CULTURE

Domesticated Goddess

"Dying is an art," said Sylvia Plath. But so is living, and she excelled at both—not that her biographers, with one wise and big-hearted exception, have noticed

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Fall 1956: Sylvia Plath is typing a poem about a public execution. It isn't her poem; it is that of her new husband, Ted Hughes. She always types his poems and sends them to publishers. "Without Sylvia, Ted might have had to work in rose gardens ... for quite a few more years," his best friend once admitted. Hughes was still unknown then, and more inclined to work odd jobs in the great outdoors than to mail around manuscripts. In any case, in 1956 Plath is typing a poem, a poem about a bishop's being burned at the stake before the citizens of his town, a poem about the power of death—violent death—to win an audience for one's words. The poem's epigraph consists of the bishop's dying words; it is as striking as the poem itself: "*If I flinch from the pain of the burning, believe not the doctrine that I have preached.*"

October 1962: four months before her suicide, at age thirty, Sylvia Plath is typing a poem about a mysterious "bee meetin[illegible] own poem. Villagers are assembled to "hunt the queen." Almost imperceptibly their search assumes a new direction. They

turn on Plath's speaker herself. There is a "blackout of knives" and, in an uncanny echo of Hughes's bishop, the slashed young woman intones,

> *I am the magician's girl who does not flinch,*
> The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
> Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they
> accomplished, why am I cold.

With a start we realize that the villagers have murdered her; she has acquiesced in her own killing—heroically, numbly, like the doomed bishop. The allusions to Hughes's poem are too numerous to ignore: rural execution, dumb-faced villagers in attendance, the victim's articulated refusal to flinch. And, possibly, the stygian suggestion that if you want to be credible, if you want your "doctrine" to be believed, you must be prepared to die for it. There is nothing like a cadaver to prove sincerity—or to seize the attention of the world.

Would we believe in Plath's poetry as much as we do had she not followed it with suicide? It's a distasteful question, and to answer it in the negative would seem to imply some untenable things: first, that she did well to kill herself, and second, that her poetry might not have made the grade without the violence in its history. Her poetry, as far as I'm concerned, is some of the most starkly gorgeous and audacious of all time; her gift for metaphor is unsurpassed in modern literature; and her honesty is searing, hard-won, and precise. If we could bottle her verse, it would be the strongest brew in the bar.

And yet we are drawn to the relation between art and life—and between art and death, as Plath herself was drawn to it, desperately, obsessively, and amorously. Had she not taken her life after those dark, death-fondling poems of her final months, the ones she called "the best poems of my life," the ones that "will make my name," but lived on, coffee-sipping, into comfort[illegible] age, we might have thought, with some of her more unsympathetic biographers, that she was a literary crybaby, a

poseur, an unscrupulous appropriator of other people's feelings. And she would have understood such a response. She, too, felt that all is play, all is poetic dalliance, that does not involve real stakes and exact a price. "If it were death / I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes. / I would know you were serious," she writes (as though to herself) in "A Birthday Present." Death is authenticating.

If Plath could admit it, why can't we? Who ever said life does not—or should not—influence how we read our writers? Do scholars of Heidegger say as much? They owe a good deal of their opinion of him to his activities as a Nazi. If an artist's work can be *eclipsed* by life, surely it can be *enhanced* as well—even if this enhancement is monstrous.

But her suicide was no career move. There was the matter, first, of Hughes's abandoning her in the fall of 1962—no small matter, given Plath's unstinting adoration of him and the couple's total fusion of their artistic, professional, emotional, and domestic lives, a fusion Diane Middlebrook documents in the new biography *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath, A Marriage*. Anyone who thinks that Plath was purely morbid or misanthropic should read her journal entries about Hughes in the first several years of their marriage. They burst with light and love. He was her unrivaled hero almost until the day he left her for another woman. She beat and badgered herself to be "worthy" of him; she loved his scent, his size, his brain, his heart, his verse, his prose, even the "cruel streak" she thought she discerned in him. It was all part of his mythic manliness in her eyes, his encompassing genius. If she was difficult and demanding at times, as seems obvious, it was because of her native volatility, and not because her love for him knew any bounds. When he left her, the sky fell.

