Claiming Sylvia Plath

Claiming Sylvia Plath:
The Poet as Exemplary Figure

By

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Claiming Sylvia Plath: The Poet as Exemplary Figure has been long in the making, with new books and essays appearing all the time that affect the dynamics in the field. It can to some extent be defined as the synthesis of my books in Norwegian on Sylvia Plath, on the role of the writer, and on biography as a literary and historical genre. Everybody who helped me realize those earlier projects – initiated in Oxford in 1993, when my interest was triggered by a commentator on BBC radio claiming that Sylvia Plath was suffering from a biography overload syndrome – has more or less directly contributed to this one. Grateful thanks to all and one of you, to anonymous readers during the publishing process, and to engaging participants at international conferences.

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Oslo, October 2012
Marianne Egeland

INTRODUCTION

Few modern authors have been the object of such intense worship and myth making as Sylvia Plath. The interest seems incessant. It can be measured in shelves full of academic studies, in reviews, articles, and popular accounts of her life and work, in tributary poems, web sites, novels, films, plays, dramatic adaptations, and musical scores to poems. A recurrent topic discussed in newspapers is precisely this 'obsession', a phenomenon remarked on by commentators, who notably contribute to it as they write.

In 1976, an old pen pal of Sylvia Plath's argued for the necessity of 'Seeking the One True Plath', in his case, uncovering an image of Plath as he had known her, underneath the extensive cult focus and misconceptions advanced by the literary industry (Cohen 1976). And that is exactly what so many have set out to do, to unearth a pure image of the real Sylvia Plath. Battles in her name have been fought in biographies and in newspapers, among scholars, relatives, critics, and feminist activists. Whether they are family members, professors of literature, psychoanalysts, or simply passionate readers, the advocates claim to speak for the *real* or *true* Sylvia, thereby aiming to neutralize adversaries who represent seemingly false versions of their idol. Alternatively, some critics claim to have discovered 'The Other Sylvia Plath' or 'The Other Ariel', which has been otherwise obscured or hidden behind the popular images.[1]

While still alive, Plath was recognized as a special poetic talent only by a limited group of insiders. The two books she herself witnessed being published in print – *The Colossus* in 1960 and *The Bell Jar* in 1963 – were received sympathetically but not viewed as anything extraordinary. In fact, most of the poems she submitted to newspapers and periodicals during her last months of life were rejected. The fame she yearned for came only posthumously.

Living in London, depressed and separated from her husband, Sylvia Plath committed suicide in February of 1963 at the age of thirty. She left behind two small children and a collection of poems ready for print. Published two years later, *Ariel* secured her an international name. Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, was met with accusations of desertion, censorship, abuse, and even murder. Spotlighted by feminists, biographers, and

journalists, he appeared to have lost control not only of his wife's story but also of his own.

Different communities of readers turned Sylvia Plath into an icon or an exemplary figure and used her to prove their assertions in order to fill personal or professional needs. Plath's name added authority to cries for attention from numerous causes. In this book, I delineate the mass of writers and followers who have based their work on Sylvia Plath, and I intend to investigate how and why her image and name have been employed. Given that each reader is conditioned both individually and collectively to the understanding of a literary text, I theorize that specific readings convey the personal traits of the author, as well as super-individual attitudes – attitudes which were typical for the relevant period. In other words, using writing grounded on Plath's work, I intend to demonstrate that what is good, right, and interesting within literary thought is defined by the era and social group we belong to, much more so than most of us like to admit. Academic circles cultivating a critical attitude form no exception.

Seen from a distance, this influence of time and setting is clearly evident in the existing 50 years of Plath's reception. Inspired by theories on the divided self, critics during the 1960s highlighted confessional and extreme elements in her work, while readers in the 1970s interpreted Plath's life and writing in light of two dominating models of explanation at the time: psychoanalysis and feminism. When poststructuralist theories caught on at the universities, Sylvia Plath's most crucial poems came to demonstrate the indefiniteness of language and of sexual identity. The idea of the text as an open entity did not preclude a cultural materialist approach. Her work was treated as social commentary, and the poet herself came to be seen as culturally determined. Her use of the Holocaust and of Jewish imagery which in the beginning was mainly discussed as an ethical question – or problem – later also became a sexual topic linked to fascist fantasies. In subsequent Plath studies, the return of history to the humanities and a preoccupation with context, politics, and popular culture are notable in literary analyses of her work. At about the same time, Ted Hughes gained more sympathy among critics and followers, as feminist criticism began to lose ground. Finally, as self-creation, performativity, interactive art, and a renewed interest in spatial form grew within criticism at large, Plath's life and work once more offered exemplary material to demonstrate current principles and timely perspectives. This ever-expanding area of discussion only further swelled when manuscripts, papers, books, and personal belongings were made available in archives. With the publication of studies dedicated to rethinking the confessional

label, Plath's reception seems to have come full circle. Since new perspectives are added to old ones, perhaps the best metaphor for the trajectory of Plath criticism during the period of 1960 to 2010, which is my focus in this book, is that of a widening gyre. The central issue from the very beginning has been the construction of identity and the involvement of the poet's work in canon discussions.

