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The problem of biography

Because the poems and novel that have made Plath's name came to almost all her readers as posthumous events, her work has inevitably been read through the irrevocable, ineradicable and finally enigmatic fact of Plath's suicide. The challenge for her biographers has been to puzzle out the relationship not merely of her life to her art, but of her art to her death. Biographers promise to expose these relationships for scrutiny, and yet the genre itself is inexhaustible: there is never an end to what the biographer cannot know. If Plath's biographers differ sharply in their readiness to propose definitive and sometimes reductive explanations of her character, they also can be judged by their ability to register the quality of her achievement, to explain what Plath's work revealed so compellingly to readers, particularly women, of her own and the next generation, and why it will remain illuminating and important in the future.

Biographers of Plath demonstrate that the genre is always interested, although hers have been more noticeably partisan than most. In fact, each of the major biographies is in part motivated to counteract what is perceived as egregious bias in the one before. Reading them in sequence, we hear an edgy conversation that has lasted for three decades. Each biographer also takes up the story at a different moment in Plath's publication history and growing literary reputation, and not unimportantly, in Ted Hughes's oeuvre and reputation. In each decade biographers gained access to new published and archival resources that document in voluminous detail Plath's historical context, her professional and personal correspondence, her education and reading and her creative process in the drafts of her *Ariel* poems.[1]

When Edward Butscher published *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* in 1975, neither Plath's letters nor her journals had been published, nor had her fiction beyond *The Bell Jar* been collected.[2] By contrast, Linda Wagner-Martin began researching her 1987 biography when Plath's *Collected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982.[3] She consulted the unedited letters from Plath to her mother acquired in 1977 by the Lilly Library at Indiana University, along with

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documentation of Plath's life from infancy through her year teaching at Smith in 1957–8. Wagner-Martin read Plath's poetry drafts and her censored and incomplete journals (a much larger selection of her journals than those published in 1982), which are among the most important materials Smith College bought from Hughes in 1981. Anne Stevenson's apparent mission in *Bitter Fame* was to counteract what by 1989 was represented by the Plath Estate as Plath's mistaken status as a feminist martyr.[4] In 'The Archive', a central chapter in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose takes the Hugheses (Ted and his sister Olwyn) to task for what she and others experienced as pressure from the Estate to adopt their view or lose permission to quote Plath's work.[5] Against these charges of coercion, Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* (1995) struggled to recuperate Stevenson's efforts, as well as to forefront the unavoidable partiality of biography as a genre.[6] Diane Middlebrook's biography of the Plath–Hughes marriage, *Her Husband* (2003), attempts to take the measure of both poets after Hughes's bombshell publication of *Birthday Letters* in 1998, his unanticipated death from cancer months later, and the showering of England's most prestigious prizes on its poet laureate in the last years of the century.[7] She was the first to mine the Hughes archives at Emory University, a dauntingly rich and tangled repository of Ted Hughes's correspondence, drafts and workbooks, and of his editorial curatorship of Plath's work.

Finally, Ted Hughes is also Plath's biographer, despite his insistent refusal to be interviewed by biographers. Through his control of her archive and his own, through more than fourteen introductions to and annotations of Plath's work, and in a series of litigious public and private interventions to protest against invasions of privacy by biographers and critics, he has laid claim to irrefutable knowledge of Plath's inspiration, intentions and writing practices, and the chronology of her work. His late volume, *Birthday Letters* was read by many as an anguished memoir of their marriage and of her writing. Accompanying the rise in Sylvia Plath's stature as a major literary talent of the twentieth century is an apparently inexhaustible market for stories of her life (which seems emblematic of the gender norms that governed growing up talented, ambitious and female in the postwar US) and of this marriage between professional writers.[8]

Reading the life

In thinking through these biographies, I want to highlight several bad habits of reading Sylvia Plath as woman and as writer that misunderstand the relation of biography to art. While some of these reading fallacies are more prominent in one biography than another, others are shared. First, beginning immediately after her suicide and continuing through Hughes's late poems

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about Plath, a powerfully influential narrative assumes that her suicide authenticates the truth of her poems. This reading assumes that the relation of creative writing to lived suffering is transparent and direct, and is predetermined rather than chosen by the poet. Further, her death is understood as a tragic but inevitable byproduct of her poetic method; her suicide is proof that the violent unresolved materials of her unconscious, once courted or confronted as subjects for poetry, couldn't finally be transmuted, ordered and contained by words. Al Alvarez launched this demonic teleology in his memoir of Plath, *The Savage God*, Robert Lowell promulgated it in his foreword to the American edition of *Ariel*, and Hughes reinscribes it in *Birthday Letters*.

Second, Anne Stevenson's is only the most egregious example of those who read the poet as pathological and her writing as symptomatic of her illness. Stevenson recycles Edward Butscher's binary logic of true and false selves, in which an unacknowledged, and essentially destructive true self is temporarily constrained through verbal technical polish only to break through in the searing denunciations of the *Ariel* poems. In this reading Plath's character is fixed from childhood by heredity, chemistry, trauma or family dynamics, and a compliant mask is held tenuously in place by middle-class propriety and ambition, until the mask breaks at the dissolution of her marriage.

