
BOOKS & WRITERS

Out of the Quarrel

On Sylvia Plath—By ANTHONY THWAITE

THREE YEARS AGO IN ENCOUNTER, in an essay pegged to the recent appearance of Sylvia Plath's *Letters Home*,¹ I said that: "The time to make sense of Sylvia Plath will be when Faber & Faber eventually get round to publishing a properly edited Collected Poems—something long promised but long delayed." At this moment, over sixteen years after her death, there is still no sign of such an edition. I believe (or I *think* I believe, for nothing in this area seems certain) that several years ago the Sylvia Plath Estate (in the person of Ted and Olwyn Hughes) together with Faber & Faber commissioned what was to be the authorised biography from an American called Lois Ames. That too seems to have foundered, as I think it was bound to. If it took more than 45 years after Hardy's death to get a satisfactory biography of Hardy (from Robert Gittings) and more than 75 years after Emily Dickinson's death to get a satisfactory biography of Emily Dickinson (from Richard Sewall), it doesn't seem likely that a satisfactory Plath biography will appear in my lifetime. A number of people of about my age (that is, of Sylvia Plath's age if she had lived) will have to die before some patient, intelligent, non-axe-grinding biographer can piece the whole thing together and publish it.

What there will be, and what there increasingly is, is plenty of partial views, plenty of gossip, a great deal of deviousness and subterfuge from those who knew her and a great deal of speculation and analysis from those who didn't. Edward Butscher falls into the last category, up to his knees if not up to his chin. The aptly named Butscher has already given us *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*,² and he now edits and introduces *Sylvia Plath: The*

Woman and the Work,³ a collection of essays, half of them reminiscences by people who in one sense or other knew her, from an early college boy-friend (Gordon Lameyer) to a Devon neighbour (Elizabeth Sigmund), and half of them critiques of the work. The whole is prefaced by Mr Butscher's lucubrations on the plaintive theme, "Who is Sylvia?" Confident in his reconstructions, he tells us how—after painful and painstaking "research"—he came to the conclusion:

I knew what had to be known and tried to intuit the rest, my personal egotism and literary absorptions responding readily to those same qualities as they had sculpted the features of one Sylvia Plath. At times, the portrait was still far too romantic and vague, more art than biography, but that also suited the pattern of a career founded upon masks, nurtured in myth-making, hammered true by the adolescent vortex where artifice has its force.

I am sure that Mr Butscher and his contributors will not be the last to air their egotisms and literary absorptions in this way, or indeed the last to mix their metaphors so exuberantly in pursuit of the elusive Sylvia Plath. Mystery encourages such stuff. According to Elizabeth Sigmund: "When a writer from America wrote to ask if I could see her to talk about Sylvia, I went and asked Ted what he felt. His answer was: 'The time to tell the truth about Sylvia is when you are dying'."

THAT MYSTERY AND OBFUSCATION, as well as pregnant misreading, have helped to create a Plath cult is undoubtedly true. That there *is* a cult-like interest in her life and work (the two often seen as inextricable) can't be denied, particularly since the publication of *Ariel* in 1965 and the later considerable commercial success enjoyed by her novel *The Bell Jar* when it was eventually published in the United States. (Its British publication, by Heinemann under her pseudonym "Victoria Lucas", just before her death, caused hardly a ripple; though to give

¹ *Letters Home* (Faber & Faber, 1976). See "I have never been so happy in my life", by Anthony Thwaite. ENCOUNTER, June 1976.

² Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (Seabury Press, 1976).

³ *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*. Edited with an introduction by EDWARD BUTSCHER. Peter Owen, £7.95; Dodd, Mead & Co., \$8.95.

him proper credit, Laurence Lerner's review in *The Listener* was perceptive, sympathetic and admiring.) But the word "cult" implies smallness, restriction and exclusion, and what I'm often struck by is the wide spread of her reputation, not only in Britain and the United States but elsewhere. On a tour of India earlier this year, I found many Indians (especially women, but not always) asking about her, wanting me to talk about her, and enthusiastic to air their own views. I gather the same is true in France, in Germany, in Italy, in Japan.