In many ways, Plath criticism demonstrates the dilemma which the biographical, or the relations of text and author, poses for modern theory and practice. The pendulum has had a tendency to swing. Literary works are either easily treated as self-reflexive and autonomous pieces of art or they are seen as diagnostic reflections of society and/or of the author's life and death. Yet in the case of Sylvia Plath, her work illustrates a blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces, as well as the converging of fields of cultural production, resulting from complex economic and social factors that largely fall outside the parameters of this study. Furthermore, Plath's writing has continually spoken to the hunger of critics and devoted readers, who crave to consume the most intimate processes of her life – processes which in current times have become 'the virtual feeding ground of the media' (Baudrillard 1985, 130).

Just as Sigmund Freud and R.D. Laing appear to have been floating in the air inhaled by early Plath scholars, Julia Kristeva, Melanie Klein, and Jacques Derrida loom high among the many who, towards the end of the twentieth century, started reading Plath's poetry as modern elegies of mourning. The latter works can be interpreted as period products just as much as the former. We usually think of our own analyses as better or more sophisticated than those made by previous generations. But literary criticism does not follow evolutionary laws, and subsequent generations will undoubtedly look at us in the same way. Before we know it, the last decades' promotion of ambiguity, diversity, and multiple meanings may be seen as masking totalizing simplifications on par with derided modernistic or mythic readings. As such, a sociological perspective on art, aesthetics, and culture in line with Jan Mukařovský and Pierre Bourdieu is relevant to this analysis. One could argue, in fact, that Plath's case confirms Bourdieu's idea of the cultural field as a universe of belief where writers and critics struggle for recognition foremost by trying to distinguish themselves from their colleagues and competitors (Bourdieu 1993). To achieve a coveted position in the literary world, it is as imperative to make a name for oneself as it is within modern celebrity culture. 'Sylvia Plath', as figure, icon, and person, has clearly succeeded in achieving markers of both elite and popular literary status.

Claiming Sylvia Plath: The Poet as Exemplary Figure is a study of five

decades of Plath reception, of shifting hegemonic positions and issues addressed by the communities that have tried to make sense of her life and work. My primary goal is neither to offer new interpretations of her texts nor to promote a specific key that can unlock the closed door of the past. Rather, I propose to demonstrate what may predictably happen when critics swear by a particular theory and end up with answers that support their chosen approach.

No new book on Sylvia Plath can escape travelling along some of the paths that have already been trodden. When Janet Malcolm's *New Yorker* essay was published as a book in 1994, critic James Wood, interviewing Malcolm for *The Guardian*, declared *The Silent Woman* as so 'subtle', 'true', and 'patiently analytical' that for him, it was 'difficult to envisage anyone writing again about Plath and Hughes. She is the cat who has licked the plate clean' (Wood 1994, 42). How many cats of different sizes and colours have since then found their special treat to savour for the first or umpteenth time? Numerous studies discuss the controversy surrounding Sylvia Plath, her legacy, and Ted Hughes's role as her editor. Others have accounted for parts of the critical heritage, the archive, the literary estate, and the Plath biographies. But a systematic and comprehensive study of the kind I am presenting here has not been undertaken before. By organizing the reception into reading communities composed of *critics*, *feminists*, *biographers*, *psychologists,* and *friends*, I hope to disclose interpretive patterns that might otherwise remain obscure. Functioning as a guide through the massive amounts of literature, the intention here is to establish persistent themes and questions in the writings about Plath during the period from 1960 to 2010.

The enclosed bibliography bears witness to the comprehensiveness of my study and the wealth of material that I base it on. Although I have sought to cover as much as possible, *Claiming Sylvia Plath* does not pretend to be an exhaustive reception study. Even after limiting myself mainly to written and published material in English, the quantity of books, essays, and dissertations is still overwhelming, and readers may look in vain for a discussion of specific works. I have chosen to concentrate on what I regard as the most representative works. As a result, my findings reveal a pervasive religious tone in much of the reception, as well as a considerable amount of activity by 'agents' like Al Alvarez.

The diversity of my material requires both widespread and complementary approaches to complete the analysis. The questions I ask are influenced by methodologies such as Prague structuralism and German reception aesthetics, as well as those from sociology of literature and cultural studies. I hope to suggest alternative entries to an often-told story

by demonstrating that the same fundamental rhetoric applied to writers and their roles preserves its validity even as the social setting and print culture change. How the poet is perceived and presented is heavily influenced by a tradition originating in Antiquity. Thus, I seek to clarify the classical sources constituting the rhetorical paste in which Sylvia Plath and so many of her mediators seem to be stuck.

Through my analysis of rhetoric, which encompasses several discourses, including biography, writer worship, and celebrity cult, I arrive at an examination of an ancient and almost omnipresent rhetorical figure: the *exemplum* or *example*, which Aristotle defines as a basic means of persuasion (Lyons 2006). Its main function is to produce belief and to lend authority to the speaker's or writer's argument. Intrinsic to literary criticism, the example also shares many points of resemblance with the quotation. In the form of a person, the exemplary figure constitutes a subgroup of the rhetorical figure. That Sylvia Plath is an object of fascination is quite obvious. Yet why does she continue to fascinate? Focusing on Plath as an exemplary figure clarifies why she has been serviceable to so many and how open she has been to colonization.