A third misreading accepts the binary of true–false selves, but reverses their values. Plath is the product of rigid gender norms imposed by patriarchy, her mother's influence and a dominant husband until his defection causes the true, subversive, protofeminist self to erupt in fury. This reading oversimplifies the relation between individual subject and ideology by imagining that Plath's true self could be immune to repressive ideology. Rather, the subject is constituted through ideology; gender norms are not merely given and internalized, but are apprehended, resisted and negotiated constantly in conscious and unconscious ways.

What none of these reading habits can do justice to is Plath's agency as woman and artist. Perhaps because as a culture we subscribe so exclusively to paradigms in which personality is fixed by good or bad parenting, early trauma or brain chemistry, biography underestimates Plath's habits of conscious reinvention and the lucid artistic control of her poetry, even in her final days. Rather than assume that Plath is an unusually autobiographical writer, we need to understand that she experienced her life in unusually textual ways. In her letters and journals as much as in her fiction and poetry, Plath's habits of self-representation suggest that she regarded her life as if it were a text she could invent and rewrite. At the age of seventeen, her creation of a persona is self-conscious and potentially omnipotent: 'I think I would like to call myself "The girl who wanted to be God"' (*LH*, p. 40). At moments of crisis, throughout her

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life, she imagines that she can erase the inscription of lived experience and earlier textual selves and be reborn, unmarked as an infant, inviolate as a virgin. Each of the narratives she created, whether letters, journals, prose, poetry or interviews, served her as enabling fictions; these proliferating personae were self-consciously chosen and personally explanatory. The dissonance and contradictions among these self-representations are at once symptomatic, in that they demonstrate postwar American culture's powerful shaping influence on her imagination, and also strategic, in that they represent her efforts to imagine, dismantle and reconstruct her ongoing self-narrative into a script she could live with.

While Edward Butscher has been uniformly disparaged by the Estate and other biographers since the publication of *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* in 1976, this first full-length biography puts in circulation almost all the formulas that later biographers would adopt and reinforce. Butscher introduces the term 'bitch goddess' as shorthand for Plath's poetic persona and sometimes as a descriptor for the woman herself. In combination, his terms evoke 'a discontented, tense, frequently brilliant woman goaded into fury by her repressed or distorted status in male society' and 'a more creative one ... with fierce ambition and ruthless pursuit of success' (pp. xi–xii).[9] The bitch goddess is the profoundly angry subconscious force that Butscher claims underlies her overachieving adolescence, her contemptuous resentment of family and friends, and her urge to manipulate and control everything from boyfriends and mother figures to nature itself.

He sees Plath's character as deformed by mental illness. Although he claims to eschew a medical diagnosis, Butscher's account depends on frequent references to her split personalities, psychosis and narcissism (pp. 26–7 and 125, among others). Like Stevenson later, he faults Plath for the unjust attack in *The Bell Jar* on everyone who had supported her (p. 308). But unlike Stevenson's extension of the blanket of moral blame from Plath's character to her work, Butscher uniformly admires her craft. More than any later biographer, he praises the accomplishment of *The Bell Jar*, as 'a minor masterpiece of sardonic satire and sincere protest', comparing it to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (p. 310). He recognizes in the *Ariel* poems not the mistaken fury of an unreasonable wife, but 'the fully conscious legend of the bitch self that she would assert with calculated genius' (p. 316).

Butscher also proposes the 'lost little girl' thesis of the poet arrested in her development by the childhood trauma of her father's death – a thesis most vividly deployed in Hughes's 1995 *Paris Review* interview 'The Art of Poetry LXXI' and in *Birthday Letters*. Butscher imagines in Plath's 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' an 'allegory of the lost little girl' which he claimed Hughes also

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recognized (p. 297). While he identifies the poem as a masterpiece, his reading emphasizes Plath's helpless passivity, even though the speaker nowhere identifies herself as little girl.

Butscher believes that their marriage benefited them mutually as poets. As Diane Middlebrook would argue more comprehensively three decades later, Butscher recognizes that 'their marriage vow above all was a mutual protection pact *against* the world and *for* poetry' (p. 188) and that their union 'provided two of the more original minds of their generation with an unprecedented and productive opportunity to feed and grow upon one another's stores of poetic insight' (p. 189). Most surprisingly, Butscher offers frequent insights that would coalesce in 1980s and 1990s feminist readings of Plath. He catalogues her justified resentment of male privilege in her culture, her domestic double day, even when Hughes shared childcare (p. 290), the submerged revenge plots of her poetry and magazine fiction (pp. 215–18, 270), and the appropriation of male powers by the *Ariel* heroines (p. 339). He recognizes that she mobilized weapons of self-defence and tools for survival in her late poetry (p. 342). Yet the latent misogyny of Butscher's representation is stronger than his nascent feminist sympathies. His version attributes to Plath a strong, innate distaste for sexuality (pp. 63, 77) and an attitude of condescension towards the men she used (pp. 95, 123). The greatest weakness of Butscher's argument is the internal contradiction suggested by his title. Is the repressed self articulated in the master works of the *Ariel* period (and foreshadowed in the novel and the revenge plots of the magazine stories) strategic method or symptom of madness? Is the bitch goddess manipulated guise, self-conscious persona or ungovernable eruption of the unconscious?