There was also her lifelong fascination with death. Her father had succumbed to diabetes when she was eight, and since then death had lived with her like a tempting friend whose hand she sought during moments of uncertainty. When it looked at the ripe old age of twenty like she wasn't going to make it as a writer, she tried to fling herself into his arms; she tried too hard, swallowed too many sleeping pills, and vomited them up while unconscious, thus enabling her rescue, two days later, from a hiding place under the house. When she related this ordeal later—in her novel *The Bell Jar*, and also in poems, letters, and conversations with intimates—she lent it a terrible sensuality.

These two factors joined with her long-honed talent and increasing boldness to create the astonishing poems collected in *Ariel*, which, in their turn, came to govern her life. The critic and friend of Plath's Al Alvarez has said that "for the artist, nature often imitates art," and there are few artists of whom this is truer than it is of Plath. She imagined herself marrying a demigod, a force "huge enough for me," and she married "Ted Huge" (as he was known in Cam[illegible]towering Pan figure with "pockets

full of poems [and] fresh trout." She dreamed of "giv[ing] myself crashing, fighting," to him—and she did.

In her sparse, haunting last poem, "Edge," Plath sketched a suicide. It is a stern and beautiful suicide: a triumph—more than a failure—of the will. The woman rendered resembles Shakespeare's Cleopatra, who dies with the asps at her breasts, stinging her to sleep. She also resembles Sylvia Plath.

"The woman is perfected," rings the chill, monumental first line.

> Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga.

... Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

> Pitcher of milk, now empty.

Was Plath drugged by the lyric invitation of the poem? Or had she simply painted herself into a corner with this work, drawing, as it did so heavily, on her biography? In any case, she placed two pitchers of milk next to her slumbering children soon after, taped up their nursery door, put her pale cheek against the stove after turning on the gas, and allowed the "odors to bleed / From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower," allowed them to bleed away her life. She came as close to re-enacting her poem as one can in a small London apartment, without fanfare.

I would like to go further than Al Alvarez and suggest that Plath's life was not only fuel for her work; it was part of that work. John Milton once said that a poet's life should itself be "a true poem." He himself failed resoundingly in this ideal, not just because his life was tragic but because it was sprawling, petty, punctuated by long stretches of nothingness, thick on work but thin on grace. Plath's life, in contrast, is a sort of poem, tragic though it is. She shaped it with the aesthetic perfectionism of a sculptor. She infused it with a playwright's drama: a college boyfriend remembers her penchant for corresponding in "hyperbole"; always "seeking a chance to dramatize her life." She ordered it with an architect's eye for symmetry: even her suicide attempts form a pattern, the pattern reified in her wild, strident, sarcastic, colloquial, exhibitionistic poem "Lady Lazarus."

> I have done it again.

One year in every ten
I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight ...

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like a cat I have nine times to die.

> This is Number Three.

She took mad chances, marrying "the biggest seducer in Cambridge" and moving to his country. She studded her life with the bold risks of an expert gambler—plunging vertically down a mountain her first day on skis (she broke her leg in two places). In the end she lost, but her art did not. If "dying is an art," as she says in "Lady Lazarus," and she "does it exceptionally well," so is living, and she did *that* exceptionally well too. *Not* wisely, as Othello said, but *well*—artistically, dramatically, aesthetically.

Literary scholars, of course, tend to see life as an embarrassment to art; indeed, many sober works of Plath criticism begin with a ritual lament about the biographical hocus-pocus that has interfered with lucid contemplation of the poetry. But although Plath's poetry stands alone as well as any, it is damagingly puritanical to bar discussion of her life, as though the spirit of her poetry would be polluted by proximity to her fallen flesh. It is puritanical, too, to think that the life of a poet might not reflect the same rigorous aesthetic discipline as her writing—that it might not in fact constitute a kind of "performance art." Avant-garde museums put on exhibitions by painters who smear themselves with pigment or mud and enact a plotless skit before audiences; if there is a case to be made for calling such slices of "stylized life" art, how much stronger a case there is for applying this term to the superbly crafted quotidian lines of a Sylvia Plath.

It's in part because Plath's life already bears many marks of fiction that it has lent itself so easily to formal fictionalization. Right now, a movie, *Sylvia*, is opening with

Gwyneth Paltrow as Plath; a play called *Edge* is showing off-Broadway; and the second novel about Plath's life in only two years has hit the bookstores. Middlebrook's biography emerged the same month as the expanded edition of an older biography, by Linda Wagner-Martin. Finally, there's a new memoir, by Jillian Becker, a friend who knew Plath for a few months before she died. Narratives about Plath are almost as tempting to write as they are to read, precisely because their subject has already done so much of the work for us; the girl who complained that she could never come up with a plot when writing her own stories has given biographers, playwrights, filmmakers, and novelists a ready-made plot in her life.

