

HAROLD FROMM

Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist

With the appearance of yet another life of Sylvia Plath, the cultural observer may very well wonder whether the world really needs three biographies in a period of less than fifteen years. Plath's literary reputation is founded, after all, upon a handful of startling poems and a seemingly accessible novel, *The Bell Jar*, that in reality may be not so much accessible as adaptable to political uses. After her suicide in 1963, her writings sold like editions of the *National Enquirer*, providing a convenient sand box for voyeurs and crude feminists on the lookout for mudpie effigies of "Daddy." But once the more sensational aspects of the Plath phenomenon began to pale, it became possible to focus upon her poetic craft, frequently at the expense of the tortured consciousness that nourished it. Since biographies, however, both reflect and influence the history of literary reception of which they are a part, Anne Stevenson's new version of the life of Sylvia Plath turns out to be anything but supererogatory.¹

Edward Butscher's pioneering work of 1976, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*,² though nowadays disparaged, was a remarkable achievement for someone to whom the major archives were unavailable. It was not until 1977 that Indiana University purchased the bulk of Plath's letters and other valuable materials from her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, nor until 1981 that Ted Hughes sold another very large cache of his wife's manuscripts to Smith College. *Letters Home*, Aurelia Plath's edition of letters, mostly to herself from Sylvia, appeared only in time for Butscher to mention it in his notes. Without having seen the bulk of Plath's journals or letters, Butscher managed to extract an extraordinary database from

¹ BITTER FAME: A Life of Sylvia Plath, by Anne Stevenson. Houghton Mifflin. \$19.95.

² New York, 1976.

interviews with survivors and to get more than the general outlines of her life quite right. It was already well-known that the death of her father when she was eight was a blow from which she never seemed to recover, that she was nurtured by a loving mother and grandparents, and that she had a brilliant career at Smith College, during which she published poems and fiction in national periodicals and won several prizes. After miraculously surviving her first suicide attempt at twenty-one and recovering in a mental hospital, she returned to Smith, won a Fulbright to England for a second undergraduate degree at Cambridge, met and married Ted Hughes and had two children. It was a relationship that worked wonders for both their craft and fame, until things began to unhinge.

Butscher's thematic characterization of Plath as "bitch goddess" was hardly wide of the mark. His insight into her precarious psyche was convincing, and his appreciation of her poetic genius very sensitive indeed. What prevented definitiveness, however, besides the limited documentation, was his wildly excessive psychologizing; his readiness to swallow the program of feminist-ascribed ills that patriarchal society was reputed to have foisted upon Sylvia as a woman, including an extreme hostility to Aurelia Plath, whom he treated as an almost malevolent agent of patriarchal bourgeois repressivity and conventionality; his excessively long accounts of minor events for which he happened to have a lot of information; the absence of material about important moments in Plath's life, as well as a very thin account of Ted Hughes and the breakup of their marriage, which had the effect (if not the intention) of putting the burden of blame upon Hughes in default of his side of the story; and by no means least of all, his egregiously extensive, rather unintelligible readings of Plath's poems. Nevertheless, his accomplishment was more than nugatory.

Whereas Butscher's prose was feverishly overcharged and portentous ("Spurred by the double tragedy of miscarriage and appendectomy . . ."), Linda Wagner-Martin's 1987 biography successfully avoided this and most of Butscher's other liabilities as well. The writing is plain and lucid (to the point of flat-footedness at times); Plath's poems and fiction are used edifyingly, without any of Butscher's clumsiness; Aurelia Plath is treated as a benign platonic idea of motherly selflessness; the