Among the valuable aspects of Butscher's biography for later readers is his persuasive critique of Alvarez's deterministic model of reading Plath's art as a fatal gamble with her own sanity. In his frequent, detailed analysis of the form of the poems, Butscher demonstrates that he takes all of Plath's poetry seriously, even the work that predates Hughes (labelled 'Juvenilia' in Hughes's edition of her *Collected Poems*). Butscher has unerring judgement about the important poems from each period, and reads many carefully. More than any later biographer, he identifies Plath's literary influences beyond Hughes and credits her with significant artistic growth before they met. He flags the bias in the interviews he draws upon, although he differs from later biographers in identifying the Comptons and Peter Davison as hostile and the Merwins as supportive after the separation. Finally, he unearths Plath's politics, important to critics three decades later, and emergent in her undergraduate days when she was part of the crowd who hissed Joseph McCarthy at Smith College (p. 69).

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Although reviewers suggest that Plath has become a blameless martyr in the accounts of feminists, Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath* (1987) is a responsible, temperate account. Actually the sole biographer who takes an explicitly feminist stance, Wagner-Martin claims Plath is broadly feminist in her belief in her own talent, her professional devotion to her calling, the importance of female friends, mentors and artistic models, and her anger that her fame would be more difficult to achieve and her work judged by different standards because she was a woman (pp. 11–12).

Wagner-Martin's 'Preface' is quoted more often than any other part of her book (for example, in reviews by Alvarez, Helen Vendler and Butscher, and by Malcolm). This is perhaps because, taking her own experience as example, she candidly accuses the Estate of coercion and attempted censorship in withholding permission to quote at length from Plath's materials.[10] Calculating that together Olwyn's and Ted's suggested changes would have meant deleting 15,000 words from her manuscript, Wagner-Martin gave up her intended close-readings in favor of her argument – an argument which, in any case, is not markedly hostile to Hughes.

Wagner-Martin's revisions of the available narratives laid down by Butscher and Alvarez resist monocausal explanations. Wagner-Martin recognizes that even before Otto's death, staged performances of precociousness and femininity required by him in her early childhood would have disastrous developmental consequences for her relationships with men, and that her inevitable emotional dependency on her mother Aurelia, while at first sustaining, became deeply resented in adulthood. Her reprise of Plath's psychotherapy with Ruth Beuscher in 1958–9 reminds us that Plath reassessed all her primary relationships; she not only gained '"permission to hate"' her mother (*J*, p. 429) but also confronted the link between her suspicion of Hughes and her resentment of her father. Wagner-Martin also situates Plath's psychosexual struggles with her family and in her intimate relationship with Hughes in a larger cultural framework. Plath's overclose relationship with her mother emerged in part through the fragility of the family's ability to preserve the middle-class façade of their Wellesley address after Otto's death. Despite Aurelia's heroic efforts to provide, the house was overcrowded with her extended family, forcing the adolescent Sylvia to share her mother's room, in what she would describe in her journals as a 'stink of women' and a suffocating 'smarmy matriarchy of togetherness' (*J*, pp. 431, 429). Wagner-Martin does not privilege biology or childhood trauma as the exclusive source of her mental illness (though she documents a history of depression in Otto's female relatives), but usefully links these to historical and cultural pressures on Plath's self-construction.

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Benefiting from the wealth of archival material available to her that Butscher lacked, Wagner-Martin finds more explicit trace evidence in the drafts for poems from spring 1962 that Plath was anxiously pondering violence and death in her relationship well before 'The Rabbit Catcher' articulated her anguish (pp. 202–4). She plausibly suggests an ominous yet unspoken exchange occurring that spring between the antifemale short stories and plays of Hughes that Plath typed and her own artistic production in which she anticipates her discovery of his infidelity. She finds in Plath's extensive correspondence in the Smith archives a circle of trusted women friends whom she reached out to in her final months and admiration for breakthroughs in subject matter and voice by fellow poets Anne Sexton and Stevie Smith. In retelling her final weeks, Wagner-Martin emphasizes Plath's plans with these female confidantes and professional approval for her work signaled by requests from several editors for submissions. This contrasts sharply with Hughes's widely repeated claim that her *Ariel* poems were largely rejected. She also departs from Hughes's contention (strenuously made to Aurelia in editing *Letters Home*) that far from intending to divorce him, Plath and he were on the verge of reconciliation.

Wagner-Martin's approach is never sensational; nor does she pretend to be exhaustive. Her account depends on the tremendous outpouring of feminist literary criticism that occurred in the fifteen years after Butscher's biography, some of which she had collected in her 1984 *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*.[11] In paraphrasing the archives that she was forbidden to quote, she also opens the way for much productive scholarship that followed in the 1990s. She offers an accessible, unargumentative introduction to Plath's work, with readings that are suggestive if somewhat embryonic.