Such devotion, or obsession, can take odd forms. Look at the envious poems written by Anne Sexton (who once went to writing-classes with Sylvia Plath at Boston University) when Sylvia killed herself first. (Anne Sexton managed it several years later.) Or look at the poem, "For Sylvia at 4.30 a.m.", by one Paula Rothholz in Mr Butscher's collection. It ends:

*The oven waits.
Watch me
all you murdering
daddy-o's—*

*The gas too
has a cock
sucker!*

No literary editor or new anthology editor nowadays is spared a spate of such offerings—

elegies and monodies and threnodies for Sylvia, poems indelibly wearing her fingerprints, rapt communings with her and about her and in her style. In this area of emotional self-identification and lay therapy, the amateur's diagnosis tends to attach to itself the unquestioning authority of the professional's autopsy. Every girl her own analyst! Everyone his own dissector of the Plath corpse and corpus!

I FIND A GREAT DEAL of this activity deeply (or shallowly) morbid and repellent. To be fair, the memoir pieces in Mr Butscher's collection are not all as awful as they might be: Dorothea Krook's view of her in a teacher/pupil relationship in Cambridge is dignified and decent, and modest because she doesn't pretend to any great intimacy; and both Clarissa Roche and Elizabeth Sigmund have some insights and memories which—if they are "true"—may have some significance. What is hardest to take is when the Butscher-handed exegetes wade in, reading the work back into the life and triumphantly emerging with syllogisms. Thus, almost at random, Robert Phillips in his essay "The Dark Funnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath":

The title poem, "Winter Trees", for instance, displays Plath's identification with trees (the

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name Sylvia, after all, is the feminine form of Sylvanus, "living in the wood"), and her envy of them for their freedom from woman's fate of copulation, abortion, and bitchery. Tree weddings are seen as merely the quiet accretion of new growth-rings; their seedings are totally effortless, unlike the sweat and heave of human procreation. Like Leda, they are full of wings and other-worldliness. (When Zeus coupled with Leda, he did so in the form of a swan.) Yet we should not forget that in Plath's radio play, *Three Women*, one of the three equates winter trees with death, perhaps the natural conclusion of such inhuman congress. Another of the women cries that there "is a snake in swans." Sex in any form seems to repel.

To consider just Mr Phillips's first observation, then, critics should take a close look at my own work, bearing the Christian name I do, for veiled reference to pigs, temptation, and possibly Cleopatra-women. No doubt they will find them.

In an interview she recorded (which has often been quoted) with Peter Orr of the British Council in October 1962, three and a half months before she killed herself, Sylvia Plath said:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind.

These images—needle, knife—can be found in fact in a number of Plath poems; but, as she says, they are "manipulated"—not in the sense of being "worked up" but of being "worked out." It isn't really poetry as problem-solving, as self-therapy, but poetry as an art, as a craftsmanlike manipulation of the given material: images, words, rhythms. In a broadcast selection of her poems she made for me in June 1961 (quoted more extensively in my ENCOUNTER piece already referred to), she said by way of introduction:

They are, quite emphatically, about the "things of this world." When I say "this world", I include, of course, such feelings as fear and despair and barrenness, as well as domestic love and delight in nature. These darker emotions may well put on the masks of quite unworldly things—such as ghosts, or trolls, or antique gods.