point of view is feminist but seemingly controlled ("Plath knew that, because she was a woman writer, her work would be judged by standards different from those used to judge the work of male writers"³); the account makes use of just about every document, published and unpublished, available at the time of writing, as well as more than 200 interviews; and the narration is cool and factual with little overt "interpretation." Indeed, Wagner-Martin's excellent "Introduction" to her 1984 collection of writings about Sylvia Plath reveals more openly than her biography her enthusiastic feminist commitment. Interpreting the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for *The Collected Poems* as proof that "the power of Plath's art finally won out—over all the detractors, the envious, the death-mongers," she goes on to observe that "had Plath been only a suicidal poet, writing in a narrow and obsessively limited voice," such recognition could never have taken place.⁴ Yet although Wagner-Martin uses both the letters home and the journals—a schizophrenic duality if there ever was one—to provide concrete documentation of Plath's dizzying mental swings, she could not resist either the downplayings or the heightenings that her feminism, however controlled, seemed to require. Thus, apart from the absence in her account of any words like "madness," or "schizophrenic," or "manic-depressive," she attributes Plath's rage, depressions, and bitchiness merely to "childhood years of loss and perceived abandonment," has little to say about Sylvia's discomfitingly ill-tempered relationship with Ted's sister, Olwyn Hughes (and a lot of other people), and excuses the almost unprecedented malice of her literary use of family and friends with remarks like "Plath's depiction of her mother and other female characters may trouble the reader who knows her biography, but *The Bell Jar* is fiction, and in fiction real people are transformed." Even more surprisingly, she devotes only one sentence to such indelible events as Sylvia's destruction of Ted's work in progress—his play, poems, notebooks, drafts, and even his favorite edition of Shakespeare—on one of the many paranoid occasions when she imagined him to be flirting with other women, a destruction that was not to be the last. Although Wagner-

³ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York, 1987), p. 12.

⁴ *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Linda Wagner (Boston, 1984), p. 1.

Martin's quotations from the journals make it perfectly clear that Plath's psyche was a maelstrom of raging conflicts, the effect of her narrative understatement is to counteract Plath's own words, producing sympathy for the "victim." And while she herself is not hard upon Ted Hughes, praising the excellences of their marriage while stressing that it was Sylvia who banished him when he finally *was* having an affair, she is too partial to Sylvia's point of view, perhaps because she has so little information from any other.

Wagner-Martin's increasingly fractious relationship with Olwyn Hughes, which she details in her "Preface," undoubtedly provided an obstacle course which she had to get around by cutting and paraphrasing when Olwyn and Ted began to make increasingly demanding editorial decisions in exchange for permissions to quote. Though it is never made entirely clear what the Hugheses were objecting to, their grounds for objection are now largely clarified by the appearance of Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*.

If Wagner-Martin's apologies for Sylvia Plath suggest that art overcomes everything, especially if the art is female, Anne Stevenson's aim is to redress the balance with fresh information that reveals more of the "everything" that up until now has been slighted. Greatly indebted to Olwyn Hughes for permissions and direct help, she describes her book as "almost a work of dual authorship," and in this case, at least, it may very well be that two heads have been better than any previous single one. "Until now," she informs us, "a whole side of [Plath's] story—that of her marriage—has been inadequately or erroneously presented. This was due primarily to Ted Hughes's understandable insistence on the privacy of his life and the lives of his children. . . . Much of the new material will surprise those who have accepted the current view of Sylvia Plath." But more than new material is involved. What becomes apparent from the very first paragraph of Stevenson's preface is that this is going to be an actively interpretive biography, fusing together all of the previously expressed points of view with new information and outlooks that throw everything slightly askew. Her technique of synthesis-cum-interpretation can be seen in a discussion of Sylvia's obsession with her father, an obsession that, in "Daddy," produced a "tangle of imagery—illogical, surreal, untrue

as to the fact but inseparable from Sylvia's psychic reality." Inexorably, "in her peculiarly hallucinatory imagination," her father Otto "would emerge from the shadow side of Sylvia's stories and poems as the Proteus of her Herculean effort to free herself of his image. Menacingly, irresistibly, he would reappear in her work as a Colossus, a sea-god muse, a drowned suicide, an archetypal Greek king, a beekeeper (brave master of a dangerous colony), even, as in the famous poem 'Daddy,' a fictitiously brutal combination of husband and Luftwaffe Nazi." Compressed, intense, jolting, and decidedly non-feminist, Stevenson's accounts are less a matter of radical revelation than of someone lighting a fuse that has always been dangling in the attentive reader's peripheral vision.

