this context; Lowll’s response, the idea of ‘the raw and the cooked’ in poetry: The cooked is ‘marvelously expert and remote’ and ‘seems constructed as a sort of mechanical or catnip mouse for graduate seminars’ while the raw is ‘jerry-built and forensically deadly’ (Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 277).


a significant result of emphasizing Plath’s interiority and confessional mode is that many critics overlook and even flatly deny her connection to the outside world.

**Imaginative Writing in the Context of the Elective**

**Exercise 1: developing a statement of poetics for the elective**

This starts to provide a kind of checklist of ideas that circulate within the elective, and which you need to show and work with in your imaginative writing.

The emphasis on ‘after’: ‘afterwardness’: post-war theory about writing; bearing witness: trauma, confession/al, memory, non fiction

e.g. Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*  
Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*  
Paul Celan (poetry, including ‘Todesfuge’)

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The dangers of aestheticising: Theodor Adorno: ‘After Auschwitz, no poetry’:

Adorno’s famous statement that: ‘After Auschwitz it is no longer possible to write poems’ is best considered in its context. The problem, for Adorno is that the aesthetic principle of stylization... makes an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed.’ The trap, for Adorno, is that aestheticisation may render writing ‘in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.’ (‘After Auschwitz’, 1949, in Negative Dialectics, trans Ashton, New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 362). Yet still, for Adorno, ‘It is in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.’

Gillian Rose: ‘holocaust piety’, Art Spiegelman: ‘holo-kitsch’

Art Spiegelman, Maus

Exercise 2: trauma, anxiety and text

Cathy Caruth: trauma as wound inflicted not on the body but on the mind. Trauma and repetition. Texts’ marks of trauma.

Excerpt from Harry Cau’s confession (from The Conversation (1974))

I’ve been involved in some... work and I think... I think it will be used to hurt these two young people. This has happened to me before. People were... hurt... cause of me, my work. I’m afraid it could happen again and I, I was no way responsible, I... I... I’m not responsible, I...

Exercise 3: Humour

Beckett, Plath and Heller all use varieties of humour to underscore their ideas. Compare these, and practice some ways that satire, black humour, irony and so on might be part of an imaginative piece relating to the elective.

Elective as Trove

Via Twyla Tharp, The Creative Habit and her suggestions of the box and ‘scratching’

The texture of the era: (see Notes From the Marking Centre)

e.g. The Family of Man exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955, curated by J. Edward Steichen

The Heart of the Elective

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Violence and its aftermath; violent action and its reverberations within the specific historical context of the Cold War period. Sylvia Plath’s poems ‘Words’ and ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ as crucial ways into the elective’s heart. ‘Words’ connects violence, reverberation, and the resultant traumatisation of form and expression through a series of clear metaphorical strokes. Beyond the literal – the figurative dimensions of the elective. ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’, another poem with no overt mention of the second world war, the Cold War, or the bomb, is again crucial for its figurative rendering of the sense of violence trembling within a box, and the vulnerability and power felt by someone in charge of that noisy box of power and possible violence.

More Angles on ‘After’:

Cast of historical characters to draw on e.g. J. Robert Oppenheimer:

Oppenheimer youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8w3Y-dskeq

Writing Well, Beginning Well

What makes a strong and striking beginning? Explore what it is that captivates you about the beginning of a text you admire. Practice types of beginnings that may be suitable, depending on the nature of the question, stimulus material and so on.

‘Beginnings Make Us Hungry for More’ Bernadine Evaristo (see also: ‘First Drafts are note Holy Relics’ and other resources/exercises/articles) at http://www.mlslexia.co.uk/magazine/inspirations/wkshop_feature_40.php

What makes a character compelling? What about dialogue? How is suspense built? Avoiding cliché, redundancy, ‘murdering your darlings’ etc.
After the Bomb: Plath: 'The Arrival of the Bee Box': worksheet

This poem is part of a group of poems about bee-keeping, including 'The Bee Meeting' about an initiation into bee-keeping ('they are making me one of them'). The initiate/speaker has a sense of being made to be 'the magician's girl who does not flinch' but may or may not be the object of a murderous conspiracy. 'Stings' sees the speaker's imaginative merging with an old queen bee allows her a resurrection: 'more terrible than she ever was'. The Arrival of the Bee Box' has perhaps the most lucid narrative lines of the group, but its simplicity belies its complexity.

While the title tells us that what has arrived is a 'bee box', the speaker seems less sure. Make a list of some of the things that could be in the box. Looking at these as a list, what kind of pattern emerges?

Which images, metaphors and diction mention or allude to death?

Which images, metaphors and diction reassure the speaker that she is in control of this 'box of maniacs'?

How does metaphor work here (thinking back to discussion of 'Words')? How are the bees imagined metaphorically, and how does that shift during the poem? What does that shifting suggest about certainty and uncertainty?

In terms of the poem's anatomy of power and powerlessness, identify moments where the speaker assumes power and moments where she expresses her fear.

Looking at the use of the word 'I', consider how many of the I-statements are negative, or negated (later, we'll discuss the idea of negation from a psychoanalytical point of view; its capacity for avowal and disavowal). For now, examine the balance between assertion and its undermining.

Consider the poem's structure, and discuss the position of its last line in terms of themes of power/powerlessness, assertion, un/certainty and fear.

Literal and figurative aspects – biographical connections in that Plath's father, Otto Plath, was a scientist who wrote about bees: Bumblebees and their Ways. Plath kept bees during time living in the country in Devon. However, her poetry transforms these triggers into a much more complex and vibrant imaginative scheme. Note the wording of her warning in the BBC Orr interview that personal experience is not the key to her poetry, nor should, as a writer, one's own experience become a 'shut box and mirror-looking, narcissistic' thing.

Several critics' views on the poem are collated at:
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/arrival.htm

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Students develop a range of imaginative, interpretive and analytical compositions, including some that explore the possibilities of the genre for a range of audiences. These compositions may be realised in various forms, modes and media. Students investigate topics and ideas, engage in independent learning activities and develop skills in extended composition.

Module B: Texts and Ways of Thinking

'Ideas have legs — and successful composers run with them.'

Consider how they do this in their texts.

In your discussion, draw attention to the imaginative use of scientific, religious, philosophical and/or economic concepts in at least TWO of the prescribed texts and other related texts.

(English Extension 1 exam, 2004)

Module B: Texts and Ways of Thinking

This module requires students to explore and evaluate a selection of texts relating to a particular historical period. It develops their understanding of the ways in which scientific, religious, philosophical or economic paradigms have shaped and are reflected in literature and other texts.

Each elective in this module involves the study of at least two print texts, relating to a particular historical period, that demonstrate the influence of particular ways of thinking on literary and other texts. In addition, students explore, analyse and critically evaluate a range of other texts that reflect these ideas.

Students explore the ways that values are inscribed in particular texts and how they are reflected by texts. They consider whether and why texts are valued in their own time. They also consider why and by whom those texts are valued today.

Questions:

1. Compare the exam question with the Module rubric. Notice any similar wording, or similar key ideas.

2. List the key aspects of the question.

3. In groups, draft the opening line/s of a response your Module’s question. Try to create a sentence or two that is fresh and engaging, and responsive to the key parts of the question.

4. Spend a few minutes writing an essay plan in response to the question. Note which texts you will discuss, and some of the main points you will make about them in response to the question.

5. In groups, draft an essay question for your elective.

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