Ted Hughes had multiple reasons for wanting an authorized biography of Plath by the mid-1980s, not least his need for control over what he emphatically insisted was his story as much as Plath's. Anne Stevenson began her research for *Bitter Fame* in 1985, the year after Hughes was named Britain's poet laureate. By 1982, with publication of Plath's *Collected Poems* and of the abridged edition of Plath's *Journals* (in the US only), everything Hughes intended to publish was out, and the Plath archives had been sold off. His decisions had made possible an avalanche of critical and popular attention to Plath's work and had amassed a sizeable personal fortune for Hughes. That income had been threatened during the 1970s by back taxes he owed on royalties from her books, reported in a letter to Lucas Myers as an oppressive debt.[12] During the 1980s Hughes's management of the Plath estate became the object of increasingly critical scrutiny and the source of financial anxieties that, in his letters, again reach monumental proportions. A libel suit was filed in 1982 against the film version of *The Bell Jar* (the book was by far the most lucrative of the Plath

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properties). This was not resolved until 1987. The mounting ironies were not lost on Hughes: fearing bankruptcy for the same reasons that he was wealthy beyond his imagination; Britain's poet laureate, but eclipsed in the US by Plath's rising fame, which he had helped to promote, Hughes shrank from further involvement in Plath affairs and at the same time longed for vindication in the ceaseless combat that had preoccupied him for the past decade.[13]

Stevenson's biography *Bitter Fame*, when it finally appeared in 1989, bore the wounds of another battle, the struggle between Olwyn Hughes's version of Ted's story and Stevenson's own. The equivocal author's note by Stevenson seemed to deny responsibility for the outcome under the guise of perhaps reluctant collaboration with Olwyn: 'In writing this biography, I have received a great deal of help from Olwyn Hughes ... Ms. Hughes's contributions to the text have made it almost a work of dual authorship' (p. x). In an interview a year later, Stevenson claims, 'She insisted on writing the author's note herself – on pain of withdrawing permission for the use of quotations.'[14] The equally unprecedented inclusion of three stand-alone memoirs by several of her sources as appendices prompted more widespread and sharply critical charges against the Estate's bias and editorial control than Wagner-Martin's direct accusations. Whether Stevenson was the helpless hostage of Olwyn Hughes or her willing collaborator, the informants she calls 'witnesses' were polarized camps that she felt forced to choose between, although Stevenson knew that each was unreliable.[15]

A quarter of a century separates Stevenson's interviews and the events she was researching. During this time memoirs by acquaintances had been sold and published and had become petrified in frequent rehearsals to other biographers, accumulating ever more historically distant annotation and elaboration. The new memoirs that Stevenson reproduces are from several peripheral witnesses who are uniformly unsympathetic to Plath. Dido Merwin, who was their London neighbour for a time, is unremitting in the pettiness, possessiveness and harridan hostilities she attributes to Plath. Lucas Myers, a Cambridge friend of Hughes, whose marriage, children and divorce paralleled Sylvia's and Ted's, seems to have known the Hugheses marriage almost exclusively through Ted's letters. Richard Murphy, an Irish poet, who was at most a casual acquaintance, accuses Plath of unwelcome sexual advances during a brief stay as his houseguest in September 1962.[16] For Stevenson to include these appendices as first-person accounts seems an odd choice because their perspectives have already been incorporated in the body of the biography. It is as if, in the contestatory battle that biographical accounts of the marriage had already become, Stevenson wants to buttress her own interpretation of Plath's bad behaviour with a final chorus of corroborating witnesses.

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In a 1990 interview Stevenson claims that she willingly accepted Olwyn's aid, but eventually lost authorial control, as well as 45 per cent of the British royalties, to her. She ultimately agreed to a rewrite of the last four chapters as a 'mixture' of her and Olwyn's views ('Biographer's Dilemma', p. 2). Stevenson admits that Olwyn's interventions were shadowed by Hughes, who wrote a lengthy critical letter and reviewed two complete drafts: 'he was more responsible for the book than he lets on' ('Biographer's Dilemma', p. 3). Whatever the Hugheses' joint involvement, the biography's central flaw is its lack of sympathy for the poet, and, more importantly, for the poetry. Stevenson never presents Plath's point of view about the marriage, representing Hughes as saintly husband and generous tutor, while she is to blame for all their troubles. Her representation of Plath's character combines a litany of character flaws (narcissism, unreasonable jealousy, violent rages, perfectionism) and symptoms of mental illness (paranoia, violent mood swings of manic-depression, a split personality, hysteria) which, taken together, suggest a teleology that make her unsavable in the end and consequently everyone near her blameless.[17] *Bitter Fame* recycles Butscher's reductive evil twin paradigm: 'the "real" Sylvia – violent, subversive, moonstruck, terribly angry – fought for her existence against a nice, bright, gifted American girl' (*Bitter Fame*, p. 163). But unlike Butscher, Stevenson seems not to fathom the greatness of the poetry this alleged split produced. The language of moral blame affects her aesthetic judgements, especially of the late poems: 'What the poet seems to want is a remedy for her inability to accept a form of truth most adult human beings have to learn: that they are not unique or exempt from partaking in human processes' (p. 290).