In other words, like any writer in control of the material Sylvia Plath used masks and manoeuvres to cope with the world. Creating illusions, making fictions, is part of the strategy. What seems to have gone largely unregarded is her comical resilience, exploiting experiences (operations, pain, suffering, blankness, fears) with a tough sardonic wit. Remember that when she first read her poem "Daddy" to A. Alvarez a few days after she had written it, his memory is that she called it a piece of "light verse." One may think that was just a defensive, self-protective ploy; and obviously it isn't "light" in the sense that Edward Lear or W. S. Gilbert or Old Possum's Practical Cats are "light." But I think one ought to take the point—and take, too, the introductory note she wrote to "Daddy" for a BBC broadcast that never took place: she said of the poem's narrator or persona, "She has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it." The words "awful" and "little" colour the interpretation, and the word "allegory" helps to define it. It is *not* a confessional splurge, a piece of let-it-all-hang-out, or a direct self-confrontation of a kind familiar in Lowell, Sexton, or Berryman: it is a way of coping with an obsession by playing with it, by making it into a game—something sophisticatedly child-like, with its insistent rhythms and rhymes, its almost nursery-rhyme-like repetitions.

IN HER SHORT BOOK on Sylvia Plath, published six years ago,⁴ Eileen Aird ended her Introduction with that resonant remark by Yeats ("Out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry") and commented: "It seems a fitting epitaph." I'm not sure I accept it as the summation of a life and a death which an epitaph should be; but I do see the sense of it when applied to Plath's own poetry. Alongside it, one ought to consider Eliot's famous dictum about the gap there is—or he said should be—between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates." This (part of Eliot's lifelong conviction of the "impersonality" of all great poetry) may seem true enough of Eliot's own poetry but less true of Yeats and, if one were to follow some of her own commentators, not true at all of Sylvia Plath. But what measuring-system can one use to measure the gap between "the man (or woman) who suffers" and "the mind which creates"?

Re-reading all of her published poems, and reading or re-reading a mass of stuff written about her, I've been struck again and again by the dramatic *distancing* of so much of her work, the way in which she created poems which are precisely *not* cries from the heart, or from a sick mind, or from the edge of the precipice in an obtrusively narrow or personal way; and at the same time I've been struck by the way these poems are indeed quarrels

⁴ Eileen Aird, *Sylvia Plath* (Oliver & Boyd, 1973).

with herself, dramatic debates between action and stillness, fulfilment and blankness, hope and despair, anger and love—not seen in those abstract shapes, of course, but translated into that dense and sprightly metaphorical discourse which is one of the languages of poetry and which was certainly her language.

Very often it is a pictorial language, the first level of metaphor, something seen: she has the attentive detail, the high-lighted focus, of a *genre* painter. It comes out, for example, in the second part of her poem "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", in which that "little country, foolish, delicate" in the Brueghel painting is the frail and threatened place yearned for and sought—and sometimes found—in many Plath poems. Sometimes, in early poems and late ones, it is the country of Death, very still, very composed, very "accomplished"—to vary a word she used in one of the poems she wrote in the last week of her life, "Edge." Here the temptation is to read back into it one's retrospective knowledge—those accounts of how she left food and milk for her children's breakfast before she gassed herself:

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

Pitcher of milk, now empty.

But Sylvia Plath, like any good poet, didn't write poems as autobiographical or proleptic footnotes. It's as absurd as to suggest that because Hart Crane wrote a great deal about the sea, *that* is why he drowned himself in the Caribbean. If literature really behaved in this way, then Hardy should have strung himself up on a gallows on Egdon Heath, or somewhere, and not allowed himself to die in bed at the age of 88.

THE PERFECTION, the accomplishment, the *necessity* of "Edge" have an inevitability which would, I think, seem just as inevitable if Sylvia Plath hadn't in fact killed herself within a week of writing it. The poem's stillness is a conscious weapon against distraction, and a stabilising one. The quarrel, for the moment, is over, resolved. That in a moment of desolation she miscalculated and pushed herself over the edge is, as I said in my previous article, in a sense irrelevant. We need to remember this, so as not to magnify the manner of her death and thereby keep on reading it back into the poems. Poets who die young seem to satisfy some gruesome necessity in the reading and legend-making public, whether they die of disease, like Keats, or by accident, like Shelley, or in war, like Wilfred Owen, or by suicide, like Chatterton and Sylvia Plath. That Dylan Thomas died of "massive insult to the brain" through drinking too