Because the interpretive Plath communities address the same subject and because all of us have more than one identity, many Plath commentators figure within several communities. Visualized on paper, the interpretive communities I study can be drawn as partly overlapping circles. Each circle more or less corresponds with specialized genres or discourses, each possessing its own particular convention and horizon of expectations. A thorough investigation of all these literary paradigms lies beyond the scope of my work. However, for the sake of clarity, the correspondence between genres or discourses and the people who practice them may be summarized like this: Biographers write biographies, friends mostly write memoirs that emphasize an insider perspective, and critics exercise criticism in a number of genres ranging from reviews to scholarly monographs. Members of the communities that I have labelled as 'Feminists' and 'Psychologists' likewise employ several rhetorical genres, and while these are often the same as the ones I discuss in the 'Critics' chapter, feminists and psychologists nevertheless have their own discursive practices which not only affect the way they express themselves but also determine the questions they ask and the answers they offer. Since feminists strive for social and cultural change, much of their writing is political and tends rhetorically towards the political pamphlet. Psychologists have an affinity for case studies and for inferring general knowledge from specific examples. Sylvia Plath, as a particular case, is turned into a didactic model and used as an exemplary figure by psychologists, feminists, and others to

draw far-reaching conclusions. A rhetoric of accountability and guilt-finding and of accusations and condemnations is widespread.

The overlapping of communities and genres means that some issues, persons, and discussions necessarily resurface throughout this book like themes and variations. If I note inconsistencies or questionable elements, personal indignation on my part is not the cause. Ethics are, however, clearly involved. I have found it necessary to explicate this rather obvious point because, like other critics, Plath commentators compete for the authority to determine legitimate interpretations of their subject. At stake in the struggle is ultimately the power to define proper discourse. A strong sense of ownership characterizes insiders. They react to scrutiny of the 'wrong' kind, and they react if undue attention is paid to contributors they dismiss as extreme or regard as unimportant. I disagree. Caricatures belong to the picture and help create more distinctive patterns. Furthermore, it is not as if I have vacuumed the media for freakish opinions; on the contrary, with few exceptions, I rely on material from established newspapers and publishing houses.

With its strong sympathies and antipathies, there are obvious advantages to operating outside the Plath institution. This 'outsider' position that I proclaim for myself does not of course imply that I believe I have escaped ordinary hermeneutical dilemmas or limitations. Although I take a meta-perspective on textual exemplification, I still have to lean on a procedure that is fundamental not only to the Plath reception that I investigate, but also to literary criticism in general. My interest in ethical questions, which follows as an inevitable consequence of journalism and a biographical approach to authors, should not exclude a hermeneutical argument for the ethics involved in literary scholarship. The use of examples, exemplary figures, and textual exemplification has ideological implications that are easily overlooked because the procedure comes so naturally to us. According to Montaigne, 'tout exemple cloche', or 'every example limps' (Montaigne 1991, 1213). And he should know. Like his fellow humanists, Montaigne uses a quotation, a saying, or an example both as a springboard for his essays and as the strings of his arguments from beginning to end. The rhetoric of example involves appeal to and enactment of authority that readers ought to question. How do critics pass from instance to principle? On what grounds are arguments and conclusions founded? As readers, we have to make judgments on the interpretations of *probabilities* that may actually be presented as truths.

Since my point of departure is the opposite of what Michel Foucault argued for in his seminal work, 'What is an Author' (1969), i.e. it should not matter who is talking, I have tried to supply bits of information about

some of the people I comment on at the time they did their talking. Rhetorically, what is said is always said in a specific situation and for a specific purpose in dialogue with others. This is where my interest lies. As patterns and lasting effects are increasingly difficult to establish the closer we get to our own time, the earlier reception of Plath's work will have to be emphasized more than later contributions. Recent works praised for epoch-making insights may, with time, be judged quite differently by the same people or at least by others. Gloating hindsight is always a danger for those who address subjects from a historical perspective. When we know how things have turned out, yesteryear's verdicts easily look dated, and failed prophecies bode even worse. How mistaken were the critics who considered Sylvia Plath as a mere shooting star and predicted that her legend would quickly die out. And how perceptive other commentators seem in retrospect. Writing about 'The Cult of Plath' in 1972, Webster Schott claimed that the mass audience was mainly grasping at her troubled personality. Accordingly, a 'novel right now about Sylvia Plath by one of the fact manipulators would be worth a villa in southern France' (Schott 1972). Of course, as it turns out, the biographies came first, followed thirty years later by fictional accounts on paper and screen.

The public image – or images – of Sylvia Plath, as well as the criticism devoted to her, is my object of study. It is certainly evident that Plath demonstrates the relevance of Boris Tomaševskij's 1923 essay on 'Literature and Biography', in which the Russian formalist argues that it is essential to consider how the biography of a poet operates in the reader's consciousness. The important thing is not the individual's factual life and whether the perception of it is correct, but how the image of an author affects the reception of his or her work. Thus, Tomaševskij distinguishes between 'writers with biographies and writers without biographies', between those who are the subject of anecdotes and biographical stories and those who are unknown to the public or appear as neutral (Tomaševskij 1995, 89). Poets moving from one category to the other, like Plath did after her suicide, make for interesting study.

Irrespective of context, there is, no doubt, a theoretical point to all of this. The reception of Sylvia Plath's life and work, *my* case in point, should be considered a general reminder of how important the reader's contribution is in his or her attempt to make sense of texts. Reading *in vacuo* is hardly reading at all; instead, making sense of texts involves making use of them. As we have seen, students of the Plath reception have shelves upon shelves of texts, which they actively use to make sense of the author and the world.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONSTITUTION OF A POET

Sylvia Plath's remarkable position today is only partly due to the brilliance of her writing. How and when she died has been just as decisive for her reputation. Irving Howe in 1972 identified the formula behind Sylvia Plath's public acclaim as a 'Glamour of Fatality' (1972, 88). A cultural fascination with suicide and the young dead converged with a popular fascination of literary celebrity and the need of an emerging political movement to make a special case out of Plath.