To produce *Rough Magic* (1991), Paul Alexander claims that he read the entire archives at Smith and Indiana, as well as conducting 300 interviews.[18] Certainly this research enables him to present a much thicker description of key moments in Plath's life. We learn the harrowing details of Otto's illness and Aurelia's heroic homecare; we appreciate more fully the gross mismanagement of Plath's outpatient electroshock treatments, as well as Olive Higgins Prouty's interventions in her treatment after her suicide attempt. Alexander revisits the 1962 bonfire that apparently underlies Plath's poem 'Burning the Letters' to report three separate purges, the first two witnessed by Aurelia, in which Plath burnt her second novel and later all her mother's letters. The third, recalled by Clarissa Roche, includes a witchlike exorcism, with Plath dancing around a fire of Hughes's papers, his nail clippings and other 'scum' from his desk (*Rough Magic*, p. 286). Sometimes, though, the details he has amassed are merely numbing in their profusion.

Many of Plath's old boyfriends appear, mostly to testify against her. We are told that Eddie Cohen, her Chicago correspondent, advised Plath early on

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that she needed therapy and that Gordon Lameyer was deceived about Plath's virginity. To Alexander, Plath's sexuality has a desperate, manipulative cast to it, and is linked to a compensatory cycle, overfamiliar from other biographies: 'When she felt abandoned by a male romantic figure, she subconsciously experienced the sense of loss she harbored over the death of her father' (p. 183). A more serious flaw is Alexander's apparent readiness to present several far-fetched scenarios as fact. He does not document the source for the sexualized scene of Hughes's nearly strangling Plath on their honeymoon (p. 167), nor Assia's alleged seduction of Hughes at Court Green by dropping her nightgown over his head at the breakfast table (p. 277).[19] Although he identifies his source for Plath's alleged return to the US for an abortion in September 1961, and her return to England on a ship of Fulbright students, everything about the incident lacks credibility.

Alexander offers few new insights on the poetry, but he valuably charts the rhythms of composition and publication in Plath's and Hughes's shared work lives. For example, in August 1960 Hughes's *Lupercal* was published to excellent reviews and Plath's third manuscript was rejected for the Yale Younger Poets prize. Their joint BBC interview, 'Two of a Kind', a jolly report on marrying because they were good for each other's poetry, is broadcast in 1961 in the same month that Plath's story of submerged marital rage, 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear', is published. The Knopf acceptance of *The Colossus* probably buoyed her writing of *The Bell Jar*, her secret project in spring 1961. A densely textured record of Plath's daily life, Alexander's biography demonstrates the depth of the archives he has plumbed, but he fails too often to shape what he has retrieved into meaningful patterns.

Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* might well serve as the definitive exposition and enactment of the problems of biography as a genre. Because each liability – the tingle of voyeurism, her partisan motivation, her self-doubt as a writer, the final unknowableness of her subject – is disarmingly revealed as her own, Malcolm gambles that the reader will come to trust her self-conscious fallibility as the most honest.

Like Middlebrook later, Malcolm seizes on Hughes's invented persona as 'her husband' to convey his split roles as protector of her children, destroyer of her journals and consummate editor. Malcolm's twin goals are to redeem Hughes as Plath's 'greatest critic, elucidator and impresario' (*Silent Woman*, p. 155), and to vindicate Stevenson's championing of the Hugheses' version. At the heart of Malcolm's sympathies – and the crux of her book as well as of earlier biographers' battles with the Estate – is Ted Hughes's struggle with Plath over ownership of his own life and his attempts to wrest it back from her representation in writing. If Plath's life has been dragged into the public domain, he vehemently resists the simultaneous infringement on his

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story: '"The main problem with S. P.'s biographers is that they fail ... to realize that the most interesting and dramatic part of S. P.'s life is only ½ S. P. – the other ½ is *me*"' (quoted p. 201).

Malcolm believes that she, Plath and Stevenson shared a common predicament as aspiring women writers in the 1950s. She claims that women's self-loathing, combined with their envy and resentment of male success, led them to believe it was '"the man's fault when the writing didn't go well"', a 'transferential misprision' that Malcolm identifies as '*the* central concern of contemporary feminism' (pp. 87–8). To exonerate both Hughes and Stevenson, Malcolm discredits Plath's earlier biographers with sharp, swift strokes. First and foremost she blames Alvarez's *The Savage God* for originating the narrative of 'Plath as an abandoned and mistreated woman and Hughes as a heartless betrayer' (*Silent Woman*, p. 23). To demonstrate the pitfalls of the mediated narratives collected through interviews, she revisits the pro-Plath witnesses whom Stevenson omitted and provides vivid portraits of their fallibility. Driven by ego, hostility or a simple need for cash, each finds the events they almost compulsively renarrate receding further from accessibility; Clarissa Roche, for example, is hypnotized to retrieve fresh information.