Not that these books resemble one another in more than a few strokes. The history of biographical writing on Plath is vexed; her biographers have had their names made, their health wrecked (Anne Stevenson), and their hearts broken (Emma Tennant) in their endeavors; they have been turned into the subjects of biographical sketches themselves (by Janet Malcolm, in *The Silent Woman*). And they have presented Plath as everything from a martyred feminist saint to a psychotic termagant to a happy homemaker. In fact, with fortunate exceptions, that has been the general progression of interpretation since the 1960s. When Plath died, and the truth of her suicide and Hughes's abandonment first became known, the outcry among feminists and feminist sympathizers was immense. Hughes was demonized in poems (by Robin Morgan, for example) urging his castration and accusing him of murder; Plath's tombstone was vandalized repeatedly by those who did not want her husband's name on it ("Sylvia Plath Hughes"); the "anger" in "Daddy" and other poems was seen as representative of a generation of women; her books filled shop windows, and she was all but canonized. But this did not hold.

Part of the reason is that Ted Hughes appointed his protective older sister, Olwyn, the literary executor of Plath's estate. Olwyn had despised her sister-in-law. She had "resented" Plath's "talent and beauty as well as her relationship with Ted," as Elizabeth Sigmund, a friend of Hughes's and Plath's, described it: "Sylvia ... often told me that Olwyn hated her ... When I met Olwyn after Sylvia's death, I felt she had understated Olwyn's attitude." This woman was now in the single most important position to control Plath's transmission to the world. Everyone who wanted to write anything of any import about her had—or initially wished—to go through Olwyn Hughes. She granted permissions to quote; but she granted them at a price.

It is in part for this reason that no foible of Plath's has been left uncovered, no spurned suitor left uninterviewed, and that an authorized biographer like Anne Stevenson has written of Plath as of a madwoman in the attic. It is certainly for this reason that we have an improbable rant like Dido Merwin's, which was expansively quoted in Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*. A [illegible] friend, Merwin assailed Plath for ignoring her advice to obtain home fu[illegible]econdhand: Plath's "unexpectedly

graceless rejection ... was like a warning shot" to Merwin, but if Plath "elected to go splurging on a posh cooker, refrigerator, and bed, what the hell?" To Merwin and her husband "it would have made complete sense had we had any inkling of the besetting insecurity that was the root cause of Sylvia's need for morale-boosting toys." *Morale-boosting toys?* A fridge? *Besetting insecurity?* Because Plath desired a new stove?

But there are other reasons for what one might call the pathologization of Sylvia Plath. America's love affair with psychopharmacology is one; innumerable essays have appeared tracing Plath's work to everything from clinical psychosis and bipolar illness to menstrual disorders. The most persuasive of these assessments are written by literary scholars who do not, like many of their colleagues, take as a starting point Plath's suicide attempts, her wilder *Ariel* poems, or even the attacks of jealousy for which she is so harshly judged in *Bitter Fame*. However unproductive, Plath's jealousy can hardly be considered unfounded; when Plath met Hughes, he was described to her as the biggest Casanova in town, and the way he seduced *her* (with his girlfriend in the next room) gave her no reason to doubt this appraisal. Nor does Hughes's life after Plath suggest that he was in any way inclined toward fidelity; he left Assia Wevill (the married woman for whom he had left Plath) for *another* married woman, and after Wevill gassed herself, in an amplified replay of Plath's suicide (killing their child as well), he left his second married woman (who, luckily, survived) to propose to a young nurse, who remained his wife until his death and watched as he had numberless affairs, many of them extremely public, some simultaneous, and at least a few punctuated by promises of elopement.

The more plausible doubts about Plath's mental stability relate to the jarringly different voices in her writings—the exhaustingly upbeat tone she employed in her huge correspondence with her mother (the "Sivvy" letters, as Marjorie Perloff dubs them, published in *Letters Home*) juxtaposed with the dark, cutting, often hostile persona in the *Ariel* poems that she wrote at the same time, sometimes about the same events. Critics have put letters next to poems and declared her nuts: Look at this ecstatic letter about sweet Ted's bringing her tulips when she was in the hospital, they will say. And now look at the poem "Tulips": the flowers "hurt" her; they are "dangerous animals"; the smiles of the speaker's husband and child "catch onto my skin" like "little smiling hooks." Was she schizophrenic? Or just a pathological liar?