Killing herself in the same year that *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was published by Betty Friedan, and leaving behind two small children and a manuscript of outstanding poems, Plath seemed to confirm romantic notions about the poet and to demonstrate the difficulties women artists had of surviving in a man's world. Her reputation grew with the women's movement. She was canonized as a genius and a martyr, and those closest to her were made accountable for her tragic end.

The pervasive image of Sylvia Plath as an exceptional person and a unique poet is usually accounted for by her individual qualities. To expand upon the understanding of her public position, I would like to stress the tradition of author worship and the use of exemplary figures in literature. Detouring by Plath's grave and posthumous reputation, I intend to give a short account of this tradition and to evaluate other reasons for placing her within it than the connection established by Katha Pollitt, who nominated Ted Hughes as 'the most notorious literary spouse in history' but for 'the possible exception of Xantippe' (1998, 4). As Plath's husband, widower, editor, copyright holder, and manager of her literary estate, Hughes has played an important part in the reception. A presentation of his views and actions, along with Aurelia Plath's, is therefore included in the pages that follow. I return to a discussion of how Sylvia Plath functions as a literary celebrity in the final chapter of the book.

Life after Death

The extraordinary afterlife of Sylvia Plath commences with a piece entitled 'A Poet's Epitaph', which showed up in *The Observer* six days after she committed suicide. This 'obituary' consisted of four poems, a photograph of Sylvia Plath holding her baby daughter, and a short text by the paper's poetry editor, Alfred – 'Al' – Alvarez. Alvarez supplies his readers with a few personal details about the deceased but does not mention the cause of her sudden death. Rather, he focuses on her literary mastery and presents her as 'the most gifted woman poet of our time', an artist who in the previous months had written 'almost as though possessed'. In her last poems, she had been systematically experimenting with 'that narrow, violent area between the viable and the impossible, between experience which can be transmuted into poetry and that which is overwhelming' (Alvarez 1963a).

Together with the printed poems, 'Edge', 'The Fearful', 'Kindness', and 'Contusion', all composed shortly before her death, Alvarez transmits a spooky atmosphere with his message: 'She leaves two small children. The loss to literature is inestimable'. It was as if the poems spoke from the grave, accentuating how weak the mooring to everyday life is. When '[t]he blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it' ('Kindness'). Seemingly notified in advance, death appears as inevitable.

The epitaph resulted in an immediate interest in Sylvia Plath, an interest maintained by obituaries, prestigious journals, and a memorial broadcast made by Alvarez for BBC radio. In the course of 1963, poems and essays were printed in *The Critical Quarterly*, *London Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Punch*, *New Statesman*, *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *The Listener*, *The Review*, *Encounter,* and *The Observer* (Tabor 1987).[1] Introducing ten Plath poems in *Encounter*, Ted Hughes emphasizes the intensity of her spirits, an uncompromising thoroughness evident in everything she did, and – despite the poems' prevailing sense of doom – a genuine love of life. During her final months, Sylvia Plath developed a new, quicker manner of composition. Acknowledged by Hughes (1963), the death of Otto Plath had been a defining moment for her.

Some years later, George Steiner – a critic and, at the time, a fellow of Churchill College in Cambridge – recalls the 'shock' caused by *Encounter*, and he imagines it then, in 1969, still to be reverberating. As they stood there side by side, her ten poems represented 'an act of extremity, personal and formal, obliging one to try and re-think the whole question of the poet's condition and of the condition of language after modernism and war'. For Steiner, Plath addressed nothing less than

Theodor Adorno's dictum, 'no poetry after Auschwitz' (1969, 247–48).

When *Ariel* was published in 1965, reviewers treated it as a literary sensation. They called attention to the poet's original way of expressing herself and the nightmarish atmosphere in her universe. *The Colossus* was seen as a piece of poetical apprenticeship leading up to *Ariel*, the manifestation of her true voice. Some critics reacted to an indiscriminate use of rhetorical devices and to the juxtaposition of rather trivial personal experiences with the fate of the Jews. Word got around that Sylvia Plath was an obsessed and suffering poet, both terrified and fascinated by death – an incarnation of the brilliant artist victimized by personal problems and cruel circumstances.

As the cause of her death became more widely known, the discussion intensified. The high price she seemed to have paid for her art added an electrifying dimension to her poems. Over a period of twenty years, *Ariel* sold more than half a million copies. *The Bell Jar*, for which Sylvia Plath could find no publisher in the United States during her lifetime, sold three million paperback copies from 1972 to 1996, after its initial publication in the US in 1971 (McCullough 1996, xiv). *Winter Trees* and *Crossing the Water*, which consist of remaining poems, came out that same year. Special and limited editions flourished; British and American editions differed. Aurelia Plath edited *Letters Home* in 1975, and a collection of prose texts, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, appeared in 1977 (extended edition 1979). *Collected Poems* was awarded the American Pulitzer prize for 1981. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* followed in 1982, with Ted Hughes as its co-editor.