What is, strictly speaking, new in this life is the light it sheds on the mysterious breakup of the Hugheses' marriage, the early signs of which Stevenson and Olwyn Hughes are in a position to provide. Of course, the strain of domestic life for six years with someone as emotionally volatile as Sylvia, whose barely repressed angers often erupted into terrible scenes among friends, had even in the earlier biographies appeared as grounds for marital conflict. Now we learn how the "bright and smiling mask" that Sylvia presented was so often followed by rages, and how Ted Hughes found these moods "largely unaccountable: they began and ended like electric storms, and he came to learn simply to accept their occurrence," sometimes with only a gesture of helplessness. "He had tried to reason with Sylvia on similar occasions, he said, but it was no use. She adamantly refused anything that sounded like criticism and simply became hysterical." Visits to his parents in Yorkshire produced tense and painful scenes that caused Ted to write his sister in an attempt to account for Sylvia's bizarre behavior. And elsewhere in the narrative, Lucas Myers, Olwyn Hughes, Richard Murphy, and others reflect upon their own disastrous encounters with Sylvia, the most intense of which is a long addendum in which Dido Merwin reports on Sylvia's fits of jealousy regarding other women (in her journals, Plath comments on some of these events herself). Stevenson even records Aurelia Plath's disarray at Sylvia's treatment of Ted while she is visiting them in England, as well as an epiphanal passage from a letter in which Mrs. Plath remarks that Sylvia "made use of

everything and often transmuted gold into lead. . . . These emotions in another person would dissipate with time, but with Sylvia they were written at the moment of intensity to become ineradicable as an epitaph engraved on a tombstone." In Anne Stevenson's account of the Hugheses, the reader is prepared for disaster long before it finally takes place.

Although this narrative is highly critical of Plath throughout, there is no *a priori* reason why the perspective from the Hughes side should be any more inaccurate than the perspective from the more familiar Plath one. Indeed, though A. Alvarez, an old Plath supporter, seemed outraged by Stevenson's biography in his *New York Review of Books* account (Sept. 28, 1989), he had very little quarrel with anything in particular that Stevenson had to say—he just didn't like it: "Thereafter the picture builds steadily of a sick and fragile personality, probably borderline psychotic, subject to unreasonable and unreasoning rages and fits of jealousy, exaggerated enthusiasms and inky depressions, who spent her life secretly raging against a father who had abandoned her by dying when she was eight years old." Unable to disagree with this characterization, he soothes his vexation by shifting gears into the *Ars Vincit Omnia* mode that we have already seen in Wagner-Martin: "However far gone she was at the end, she also possessed enormous powers of recovery and was in touch with an incomparably rich inner world. Whence the power and beauty of her last poems, and also their extraordinary detachment." After quoting Plath's valedictory last poem, "Edge," he concludes: "What matters here is not the Medea-like tragedy but the uncanny artistic detachment that allows the imagery to develop its own lucid, calm life."

If the first period of Plath reception could be thought of as the "madness and melodrama" phase, the second period, which perhaps may now be drawing to a close, could be called the "transcendence of art" phase. Given this latter mode of reception, it becomes imperative that we not miss two passing comments that Anne Stevenson and Olwyn Hughes make in the course of *Bitter Fame*—marking a radical departure from previous treatments of Sylvia Plath—because despite the general boldness of their book, their voices at these moments betray a trace of timorousness and qualification, as they eye the pile of bricks waiting in readiness to be thrown at them.

Speaking of the startling nature of Plath's "Daddy," "the shock of pure fury . . . the smoldering rage with which she is declaring herself free, both of ghostly father and of husband," Stevenson concludes, "The implication is that after this exorcism her life can begin again, that she will be reborn. And indeed *on ethical grounds* [emphasis added] only a desperate bid for life and psychic health can even begin to excuse this and several other of the Ariel poems." And on the biography's final, emphatic page, where the feminist vandals of Plath's tombstone are also excoriated, Stevenson quotes Olwyn Hughes: "Sylvia may be a *poete maudit*, but she is an achieved mature one: her work is hermetic, even, *on ethical grounds* [emphasis added], questionable. But as art it is unassailable." This introduction of ethics, the implications of which have so angered A. Alvarez and the *Ars Vincit Omnia* crowd, becomes all the more worth considering in the light of the present climate in which Heidegger, Eliot, Pound, and even Mencken, are being raked over the coals for their ethical shortcomings. So it is tempting to say, "And why not Plath?"

But a more general question might be tackled first: Just what *was* Sylvia Plath's "problem"? The consensus seems to be that Plath was unable to forge a coherent self from the multiple and warring fragments of her psyche. She remained a captive of the "primary processes," of the pre-social and pre-linguistic unconscious where time and space are minimal, and where desires manipulate the contents of consciousness to produce satisfaction at any cost, including the gratifications of hallucination. Her journals and letters home are blatant documents of this phenomenon, which is the most pervasive characteristic of all her writings. These journals and the letters to her mother represent "selves" so radically opposed that one can hardly believe they are emanations of the same person, the journals so agonized and self-lacerating, the letters so gushingly chirpy and upbeat, often with regard to the very same events. But Plath herself recognized this problem only too well, as the journals themselves reveal:

God, is this all it is, the ricocheting down the corridor of laughter and tears? of self-worship and self-loathing? of glory and disgust?

Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God—or the universal woman-and-man—or anything much. . . . But if I am to express what I am, I must have a standard of life, a jumping-off place, a technique—to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos.

I have the choice of being constantly active and happy or introspectively passive and sad. Or I can go mad by ricocheting in between.⁵

But early on she also recognized the "solution": "Writing makes me a small god: I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word patterns I make. I have powerful physical, intellectual and emotional forces which must have outlets, creative, or they turn to destruction and waste." The resolution is frightening: "My house of days and masks is rich enough so that I might and must spend years fishing, hauling up the pearl-eyed, horny, scaled and sea-bearded monsters sunk long, long in the Sargasso of my imagination." And the most interesting of her reflections is not found in her journals at all but in a high school diary quoted by Aurelia Plath in *Letters Home*: "I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself The girl who wanted to be God.' Yet if I were not in this body, where *would* I be—perhaps I am *destined* to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I."⁶

As things turned out, however, Plath was never able to form a coherent public self and she remained indeed almost free of classification and qualification. Her letters and behavior were so kaleidoscopic that they seemed to derive from no central, public, or "ego" core. She appeared to be comprised of two computer programs: an unalterable hardware program (a ROM [read-only memory] of primary process), and a RAM (random-access memory) software program that—like many computer games—gave the illusion of interactive behavior with other people, although it was really just serendipitous coincidence. As she grew older and moved away from her supernormal golden girl period in which she could still aim to please, her immutable, pre-programmed, read-only memory took over,

⁵ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York, 1982), pp. 13, 23, 24.

⁶ New York, 1975, p. 40.

and her ability to interact "correctly," i.e. "sanely," with an outside world kept decreasing until it reached zero. Had she not killed herself at thirty, she would doubtless have done so at thirty-one, since no wherewithal for human interaction remained: the computer had crashed. Speaking of her multitude of "false selves," and her gradual arrival at her "true" one, Ted Hughes—much too optimistically—writes in his Foreword to the journals that "*Ariel* and the associated later poems give us the voice of that [true] self. They are the proof that it arrived. All her other writings, except these journals, are the waste products of its gestation." Those "waste products," however, happened to be the residual shreds of her sanity.

In her brilliant explication of Plath's personal mythology as a moon-goddess and the role that mythology played in her poems, Judith Kroll⁷ succeeds in demonstrating that the earlier poems are often unsuccessful because the mythology is imposed from without, like stale and allusive poetic conventions, whereas in the celebrated later poems the mythology has been so internalized that the poems are organically whole—though completely obscure if the reader is unable to decipher the terms of the system. Few concessions are made to a recognizable public world in these late poems, which are almost totally symbolic of Plath's primary processes as her life fell apart and she withdrew into her primordial self. In their perverse way, some of these poems may seem "perfect" (if one has cracked their code) but the ultimate cost, both for the author and the reader, exceeds the cost of almost any other poems that come to mind. (And thinking back on the castrati of eighteenth-century opera, one may legitimately wonder at what point the cost of art becomes *too* high for any possible justification.) For Plath's "true self" consisted of the purest primary processes uncompromised by interaction with reality, un"classified" and un"qualified" by others. From this stem her unremitting rages against everybody about everything, rages that had no real grounds or objects but which were part of her original resistance to lost omnipotence,

⁷ Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York, 1976). Kroll has a tendency to overexplain the poems, making them too coherent. When one returns to the poems themselves, they often seem as obscure as they did in the first place.

which recognized that an uncontrollable outside world required a farewell to all delusions of godhood. During her last stage of life, however, her rages subsided as she shut down the doorways of perception and withdrew completely into a quasi-mystical, once-again omnipotent private universe. At the age of two months, we call this sense of omnipotence "normality." At the age of thirty, the conventional word for such a state is "madness."