I don't think Plath was a pathological liar. Neither was she an overdutiful daughter, as has also been claimed, laboring—at the expense of truth and taste—to cheer her mother. She wrote these letters because it answered a basic need in her: to portray—and to *feel*—herself as being in control, capable, cheerful, resourceful, and happy. Anybody who imagines that she ran around ranting blackly like Lady Lazarus and "eating men like air"—or even wallowing catatonically like the speaker in "Tulips"—is absurdly mistaken. (Looking at phot[illegible]of Plath, Janet Malcolm feels "disappointed" that she lacks Lazarus [illegible] and an appropriately fierce

expression.) Plath didn't curse or cower in her daily life; she coped. She got up in the morning and told herself she was happy; otherwise she could not have accomplished all the child care, household duties, moves, mailings, meetings with editors, typing for Ted, horseback riding, knitting, German study, beekeeping, and writing in several genres that we know she did. "Without visiting the [Plath] archives, it would be impossible to comprehend just how prolific Plath's output was," one scholar has marveled. And just as Plath told herself she was happy, and could keep doing this, she told her mother the same thing. That does not mean there wasn't a level at which Plath gave free rein to her doubts, at which she permitted herself to be pessimistic, to be *brutal*, to follow her fears, her fantasies, her darker intuitions, as far down or up as they would take her. It seems to me that the critics who call Plath schizophrenic are pretending that people are simpler than they are.

But there is a further reason for the souring toward Plath in later biographical works. It is that any number of writers who set out to research her fell in love with her husband. Mainly female, and mainly intellectually iconoclastic, they came into contact with Hughes during their research and gravitated toward him as Plath had, probably for some of the same reasons: his shady sexual history, bad press, enormously articulate intelligence, love of women, carefully timed reticence, and strategically deployed loquacity. Usually Hughes left the dirty work of corresponding with Plath investigators to Olwyn, but when he chose, he could write a masterly letter: "When [Hughes] writes about Plath, he renders all the other writings about her crude and trivial," Janet Malcolm writes in *The Silent Woman*. Malcolm reprints a few incantatory examples; she also tells us she's on his "side" in the Plath-Hughes controversy. That is, she's on the side of "the Hugheses"—but given the surpassingly awful things she relates about Olwyn in the book, we can't quite believe it's because of *her*. Malcolm has seemingly fallen under Ted's spell—in much the same way as the English writer Emma Tennant before her. An aristocrat by birth, Tennant approached Hughes in part because of her interest in Plath, but soon fell in love and into bed with him; she now figures among the photos of mistresses in Elaine Feinstein's biography *Ted Hughes*. Their affair proceeded for years in the late seventies, and Tennant was surprised to find one day that Hughes was also publicly cohabiting with a beautiful Australian, Jill Barber. Tennant's admiration continued nonetheless, and in 2001 she published a novel about the Plath-Hughes marriage that is a miracle of fawning bias in favor of Hughes and clumsy belittling of Plath. *Sylvia and Ted* drips with sentences like "[Sylvia] knows that kind Ted is right for Sylvia is damaged and he is not."

Sylvia "sweats and pants" while Ted "comes taller from" his work every day, "as triumphant as a woman who has experienced multiple births."

As far as sophistication and subtlety go, Malcolm is in a different league from Tennant, but she, too, is remarkably cavalier about Plath's suffering, all but chiding her for killing herself and denying Hughes the "peace that age brings" when all she had to forgive him for anyway was "youth." (Not that his *modus operandi* changed with age.) Malcolm coyly reveals the source of her bias when she reprints a letter she addressed to another Plath scholar, Jacqueline Rose. Describing the "sibling rivalry" she felt when Rose showed her a letter from Hughes and then took it back, Malcolm evokes the "image of two women fighting for something—over a man?" Over a man indeed. Plath scholars—from Olwyn and Feinstein to Tennant and Malcolm—have been fighting over him for years. Perhaps only now that he is dead can we begin to achieve some objectivity regarding this man who was so dangerously magnetic in person and correspondence, so lighthearted in relationships, and so mediocre, in my view, in the majority of his poems.