While the large number of titles gave the impression of a writer who was still alive, the books conveyed different and contradictory sides of Plath as a person and as a writer. She was associated with confessional poets, such as Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, who used themselves and their own experiences as subjects, ostensibly without reservation. 'Alas, I can only tell my own story', Lowell observes in the last book he wrote, *Day by Day* (1977; in 'Unwanted'), letting the readers in on his own life crises, divorces, and infidelities. He even included bits of letters from frustrated wives, without asking for their permission. Treated in this confessional vein, Plath's work was interpreted literally and biographically, an inclination still endorsed by the publishing houses. Blurbs, quotations from reviews, and photos on book covers encourage readers to conflate art with life and fictional characters with biographical persons.[2]

Critics explained their biographical and confessional readings by claiming direct access to the poet's intentions. According to Richard Howard, 'she kept meaning us [to see her life], from the vantage of her

death' (1969, 416). He then duly adapts his interpretation to this understanding of what Plath was all about. Alan Brownjohn holds the poet herself accountable for the massive preoccupation that others attach to her life and death: 'More than any other poet of our time she dictated – altogether unconsciously – the terms on which her work would be approached by most of her critics after she died' (1982, 165).

Repeated targeting of those who apparently had deserted the lyrical 'I' resulted in Ted Hughes being turned into a synonym for 'oppressive male' and 'deceitful husband'. Otto Plath came to personify the worst of patriarcy. Aurelia Plath, as the wicked mother, was made responsible for an exalted manner and conventional views which readers of *Letters Home* found discomforting. They could not get the 'Sivvy' of the letters to correspond with *Ariel*'s original and merciless *persona*. What did not fit into the idealized image was explained away, defined as false, and attributed to unfortunate influences.

In the first years after Sylvia Plath died, Ted Hughes was able to keep his privacy. But at the end of the 1960s, criticism against him increased proportionally with her standing as a cult figure. An insatiable appetite for biographical information grew. At readings, Hughes risked being received with hissing and disgust-ridden resolutions. Some wished him dead, and violently so. Conclusive in the case against him was that in 1969, Assia Wevill, 'the other woman' for whom he left his wife, actually killed herself and their four-year-old daughter.

Everything Sylvia Plath had said and written, whether her words were originally meant for private eyes only or for a larger audience, was attributed with crucial importance. When the public learned that Ted Hughes had changed the poet's own ordering and content choices in *Ariel*, destroyed her last diary, and made cuts to both her letters and journals, a big commotion ensued. Hughes was portrayed as a censor who treated his wife's work just as badly as he had treated her. It didn't exactly help Hughes's case that he had asked his own sister, Olwyn, to manage the estate and act as the agent for her dead sister-in-law. The relationship between Sylvia and Olwyn was known to have been on the strained side. However, Olwyn Hughes needed a way to make a living after she resigned from her job in Paris to help care for Plath's children. And in her role as family advocate, she did not favour diplomatic euphemisms. She met accusations of censorship and oppression with allegations of lies and mythmaking.

Within a decade of her death, a multi-layered image existed of Sylvia Plath, rendering her as a death-driven, extremely gifted, and disturbed poet on the one hand, and as a competent and fiercely ambitious woman on the

other. Depending on the informers, the biographical angle, or what texts were being highlighted and how, she was seen as both an implacable avenger and a woman who was wronged and victimized by husband and parents. Published chronicles tended to imitate popular story structures and conform to the narrators' own fancies.

The readiness of critics to bang the big drum and to pronounce Plath as remarkable in one way or another is visible in George Steiner's quotation above. Perhaps to give his judgment added authority, he actually imagined having met her personally. In his essay, fittingly called 'In Extremis', Steiner writes that Sylvia Plath – then a nineteen-year-old college student – came to interview him in London for *Mademoiselle* during the summer of 1952. Describing her as a 'poised and conventionally inquisitive' young lady, which was typical for the kind of guest-editors these American glossies 'picked up', he declares himself haunted by the lack of any distinct recollections. Only the 'weedy photographer' had managed to impart an impression (Steiner 1969, 247). Yet the reason why Steiner remembers so little is probably not because Plath's personality matched her 'all-too-predictable-article on "Poets on Campus"', but because they actually never met. Sylvia Plath worked as a guest editor on *Mademoiselle*'s special college issue in June of 1953 and conducted her interviews with five young poets *by mail* (Love 1979, N7; Wagner-Martin 1987, 98).[3] She did not visit England until 1955.

As if they had shaken off some kind of spell, critics would later distance themselves from how they had reacted to *Ariel* when the book first was published, in March 1965. Using his review of Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981) as an opportunity to look back, Denis Donoghue depicts the *doxa* he subscribed to then as so pervasive and forceful that we get the impression of brainwashing. At the time *Ariel* came out, risk was imbued with a heroic nimbus, and madness was believed to constitute 'divinest sense'. In his review for *The New York Times Book Review*, Donoghue contradicts the traditional concept of rhetoric as a discipline *opposed* to authenticity. Instead, he regards rhetoric as an instrument applied to suffuse hegemonic ideas with a 'jargon of authenticity' so as to appear all the more convincing. Sylvia Plath's death was widely used to serve such a rhetorical purpose, supporting the belief that 'the only valid experience was an experience of the abyss' (1981, 1).