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much, at the age of 39, may perhaps seem important, a kind of resolution of that particular quarrel. But then what about George Herbert—in my opinion just as fine, indeed a finer poet—who died at exactly the same age as Thomas but in circumstances to which no legend has accreted? Herbert, too, made poems “out of the quarrel” with himself, a quarrel between (among other things) pride and privilege and ambition on the one hand and humility and self-abnegation and acceptance on the other. Poems that survive—in the sense that a number of poems by Herbert, Thomas and Plath survive and have currency—do so not because of legendary “circumstances” but because they are well-made things which extend us, enlarge us, and make us, too, survive and endure and enjoy.

IN HER *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*,⁵ Margaret Dickie Uroff attempts to “read the work of these two major poets in a new way”:

Plath and Hughes lived together during their most creative years, read each other's poetry, and read poetry to each other . . . what critics have frequently called the pathological element in Plath's poetry comes actually from areas she explored with Hughes. . . . Hughes's development toward surrealism was clearly influenced by Plath's work.

That comparisons can be made between the two is no new thing. As I once put it⁶: “In a way, Hughes's poems are the *animus* to her *anima*—the male principle backing on to the female principle on the same coin: compare, for example, his ‘Thistles’ with her ‘Mushrooms’”—a remark that brought a ribald laugh from Philip Larkin, and I admit the point might have been more elegantly put. Ms Uroff is by no means a sensational or Butscher-like commentator, and some of her pertinacious tracking is worth following. On the other hand, she pushes too hard to make correspondences and reversals, as if she were out to construct a beautifully proportioned graph: here she gives him that and he gives her that, here they change roles, here he is in the ascendant, etc. Remarks such as (of “Daddy”), “Whatever its source in Plath's life, its literary sources may very well be Hughes's animal poems”, aren't made any more illuminating by Ms Uroff's demonstrations; and large-scale sleights-of-deity such as, “As they developed, Plath came to locate herself at the fulcrum, while Hughes stood back to explore the nature of the universe”, have a touch of literary megalomania.

⁵ *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. By MARGARET DICKIE UROFF. University of Illinois Press, £5.60, \$7.95.

⁶ Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today 1960-73*, (Longman, for British Council, 1973).

Still, it is a sober, sane and on the whole jargon-free book. She is sensible about “Lady Lazarus”, a poem which in its notoriety and in the variety of its misreadings just about equals “Daddy.” Written very directly “out of the quarrel”, it sounds (and this is a measure of its dramatic success) as if it had been written just this side, or the other side, of hysteria. But the poem with which we're confronted works like that precisely *because* it is so superbly controlled and directed. It confronts private horrors, transforms them into public ones (the concentration camps)—and then has the audacity, the bad taste, the skill, to play with them:

*Beware
Beware.*

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.*

The notion of serious writers—especially, perhaps, serious women writers—playing with their obsessions, or joking about serious matters, is offensive to many people. The squeamishness of male critics confronted with the work of, say, Erica Jong has often been remarked. To justify or tidy up, such work is sterilised with the cosmetics of *black comedy*, *theatre of the absurd*, *sick humour*, etc. Sylvia Plath was a very controlled, very witty, and also very serious and ambitious writer, who had the bad luck to be born and brought up in a society which—at one and the same time—equated seriousness with solemnity and, in its more intellectual reaches, gave an odd and special status to what used to be called insanity. In a secular age, without belief but hungering for something transcendental, many felt like the natives in the Evelyn Waugh novel: “Very mad, very holy.”