Malcolm trusts letters, over these discredited interviews, as her most reliable sources. To her, letters are 'fossils of feeling', the biographer's 'only conduit to unmediated experience. Everything else the biographer touches is stale, hashed over, told and retold, dubious, unauthentic, suspect' (p. 210). Malcolm's preference for letters powerfully argues for independent, detailed archival research. She structures her apparently desultory narrative by revelations from unpublished letters, in many of which the elusive Hughes comes forward as a passionately definitive biographer. He chides Stevenson for claiming that he could never forgive Plath for burning his papers: '"I never held that action against [Sylvia] – then or at any other time ... She never did anything that I held against her"' (quoted p. 143). Malcolm sees Hughes's interventions as motivated by redemptive affection for Plath that should preempt other accounts: 'when he writes about Plath, he renders all other writings crude and trivial. He writes with brilliant, exasperated intelligence and a kind of Chekhovian largeheartedness and melancholy' (p. 123).

Over another letter from Hughes, Malcolm does battle with Jacqueline Rose, whom she describes as the 'opposition's most powerful and plausible witness' (p. 177), 'the libber in whom the Hugheses finally met their match' (p. 176). Her struggle is in part staged through an unsent letter to Rose. Through a series of deconstructive moves intended to rival Rose's own critical practice, Malcolm exposes contradictions in Rose's avowed positions, most importantly that ethics are involved in interpretation and that

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Rose's own fantasy may be to have sole possession of the unavailable Hughes. Satisfied that she has bested the critic at her own intellectual game, Malcolm can disavow the jealous triangle she constructed to shame Rose as perhaps more evidence of the biographer's unreliability: 'I no longer have the conviction I once had that Jacqueline Rose and I were fighting over Ted Hughes' (p. 183). Yet her layering of letters, sent and unsent, suggests otherwise.

Almost a decade later, when Middlebrook resuscitates 'her husband' as the image of Ted Hughes's lifelong partnership with Plath, Hughes again comes forward as Plath's most admiring consort. In her biography of a marriage, *Her Husband*, Middlebrook demonstrates that whatever damage their marriage ultimately produced in their lived experience, it was a mutually productive literary partnership of the first order. By moving discussion of their marriage into consideration of what was good for poetry – their creation of mythic personae – Middlebrook arranges a kind of no-fault divorce, the pain of which is transcended by a more lasting union through poetry. To Middlebrook, the couple's needs were diametrically opposed. Plath needs middle-class domesticity, with motherhood a core psychic requirement and Hughes as muse and mentor for her writing. Hughes's writing requires solitude and periodic escapes into wildness, usually through extramarital sex. *Her Husband* replaces blame for Hughes's behavior with sympathy for his artistic requirements. As far as poetry is concerned, there is no question of Hughes's infidelity; Plath remains his lifelong muse and most poignantly reappears to him in 'The Offers' to demand their reunion.[20]

Middlebrook underscores earlier biographers' and critics' judgement that Plath's investment in Hughes fostered her artistic growth. She differs most from her predecessors in the very persuasive evidence she offers of their stylistic habits of 'call and response' in which images, sound patterns and phrases are exchanged between poems, often to quite different ends. Middlebrook also advances an alternative understanding of Plath as mother and poet. Rather than the tension between the demands of poetry and the rigours of single-motherhood other critics find, she argues for continuity between Plath's prechildren idealization of motherhood, as measure of her domestic and poetic creativity, and the *Ariel* poems, which she sees as 'bursting from her motherhood' (p. 193.) It was the experience of maternity, Middlebrook claims, that rescued her from apprenticeship to Hughes (p. 153).

Middlebrook draws on new archival material, Hughes's letters at Emory University and the British Library, to give a fuller first-person account of Hughes's curatorship of the Estate than appears in any of his introductions to her work. Through these we see, even more vividly than in Malcolm, the

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emotional needs that produced the split persona, 'her husband', that she chooses as her title. In place of the familiar image of Hughes as destroyer of Plath's journals and despoiler of her finished *Ariel* volume, Middlebrook evokes a picture of Hughes as stunned participant in an ongoing conversation with Plath. Hughes's discovery of his poetry on her writing table after her death is evidence, she suggests, of Plath's 'continuing attachment to their creative partnership' (p. 219). Along with the carefully ordered and bound *Ariel* poems, Hughes found his poem 'Out', which contains poppy imagery echoed in her two poppy poems, and a typescript of his 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' next to reviews of *The Bell Jar* (p. 220). Middlebrook offers a romantic reading of *Birthday Letters* as their reunion (other Plath scholars might name it a rematch) in which Hughes rehearses old disputes on an 'intimate wavelength' (p. 279). Whatever the tone of the exchange, Middlebrook is entirely accurate in insisting on the text-based dynamics of the book: 'he has been prompted by her words to enter into dialogue with that self she made in language' (p. 279).