Donoghue does not think of the early reception as 'wrong'; he merely thinks that the *Ariel* readers were in some respects 'naïve' because things escaped them which later became self-evident to him (1981, 30). But is this actually a question of naïveté? Hasn't the critic here described a rather common phenomenon? Only with the passage of time, when and if our

perspective has changed sufficiently, are we able to discover the limiting and lacking elements in earlier beliefs, at which point we think of ourselves as having reached some higher horizon of understanding. Mustering objections to a hegemonic discourse from within and question the seemingly normal order of things, or to realize that one's own pre-judgments might be just as conventional as those conditioned by other codes, is virtually impossible. Of course, the likelihood that authority will be challenged increases with the diversification of culture and the existence of rivalling schools.

Conflicting Interests

Ted Hughes inherited the delicate job of managing and publishing texts which many saw as devastating attacks on himself and other members of the family. As executor of the estate, he not only had to consider questions of privacy but also how to acquire the greatest benefit for Sylvia Plath's literary interests. These contradictory obligations proved unsolvable. He was accused of publishing either too little or too much or accused of both at the same time. Although scholars and Plath *aficionados* seemed omnivorous and demanded full access to her complete writings, critics judged several of the published titles – *Winter Trees*, *Crossing the Water*, *Johnny Panic,* and *Letters Home* – as a disservice to her reputation.

The publishing history of Sylvia Plath's work may be read as a reluctant jerk-and-pull disclosure and, at the same time, the outcome of a dialectic interaction between parties who wanted to mediate different images of the poet and of their relationships with her. A persistent urge among readers to allocate blame and interpret Plath's work literally, put Ted Hughes and Aurelia Plath on the defensive. Both of them tried to prevent a biographical reading, while at the same time connecting at least some of her work to a life they knew from the inside and claimed to understand better than others.

Their reactions may be seen as protective strategies proceeding from close ties with a poet whose eloquence – in Diane Middlebrook's words – was stirred by negative emotions, and whose reputation rests on work written after she had dismantled 'the structure of parent/child, teacher/student, mentor/apprentice' that prevailed within her principal relationships (2003, 128). In an effort to divert public scrutiny from himself, Hughes emphasized the importance of his wife's relations with her dead father and her own children. An awareness of *abstraction* was, according to him, necessary when reading her poems, since she did not write about specific persons but about archetypes.

One month before *Ariel* was launched, Hughes published a short outline in the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* (1965) of Sylvia Plath's background and her way of composing. In this piece, Hughes expands on views he had presented in *Encounter*: Sylvia Plath grew up in an atmosphere of intellectual competition and Germanic discipline; she worshipped her father and was always the perfect student bent on excelling. Her love of life was as possessive as it was uncritical: 'It fastened her to cups, plants, creatures, vistas, people, in a steady ecstasy'. *Ariel* hardly resembled any other poetry, but the book *is* her: 'Everything she did was just like this, and this is just like her – but permanent'. Hughes considers his wife's poetic development amazing both because of its suddenness and its completeness. Contrary to how she used to work, *Ariel* had been composed at high speed. The birth of their two children had apparently triggered the heightening of her creative process. Yet Hughes also describes the poems as fruits from many years of labouring to find the right words and to invent intricate rhymes and metrical schemes. The resulting verses are 'odd-looking', the vocabulary 'one of the widest and most subtly discriminating … in the modern poetry of our language', marked by a musicality of an almost mathematical kind. Behind the poems resides a 'fierce and uncompr[om]ising nature' and 'a child desperately infatuated with the world' (Hughes 1965).

Around the same time, Hughes gave a rare interview in *The Guardian* about his own background, work, and life with Sylvia Plath. He calls their marriage an all-absorbing working partnership, free from rivalry. They had mutually influenced and inspired each other 'like two feet, each one using everything the other did', writing 'out of one brain'. While she had a great desire to succeed with novels and short stories, he values only her poems as works of genius (in Horder 1965).

Hughes in the interview does not mention her death or the cause of it. For more than thirty years, he consistently sought to limit the attention given to personal details, and he mostly stuck to his early interpretations. Accounting for the chronological order of Plath's poems, Hughes in 1966 labelled her way of writing as *mythological* and – unlike Anne Sexton's and Robert Lowell's – as neither confessional nor personal. In Sylvia Plath's poetry, autobiographical details are set out as masks for 'dramatis personae of nearly supernatural qualities'; family and everything else spoke the fundamental language of disintegration and renewal. Hughes uses words such as 'clairvoyance', 'mediumship', and 'psychic gifts' to characterize his wife's special talents. Perhaps conveniently for him, poetry like Plath's, which is filled with 'emblematic visionary events', escapes ordinary analysis (1966, 81–82).[4] Still, he believes the poetry

reflects her inner process of cognition because within her, artistic and personal development were the same. And they were the same in nature too, he maintains, thus imbuing the events of Plath's life with a sense of inevitability.

In a 1982 article, where he discusses her journals, Hughes claims that the root system of her talent consisted of 'a deep and inclusive inner crisis' that probably traced back to the death of her father and settled into its chief symbols at the time of her first suicide attempt. Hughes does not doubt that the shock treatment and 'death' she went through in 1953 'fused her dangerous inheritance into a matrix from which everything later seemed to develop'. Conforming to his account, Sylvia Plath went so far as to describe that suicide attempt as a bid to get back at her father (1982a, 88).