But before returning to "ethics," there are two other questions about Plath that still must be addressed, her "feminism" and her "craft." Although Plath speaks early in her journals about her discontents with being a woman ("I can only lean enviously against the boundary and hate, hate, hate the boys who can dispel sexual hunger freely, without misgiving, and be whole, while I drag out from date to date in soggy desire, always unfulfilled"), as well as her distaste for the prospect of spending her life making scrambled eggs for some man, as time passes she takes up—with a greedy vengeance—the roles of femme fatale and then procreative mother. In this, as in everything else, she entertained virtually every possible view, every possible self, from virginally pious daughter to roaring bitch to moon-goddess to adoring mother to bourgeois puritan, and intermixed with all of them was a powerful attraction to men. None of these selves can be accorded more authentic priority than any of the others. Had there been ten possible sexes instead of two, she would have raged against each of them *seriatim*, since it was not femaleness or maleness that she hated but *incarnation itself*. To be a creature in space and time was to be limited, classified, qualified, and to her this was wildly insupportable. Nor was she able to take responsibility for *any* of her incarnations. Her real life took place amidst the timelessness of mythology and not amidst the crap and piss of mortality.

As for craft, in the sixties Irving Howe characterized her as "an interesting minor poet," a verdict against which there has been considerable resistance. Alvarez and Wagner-Martin are representative of the way in which all other aspects of Sylvia Plath's existence have been pushed aside in order to extol her extraordinary craft. The question of major or minor status is not a matter of fact, so with regard to poetic craft Sylvia Plath

may be as major as any poet in English. But with regard to the larger "world" upon which poetic craft operates—its subject matter, substance, and moral direction, as well as its relation to human life and possibility—it would be utterly preposterous to compare her with such undisputed major poets as Milton, Wordsworth, or Yeats, or even more debatable cases like Shelley, Tennyson, or Eliot. Richard Crashaw may well be her closest counterpart. For we expect from major writers a consciousness-raising operation, an opening up of the reader's experience to the complexities of a larger world, from which Sylvia Plath was completely cut off. Even her most accessible poems are largely incapable of changing the way in which we experience the world, since she had little interest in anything incarnated, apart from the recondite drama of her own primordial psyche. We learn from her most acclaimed poems only about the aberrations of this-particular-psyche-here, little about a world out there. Experience, for her, was only raw material to be fitted to the opening of her holocaustic funnel and then sucked into the savage tornado of her immutable myth. If her experience is taken to have anything to do with a public world, it can only produce the outrage and vexation that Anne Stevenson and Olwyn Hughes express when they contemplate the horrible rape and mutilation that Plath's writings performed on her mother, her father, and her husband—and everyone else as well—as she incorporated them into the other-worldly distortions of her solipsistic psychodrama.

Although I sympathize completely with Anne Stevenson's and Olwyn Hughes's introduction of the question of ethical responsibility, since human beings, even when they are poets, must be dealt with according to conventional human values as long as they are actors in a communal world; and although no amount of "craft" can exonerate artists from the responsibilities of being a person, because *craft is not enough*—it seems to me that ethical obligations can be justly required only from human beings we consider free agents, however relative the term "free." But it is very hard to look upon Sylvia Plath in any such light. If her madness was as controlling a force as I judge it to be, the options of ethical responsibility would not appear to have been available to her, since her range of choice was perilously confined, and she scattered ruin on everything she

touched. Where the question of ethics really arises, as I see it, is among those of her admirers who insist on brushing aside all of these important considerations of human values in order to affirm that craft is everything and overrides everything else. The matter is far from simple, and though it may ultimately be regarded as undecidable (as in the cases of Heidegger, Pound, et al.), undecidability is a much better resolution of this dilemma than unqualified admiration. Mankind simply cannot live by craft alone, and if poets qualify as members of mankind, there is no way they can escape the value systems that bind whoever would call himself a member of any particular human society.

Like Kafka's hunger artist, Sylvia Plath was an unworldly specialist in suffering who performed in front of the peanut-crunching crowd that both applauded and doubted the authenticity of her performance. She too knew "how easy it was to fast," because her hunger was not satisfied by anything available in this world. "I have to fast," the hunger artist informs his overseer, "I can't help it, because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." Like the hunger artist, Plath depended on craft as surrogate for the substance of this world, a craft of mythmaking words to control "the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word patterns I make." This craft enabled her to survive for a while and to exhibit, like an athlete or nuclear physicist, some of the questionable feats that human technology can accomplish. But our praise for her craft ought to be highly qualified—because in her case, it was madness.