There have been biographical works other than the pathologizing kind over the past decades. Although Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* is the only authorized and still the best-received biography (with blurbs by John Updike and Joyce Carol Oates to recommend it), Linda Wagner-Martin, Paul Alexander, Ronald Hayman, and Jacqueline Rose (among others) have produced serious studies. Swimming against the current, these writers, who elected to forgo Olwyn Hughes's permissions and her formidable censorship, wrote valuable if quotation-poorer books. By far the wisest, shrewdest, best-written, and most poetically acute and big-hearted of these, however, is Middlebrook's *Her Husband*. This is the place to find a fair-minded and eminently readable guide to Plath and Hughes's artistic collaboration as well as to their erotic strife.

There are other places, of course, including the film, *Sylvia*, and Kate Moses's *Wintering*, a novel about Plath's final months, but they are inferior. That said, they may be more representative of the new direction in Plath studies than Middlebrook's book. Having first sanctified and then pathologized their subject, Plath scholars are now beginning to domesticate her. The figure that emerges from John Brownlow's screenplay is a more or less pallid homemaker, a perpetually wounded stay-at-home wife who compulsively bakes pies and makes little worried noises about her roving husband. Though the film pays lip service to Plath's literary genius, and Gwyneth Paltrow does bear an uncanny resemblance to Plath, neither her boldness, her predatory passion, nor her self-determination is anyw idence.

Worse, though, is the caricature we encounter in *Wintering*. Moses's book—if one can forget, for a moment, the baroque prose—essentially portrays Plath as a doting and somewhat simple-minded mother, occupied predominantly with changing her babies' "nappies." (The book makes record use of "potty" and "nappy.") Perhaps this is a necessary perspective on Plath, but it is a limited one: it captures little of what makes her great, troubled, or in any way different from the stereotypical adoring mom. And Plath *was* different from this stereotype. Jillian Becker, who cared for Plath during the last weekend of her life, paints a very different woman—one almost indifferent to her kids. Even if we make allowances for the fact that Plath was at her worst in the days chronicled in *Giving Up* (and that Becker, for all her kindness, seems to have understood her hardly at all), the fact remains that Plath's verse suggests a violent ambivalence toward maternity. That fact, oddly, is overlooked by any number of formidable readers, from Katha Pollitt, who has praised the "tenderness and purity of Plath's maternal feelings," to Linda Wagner-Martin, whose new edition of *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* spends a chapter strenuously misinterpreting Plath's lyrics about children. It is worth quoting from "Morning Song," Plath's most famous poem about maternity, and one that Wagner-Martin claims "re-creates" the experience of "joyous mothering."

> I'm no more your mother

> Than the cloud that distills a mirror
> to reflect its own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.

The child effaces its mother's identity. It also strips her of sexual power.

> One cry, and I stumble from bed,
> cow-heavy and floral
> In my Victorian night-gown.

Once a nubile girl, the speaker is now a shapeless Victorian monster, a milking machine, a "cow."

It is among Plath's greatest strengths that she tells us in her poetry not only what is nice but also what is true—or what *can* be true. She shows us not only woman's selfless delight in her infant but also her fear of being upstaged, eclipsed, desexualized, by maternity—turned into an absurd instrument of biology, "a means, a stage, a cow in calf," as she puts it in "Metaphors." In some ways we are ready for Plath; in others we still aren't. We will allow her to rage against her father in "Daddy" (male authority

figures are fair game), but when it comes to children, we insist on sentimentalizing her. This is what Moses's book does, and what several recent readings of Plath's poetry do. It is almost as though, in order to rehabilitate her after the pathologization of previous decades, we need to put her in an apron and make her Supermom. Moses has gone so far as to publish a magazine article titled "Baking With Sylvia," which pictures Moses standing, without irony, before a handsome gas stove demonstrating what she believes to be Plath's favorite recipes.

Plath was neither as sick nor as saccharine as her biographers have pretended. As her arresting poems and extraordinary journals reveal, she was fiercely honest, fiercely complicated, fiercely skilled, and fiercely emotional. "Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists," Ralph Waldo Emerson said. The impressions of nature did not fall feebly on Plath. They fell hard and deep, and they turned this hungry consumer of the American dream into an artist as urgent as she is indispensable.

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