If she had been able to free herself from 'that one wound that wracked her, she might have changed, led a normal life, even perhaps have felt healthy enough to stop writing', he later speculates. Hughes goes on to claim that all her creative work tells the same story of 'Oedipal love for her father, her complex relationship with her mother, the attempt at suicide, the shock therapy' (in Negev 1998a). In this – that is *his* – version, neither Plath's story nor her root system had anything to do with her husband.

Whether the psychological process taking place within Sylvia Plath is seen as a technique of crisis management or as the uncovering of roots, it largely happened outside her ordinary consciousness and, according to Hughes, seemingly went on undisturbed by outer upheavals in her life. However, the inner workings of the process reveal themselves in her poems (1982a, 88–89). To study the chronology of the texts is consequently helpful for understanding them, Hughes states. Very little of her poetry was 'occasional'. Rather, the texts form one long poem where the individual poems constitute 'chapters in a mythology'. At stake for her was the mending of a shattered self or the finding of a new one (1966, 81). Seen in this light, the poems are *by-products* of her central quest. Hughes defines Plath's *real creation* as 'that inner gestation and eventual birth of a new self-conquering self, to which her journal bears witness, and which proved itself so overwhelmingly in the *Ariel* poems of 1962'. The fact that her new self could ultimately not save her confirms what is known about this kind of 'conflict', he claims. There is no guarantee that victories will last, and those who turn their back on a defeated enemy are in the greatest danger (1982a, 98–99).

In his foreword to the first edition of Sylvia Plath's journals, Hughes compares the changes going on within her to 'a process of alchemy'. Once more, he terms the apprentice writings as thrown off 'impurities' and 'by-

products of the internal work', whereas *Ariel* and the associated later poems are proof that she finally achieved the birth of a new real self in the death of an old one. Except for the journals, all the other writing constitutes, in his words, 'the *waste products* of its gestation' and 'the visible faces of her lesser selves, her false or provisional selves'. The journals – which he calls 'her autobiography' – show how she struggled with these warring selves (Hughes 1987, xiii–xv; my italics).

However, there are good reasons for arguing that the journals actually contain many set pieces and writing exercises. In what way does this affect his theory? Hughes was far from alone in expanding on Sylvia Plath's real and false selves. But commentators disagree on what they see as one or the other. In a later essay, Hughes does not differentiate as sharply as he used to between the various parts of her production and notes that *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* are 'closely related'. Having been 'gestated' in parallel and in the same imagination, they both utilize 'a genetic code of symbolic signs that has few equals for consistency and precision' and operate on the same upper and lower level (Hughes 1994a, 8). Yet they differ as to how the ritual of rebirth functions: more positively in the novel than the poems, where the possibility for an authentic rebirth is defied more openly.

The conflicting interests between his roles become evident when Hughes, as her *editor*, writes about *the widower of Sylvia Plath* – i.e. himself – in the third person singular, explaining how 'her husband destroyed [one of her last journals], because he did not want her children to have to read it (in those days he regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival)' (1982a, 86). Analysing the evolution of 'Sheep in Fog', Hughes argues that 'the *Ariel* poems document Plath's struggle to deal with a double situation – when her sudden separation from her husband coincided with a crisis in her traumatic feelings about her father's death' (1994d, 191). Clearly, Hughes also struggled with a double situation.

In subsequent chapters, I return to reactions caused by statements like these – Diane Middlebrook has for instance appropriated the expression 'her husband' as the title for a book published in 2003 – and evaluations of Hughes's work as Plath's literary executor.

Trapped Into Her Past

For years, Aurelia Plath succeeded in stalling *The Bell Jar*'s release in America because she felt herself and her close friends to be unjustly treated in the book. She did not surrender until plans of a pirated version became known and the estate, as a consequence of US law at the time, risked losing its copyright (McCullough 1996, xiii–iv). But she did not

give in gladly. Her distress is apparent in a letter she sent to Harper & Row, which was quoted in a biographical postscript to the American edition (1971). Mrs Plath realized that no matter how much pain *The Bell Jar* caused, it would still be published. All the same, she needed to impart what Sylvia had told her about the book in early July of 1962:

> 'What I've done,' I remember her saying, 'is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color – it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown. … I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar.' Then she went on to say, 'My second book will show that same world as seen through the eyes of health.' (in Ames 1972, 214)

According to Aurelia Plath, the book's very title endorses the point she wanted to make, and that ought to guide the reading of it. As for the poetic licence her daughter had taken, she was quite explicit:

> Practically every character in *The Bell Jar* represents someone – often in caricature – whom Sylvia loved; each person had given freely of time, thought, affection, and, in one case, financial help during those agonizing six months of breakdown in 1953 … [A]s this book stands by itself, it represents the basest ingratitude. (214–15)[5]

Here and elsewhere, Mrs Plath expresses hurt at the way she finds herself portrayed in her daughter's work. In spite of this, she continued to insist that at home, they had known another Sylvia. Ingratitude was *not* at the core of her personality, and for that very reason, Sylvia became frightened when *The Bell Jar* showed signs of becoming a success, Aurelia Plath maintained. To her brother Warren, Sylvia had written, 'this must never be published in the United States' (215).

