PART I

Contexts and issues

1

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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

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

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

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

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).

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.

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

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.

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