Given Middlebrook's impressively extensive new research, it seems curiously old-fashioned to appeal to Robert Graves's 'white goddess' paradigm to explain Plath's function in Hughes's artistic life. She is the awesome primal female required by Hughes's shamanistic journey: 'her destiny [is] to inflict devastation on Hughes as well as release his creative fluency' (p. 283). Certainly his accounts of Plath's development resort to similar formulas, as Middlebrook paraphrases: 'an old shattered self reduced by violence to its central core, had been repaired' (p. 114). Middlebrook sympathetically attempts to explicate the Gravesian worldview that she feels underlies his art, yet in granting the explanatory power for Hughes of this cosmology, she risks losing sight of how Plath's might have differed. Middlebrook's belief in the indissoluble nature of their union is likewise evident in her retelling of the final weeks of Plath's life. She underscores Hughes's later version of their potential reconciliation rather than Plath's letters about the finality of their separation.

Middlebrook makes a lucid and compelling argument from a wealth of new archival sources that is generous in its admiration of both poets, yet the portrait of the marriage that emerges is less marked by the contestation of gender norms that has made their story so emblematic for the end of one era and the dawn of our current age.

The uncertainty of biography

Who is the Sylvia Plath that these biographies have produced? Taken one by one, these narrations purport to give us the real Sylvia, to penetrate

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the multiple guises and arrive at certain truth, verified by a chorus of eyewitnesses. Yet my purpose in emphasizing the contradictory stories these biographies tell is to demonstrate that what they communicate is uncertainty.

If we hope to piece together the definitive, documented facts that provide a causal link between Plath's experience and her art, we are bound to be disappointed. We need to recognize that biography produces and reproduces the stories circulating in our culture, particularly those that are used to make female experience legible. The credibility of the figure of Plath as psychotic, wounded, devious, narcissistic or death-driven does not lie with the objectivity of the witnesses the biographer draws upon, but comes from the multiple sites within culture that give shape and meaning to women's experience *as* story. These explanatory plotlines smooth over the contradictions, dissonances and unknowable motivations of the life in order to narrate a coherent identity unfolding developmentally in time that we as readers recognize as familiar and plausible.

More helpfully, feminist theorists have enriched our understanding of selfhood, not as an experiential certainty, but as a process. The female subject, like any other, does not preexist her awareness of culture but emerges through it, in language and representation. Further, as Joan Scott explains, 'it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted by experience'.[21] Claiming experience as a property of selfhood is thus an act of interpretation and a process in need of interpretation. Culture itself is a site of competing solicitations and prohibitions that shape subjectivity, but unevenly and never completely. Plath's subjectivity, in her private and public acts of narration, can be read in Judith Butler's terms as a 'daily act of reconstitution'. She apprehends her gender, her sexuality, her embodiment in an 'impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions'. Her agency is not fully self-determining but is nonetheless present in the improvisations and reconsiderations through which this subjectivity is appropriated, not merely given: 'Not wholly conscious, yet available to consciousness, it is the kind of choice we make and only later realize we have made.'[22] The life-writing theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain that the interaction between experience, subjectivity and story is constant:

> Every day, all day long, the material universe affects us, literally as well as discursively ... But in making meaning of these events, we make that meaning, or the 'experience' of those events, discursively, in language, and as narrative. Thus, we retrospectively make experience and convey a sense of it to others through storytelling; and as we tell our stories discursive patterns guide, or compel, us to tell stories about ourselves in particular ways.[23]

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What this reconceptualization of subjectivity as a process disturbs is the neat binary that an uncritical reading of biography rests upon; that before or behind the art is a coherent, unified self to be laid bare as the source or motor of the poetry. We need to resist the unexamined assumption (and often in biographies of women what amounts to the misogynist practice) that a woman can only write out of or about what she has actually lived. Such a premise disallows the transformative power of a woman's art as epistemology, as an alternative, equally self-constituting form of knowing and being.

Can we simply forgo biography? I think not. Every literary critic must inevitably confront what Jacqueline Rose describes as 'something untellable, but which has to be told, [which] enters the frame when the subject of biography dies by her own hand'.[24] We cannot simply dismiss biography; instead, we need to situate the story of a life differently, as part of more encompassing narratives. We need to take apart the ways that Plath's and Hughes's lives are forever conjoined in material ways, in the revenue Plath's texts generated for Hughes, as well as in texts they generated about each other. Their intertwined literary history suggests that Plath and Hughes were each moved to write (and to rewrite each other's work) because each believed that to be in possession of a story meant to be in possession of your life. Each uses poetry as an enabling fiction; having a story means creating a coherent narrative with an explanatory past and a plausible future. Telling a story is interpreting your life; it also makes that life possible. We could also use their cross-referential writing practice as a test case to examine the limits of genres; biography necessarily interpenetrates autobiography in the poems, as both poets tell the other's story as a way of telling their own. Nancy Miller, Leigh Gilmore and Paul John Eakin rightly contend that autobiography is always relational. Their subtle and provocative theories of life-writing scrutinize the malleability and permeability of established genres such as biography, autobiography, confessional poetry and literary criticism and identify new hybrid forms.[25]

Hughes's public and often litigious conflicts with biographers and literary critics demonstrate his aggrieved sense that Plath's autobiographical acts were in fact biography, imprisoning him in her misrepresentation. Any critical interpretation of her work, it seemed, also harmfully interfered with his own and his children's possession of the woman Sylvia Plath. In her 'Foreword' to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, Frieda Hughes reveals what she experiences as the incursion of literary criticism and biography into life: 'The point of anguish at which my mother killed herself was taken over by strangers, possessed and reshaped by them. The collection of *Ariel* poems became symbolic to me of this possession of my mother ... and vilification of my father' (*A Rest.*, p. xiv). Dramatically, both Hughes and his daughter

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testify to the incredible power of texts to produce a figure with tremendous staying power, here a figure of Plath that they claim not to recognize.