It is doubtful whether Sylvia Plath noticed any acclaim for her novel before she died. After all, she failed to acquire an American publisher for the book. Ted Hughes in 1982 commented that if she felt qualms about publishing 'this supercharged piece of her autobiography, she made no mention of it at the time, either in conversation or in her diary' (1982a, 98). Prompted by her publisher in London, she had considered 'the libel issue' and made a list of minor corrections that were necessary for changing specific factual references. According to Sylvia Plath's own account, most of the characters in *The Bell Jar* are either fictitious or made indistinguishable, except for Esther's mother, who is based on Aurelia. However, she detected nothing defamatory in Mrs Greenwood – 'a dutiful, hard-working woman whose beastly daughter is ungrateful to her'.[6] Could

she really have been that unaware of how destructive the portrait is? On the other hand, in a letter to 'Dear James' at Heinemann, she assumed correctly that her mother was not of the suing kind. As best as she could, Aurelia Plath did insist that she was *not* Mrs Greenwood, whose character was, she claimed, a composite of five different people they had both known (in Toomey 1978).[7] As it turned out, all objections were in vain.

Upon its publication in the US, *The Bell Jar* became a tremendous success. The reception confirmed Aurelia Plath's worst fears, and as a result, she suffered a heart attack. She needed to modify the public's image of her, of Sylvia, and of their relationship. Just before *Letters Home* was published, she explained to a local Wellesley paper that this new book 'more than anything else' projects her daughter as she saw her (in Ouellet 1975, 1). She was also confident that the letters revealed the Sylvia they 'all' knew (in Robinson 1976, 515). 'I had to have Sylvia speak in her *truest* voice, which I know comes through in these letters', she reasons in another interview, where she rationalizes her efforts to publish their correspondence (in Robertson 1979; my italics).

After Mrs Plath capitulated with *The Bell Jar*, Ted Hughes could hardly veto an edition of letters home from 'Sivvy', but he did exercise his copyright to safeguard his own and their children's privacy. He warned his mother-in-law against including too much of Sylvia's abundant enthusiasm and advised her to fashion the narration carefully, like a novel. To avoid a false impression of completeness, he underscored the imperativeness of keeping the book short. In the absence of a biography, the letters would be interpreted as authentic background material, yet they had the potential to elicit attacks because they gave such a one-sided portrait of Plath (Hughes 2007, 351–53).

Letters Home did garner a sufficient amount of interest. Compared to other Plath titles listed in Stephen Tabor's 1987 bibliography, only *The Bell Jar* received more reviews, while the poems attracted notably less attention.[8] But the letters did not have the neutralizing effect that Aurelia Plath had planned. Rather, Hughes's warnings of what could happen if she did not make drastic cuts proved to be correct. The reception is interesting for what it reveals about the likes and dislikes within the literary field, as well as among readers who on the one hand think the letters are too much and who on the other hand criticize the book for its omissions. According to Jill Neville (1976) in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the inverted mirror held up to the romantic poet at the heart of a booming Plath industry was not much appreciated. While Neville describes the letters as 'touching' and 'quite dazzling in their ordinariness', other critics deemed them to be indicative of a pathological mother–daughter relationship. Harriet Rosenstein,

who for her PhD dissertation at Brandeis University in 1973 had written a critical biography of Plath,[9] claims that the editor's introduction smacks of 'maternal self-sacrifice' and describes the letters as 'embarrassing to read, painful to contemplate' (1975, 45). They form an interminable report card of achievements aiming to satisfy an unappeasable maternal demand. 'Everything Sivvy "shared" was payment to the bank that held rightful title to her life' (46). Peter Ackroyd's review was even entitled 'Dear Mummy, I hate you' (1976). Erica Jong by contrast sees *Letters Home* as an 'immensely valuable work', and she expresses her gratitude to Mrs Plath and Ted Hughes for letting it be published. Yet, like numerous colleagues, she deplores the 'many ellipses' and the 'appalling' secrecy surrounding the poet's last months of life (1975, 10).

Responding to an accusation of whitewashing, Harper's Frances McCullough states that Aurelia Plath had not been concerned with sparing either herself or her daughter. Apart from private material that was really nobody's business and hurtful comments that Ted Hughes had asked them to remove, most of the deletions could be explained by an obvious need to edit and downsize a voluminous manuscript. Asking readers to remember their own letters home, McCullough (1976) insists that if a complex person like Sylvia Plath came through as one-sided, the censor at work was the daughter herself and not her mother.[10]

Reviewers reacted with irony, disconcertion, and denunciation to Sylvia Plath's capacity for uninterrupted gushing. In her monthly column of brief reviews for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Phoebe-Lou Adams finds the girlish glee 'unbelievable and even revolting' (1976). Harriet Rosenstein associates the language and sentiments with '*Mademoiselle* at mid-century' (1975, 45). To critic and scholar Hugh Kenner, the letter writer sounds 'like the heroine of a *Seventeen* story', resembling a million other unremarkable adolescent diarists (1976, 459). Most unusual, however, was how Plath still poured out the *Seventeen* idioms as a Fulbright scholar and kept up her 'usual unmodulated burble' right to the end. 'Did [Ted Hughes] suddenly tire of being trapped in a *Seventeen* story?', Kenner wonders (460). Peter Ackroyd, at the time twenty-six-years-old and with one book of poetry to show for himself, claims *Letters Home* proves Sylvia Plath to be 'a minor poet' and that 'her work had no staying power' (1976). Larry McMurtry likewise regards the letters as a disservice to Sylvia Plath. The best of her work had been published years ago, he points out, 'but it will be a long time before we have finished having the worst' (1975).

For reviewers, *Letters Home* poses what seems to be an unyielding contradiction. How could 'fierce Sylvia' – the *persona* that readers already