The society and the age of which I speak is of course our own. Sylvia Plath used it, as any artist must use his age and society. That she tried, as what American psychologists call “an over-achiever”, to kill herself, haunted her and became part of her subject-matter. That she not only tried to kill herself again but actually succeeded, after she had been deserted by her husband for another woman, is not actually part of her subject-matter at all: her death naturally precluded that. In any case, many wives who were in no sense artists have suffered in the same way and have acted in the same way. What is unique about Sylvia Plath is not what happened to her and what she did to herself—the gas oven and the note to the doctor—but her control, her zest, her vitality *as a poet* up to that point. If we make her into a legend, we falsify and diminish her. In the end, we see the perfection and resolution of her own “quarrel” in the poems:

*The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted.*

A Change of Landscape

New Poetry—By ALAN BROWNJOHN

HOW WRONG they were, all those critics who read the emergence of the Movement, that 1950s new wave of English poets who espoused tightness of form and tightness of lip, as a purely literary phenomenon. And how mistaken were all those later literary historians who saw Movement mistrust of extravagance, its modesty of ambition and its predilection for defensive ironies as in some way a faithful reflection of an entire social landscape: the Welfare State (the reality never existed and even the myth is now rapidly vanishing) where nothing ever went gravely wrong, nothing exciting ever happened, and drab living produced drab writing.

Both views were wide of the mark, and the truth was far simpler: with the wisdom of hindsight we can now fairly safely say that the tone of the new English poetry of the 1950s came largely out of an unusually marked tension between the world of action and the world of the imagination. "How can I dare to feel?", Donald Davie's often-quoted response to Donne's "Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?", should not have been foisted on the Movement by its critics as a damaging slogan. Donne's "Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do" would have been a much more apposite choice.

In the early years of the decade, the Second World War, service in the armed forces, and the National Service which followed were much closer presences than most critics saw at the time and almost any critic has understood since. If the new poetry came largely out of academe (six of the eight poets in the Movement anthology, *New Lines*, were academics, two were librarians, one worked in the Foreign Office), it was an academe which sheltered a whole generation unable to settle comfortably for the security of traditional academic values, and distantly fascinated by the world outside. Some literary academics found a rigour they could enjoy in the strenuous critical procedures of a Richards or a Leavis; so the poetry they wrote had to be invulnerable to practical criticism as well as to accusations of wetness. (Sometimes the quest for rigour finished in a near-contempt for poetry itself, and an increasing envy of the world of action where men gambled at cards, or played football—or at

least reported matches.) If the cinema seemed outside their range, and television irrelevant as yet, if the world of popular music seemed beneath their contempt (a later generation was to change all that), then the novel afforded an acceptable means of showing muscle—even literally, because "Movement" fiction offered a violence of emotion, and sometimes of action, which was altogether absent from Movement poetry. Politics, and some mild forms of social action (writing a Fabian pamphlet, raising a banner against capital punishment, lining the route to Aldermaston) were also currently acceptable; but not to be taken too far.

But what could scarcely be disputed, even while its supporters were protesting that the Movement was *new*, was that it was essentially *conservative* in character. If the literary conservatism was easy to notice, the stronger underlying social conservatism which derived from experiencing or imposing structures of authority and simple rules of behaviour in military set-ups was harder to detect, and took longer to emerge in its true colours. Again, the wisdom of hindsight has to be invoked. It should have been possible to see at the time (but one didn't, all the same) that the characteristic Movement way of worrying about the discrepancy between dreams and reality (tight-lipped, apologetic), of agonising about whether one stood comparison with the man of action if one was a *poet*, went with a distinct annoyance at finding that life, love and the ravages of time were more complicated things than they looked in the officers' mess. Its mistrust of sensitivity, mistrust of experiment, mistrust of artifice—mistrust of *art*—linked the Movement with the philistinism of good old conservative Middle England. And lately we have heard that dullest of all political noises: the thunder of mild rebels going down on middle-aged knees to repent of little indiscretions.

KINGSLEY AMIS's *Collected Poems*,¹ which are arranged in a very exact chronological order, provides, apart from anything else (and the "anything else" includes pleasures as well as regrets) an interesting graph of one Movement poet's progress. In the early pages, feeling—not only emotion, but the feeling for actual, untidy, complicated human predicaments—tends to get hidden behind allegory, or muffled in abstraction.

The move into academe seems to have two

¹ *Collected Poems 1944–79*. By KINGSLEY AMIS. Hutchinson, £4.95.