That our sphere of enquiry is steadily expanding outwards from the hermetically sealed text, I am convinced, is a very good thing for literature. The critical practices that appear most promising to me are those that reveal how literary texts are illuminated by an enlarging network of other texts in which they are embedded; these methods require that we do not set aside biography, or history, or commercial 'packaging' but that we analyse their interrelation. I have suggested how the methods of feminist criticism, cultural criticism and life-writing theory enable us to see how artists are shaped by and reshape ideologies, how they engage cultural anxieties about gender roles, sexuality, happiness, materialism, politics, the environment and war – topics that recent critics have explored in Plath. Our questions now legitimately encompass the composition of literary texts, their publication and reception, and the cultural uses of poets as icons or caricatures. The meanings of Plath's poems, I am proposing, are not fixed but change depending on our tools and the contexts in which we have learnt, in the past four decades, to read them.

How will this change our practical reading practices, of Plath as artist and of her biographies? I recommend four strategies. First, approach biographies with a hermeneutics of suspicion about what we expect to find there. We need not only to interrogate the cultural scripts that structure the biography and produce the figure of Plath, but question as well our search for a final truth that we mistakenly imagine exists outside of culture or before mediation by its images and stories. Second, grant the artist her imaginative freedom to invent, misremember, substitute and play. Emily Dickinson's insistence on the difference between her existence and that of the 'supposed person' in her art is essential to reading Plath. Third, we need reading practices that honour the unconscious as an integral element of subjectivity and of narration. I offer my students Adrienne Rich's insight, 'Poems are like dreams in that you put in them what you didn't know you knew.' Last, we can develop habits of reading more reflexively, of including the historical moment of our own reception and consumption of these texts as part of what must be examined.

If, in our widening understanding of multiple sites and forms of mediation, Sylvia Plath seems to recede further and further from our comprehension, I am heartened that these strategies will actually make her more present to us textually – implicated, resisting, investing, improvising, revising the myriad texts around and about her, because each of these texts is, in turn, susceptible to interpretation.

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Notes

1. See my *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), and Lynda K. Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).
2. Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).
3. Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).
4. Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
5. Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991).
6. Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1995).
7. Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2003).
8. See Dale Salwak, *Living with a Writer* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), and Frances Wilson, *Literary Seductions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
9. See Rose's discussion of the origins of this term in *Haunting*, pp. 165–9.
10. See A. Alvarez, 'A Poet and Her Myths', *New York Review* (28 September 1989), p. 34; Helen Hennessy Vendler, 'Who Is Sylvia?', *New Republic* (6 November 1989), p. 100; Edward Butscher, 'Unfinished Lives of Sylvia Plath', *Georgia Review* (Spring/Summer 1990), p. 296; and Malcolm, *Silent Woman*, p. 25.
11. Linda Wagner (ed.), *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984).
12. Ted Hughes letter to Lucas Myers, 16 January 1977, Emory.
13. Ibid.
14. Anne Stevenson, 'A Biographer's Dilemma' (interview with Madeline Strong Diehl), *Michigan Today* 22.2 (April 1990), p. 2.
15. 'The animus of the pro-Sylvia side against Olwyn was so very great, and the misconception of what Sylvia was all about was so terrible, that I was thrown back in Olwyn's arms anyway', ibid.
16. Middlebrook mentions that he met the couple in London (*Her Husband*, p. 179). Plath knew him as prizewinner in a contest she judged; later, at Plath's initiative, the couple were his houseguests in Ireland (September 1962).
17. Among many other references, for split selves, see p. 23, 163–4; egotism, pp. 15, 21, 32, 164–5, 167; mood swings, pp. 15, 36, 59, 93, 298; paranoia, pp. 129–31; and hysteria, pp. 56, 60, 138, 187.
18. Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 1.
19. Assia Wevill and her husband David were acquaintances of Plath and Hughes. When the latter couple left London, the Wevills took over the lease of their flat. In May 1962 they spent a weekend with Plath and Hughes at their North Tawton home. Later that summer, Hughes and Assia Wevill began a relationship, which continued until 1969 when Assia died by suicide.
20. 'The Offers' was published in Hughes's limited edition *Howls & Whispers* (1998) and reprinted in Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).
21. Joan Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991), p. 27.

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22. Judith Butler, 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*', *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986), p. 40.
23. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 26.
24. Jacqueline Rose, 'Sylvia Plath – Again: This is Not a Biography', *London Review of Books* (22 August 2002), 2; reprinted in Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), pp. 49–71.
25. See Nancy K. Miller's hybrid genre 'personal criticism' in *Getting Personal* (London: Routledge, 1991); Leigh Gilmore's study of the markers of autobiographical acts in *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and *The Limits of Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Paul John Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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