

Notes on a Fictional (Colossal) Figure of Sylvia Plath

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虚(巨)像シルヴィア・プラスについての覚書

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Sylvia Plath は、1963 年 2 月に 30 歳で自殺したときには、詩集を一冊と小説を一冊発表しただけの、若く結婚生活に挫折した詩人に過ぎなかった。しかし、死後の作品・数々の伝記の出版、ピューリッツァー賞受賞、書簡集の出版、彼女自身の日記の出版が続き、ついには彼女を主人公とする劇、映画、小説まで登場した。彼女は 50 年代のカルト的ヒロインとして、その心乱す性質によってフェミニズムの先駆けとして記憶されるだけでなく、さまざまな相反する性質を持った芸術家、詩人、女性として、かつては巨像として聳え立つ父と夫の影に抑圧されていたかに見えた若死にの詩人から、死後 40 年経ってもなお、ますますイメージの増幅を続け、彼女自身が、実像と虚像が複雑に重なり合う巨像に似た存在として忘れがたいものとなっている。

キーワード

Colossus · real self · fictional self

Sylvia Plath was a person of many masks, both in her personal life and in her writings.

Foreword to *the Journals of Sylvia Plath*

Ted Hughes

Why Plath now? More than 40 years have passed since the tragic death of Sylvia Plath, a poet, the author of the disturbing autobiographical novel titled *The Bell Jar*, and a (single) mother with two children and with an infidel, separated but talented husband, Ted Hughes. Even though we consider the fact that Plath's fame was established posthumously (Hayman 184-198), it is surprising that we've seen so many works and performances on the life of Sylvia Plath at the turn of the century. Recently, the literary figure, Sylvia Plath, seems to attract more attention in the broader cultural sphere than ever.

Perhaps it signaled the beginning of this "Plath Phenomenon" when Ted Hughes published a

collection of poems, *Birthday Letters* in 1998, which was only one year before his death. Ted Hughes had been well known as being undoubtedly Plath's source of literary inspiration and also the cause of her suicide as well. Hughes had edited all of the publication of her works including her journals with his exclusive control on Plath's all works after her death, but he had kept his silence and rarely mentioned their marriage life until *Birthday Letters* was published. After *Birthday Letters*, another version of journals titled *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* edited by Karen V. Kukil, not Ted Hughes was published in 2000. Then a novel, not a biography, titled *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* appeared in 2003, the play *Edge* was performed off Broadway, New York in the summer of 2003, and a major movie titled *Sylvia* was released in 2004. Even in Japan, the new and more sophisticated translation of *The Bell Jar* was published in the spring of 2004, the older version of translation was published in

1974 and this version had been out of print for a long time. It seems no one can deny that Sylvia Plath has become a cultural phenomenon, a fictional larger-than-life figure.

Sylvia Plath's posthumous fame

Many critics agree that Sylvia Plath's fame grew only after her death. Ronald Hayman insists that "when Sylvia Plath died, she wasn't yet Sylvia Plath. The name had none of the reverberations it has today" (184). When she was alive, "to the people who met her in London during her last three months, she was a depressed single mother, American and alone in the vicious London winter with two children and few friends" (Hayman 184). The first book of poems she'd published, *The Colossus* (1960), had made only a minor impact. The book was given only a few favorable but brief reviews. *The Times Literary Supplement* awarded the book "only 120 words" complaining that "Miss Plath tended to be elusive and private" (Hayman 185). When *The Colossus* was published in England, A. Alvarez reviewed it for the Observer. "It seemed to fit the image I had of her: serious, gifted, withheld, and still partly under the massive shadow of her husband," he writes in his memoir. He praised Plath's poems for their technical proficiency but felt that something was being held back: "Beneath most of the poems was a sense of resources and disturbances not yet tapped" (Alvarez, *Savage God* 20-21). *Colossus* poems might have made readers aware of the poet was "under the massive shadow of her husband" (and her father), but her posthumous publication of *Ariel* in 1965 was described as "a shocking revelation of extremist elements" and "Plath became a spokeswoman for the angry, the disillusioned, the bewildered generations of the 1960s and 1970s" (Stevenson xiii). Anne Stevenson depicted the death of Plath:

The tragedy of her suicide and the power of her last poems seemed to sweep the polarities of life

and art (carefully separated by T.S. Eliot and the New Critics) into one unanswerably dramatic gesture of female defiance: "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it." (Stevenson xiii)

With the *Ariel* poems, Plath was no longer under the massive shadow of her husband or father. Ironically, this change was admitted and praised by her "massive" husband. In the foreword to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Ted Hughes wrote that Plath was preparing for "the new birth" (*Journals* xi). Hughes tried to explain or justify the change and eventual death of Plath that the negative phase of the new birth was suicide, but the positive (but not happened) phase was the birth of the new real self after the death of the old false self. (*Journals* xi-xii). And Hughes insisted that "When a real self finds language, and manages to speak, it is surely a dazzling event — as *Ariel* was" (*Journals* xii). This dazzling event was told by her "true self" with "her courage to be unpleasant" (Malcom 32). "Every woman adores a Fascist," Plath wrote in "Daddy"—meaning a male Fascist. Janet Malcom indicated that women have adored Plath for "the Fascist in her... even as she writes of male oppression" (32). This unpleasantness, being not-nice is the quality that *Ariel* poems and *The Bell Jar* have in common.

However, we should be aware that Hughes's simplification of real self and false self should be considered carefully. It would be possible to condemn him to conceal what was not favorable to him. At least, we may maintain that it was understandable but self-righteous for Hughes, as a highly praised poet, to approve what looked acceptable or well-written as "a voice of real self" and reject what looked too shallow or lesser as "a voice of false self." We can easily imagine that to interpret Plath's death as an act or struggle of/for her spiritual rebirth would comfort Hughes. But, the

fact is that not only poems of Plath but also her novel which was labelled "false self" by Hughes were quite well praised and widely read. Many readers were interested in not only her journals but also her letters to her mother and her marriage. It would not be an overstatement that her experience as a struggling ambitious American girl in 50's and her dramatic but unhappy marriage attracted more attention. The image of Sylvia Plath grew larger and larger with not only her works but also many biographies and a sort of gossip stories about Hughes's infidelity. Many people adored Plath as a kind of cultural icon and many of girls identified themselves with Plath. "False self" according to Hughes could be more influential than "real self" approved by Hughes.

Reviews of the pseudonymous *The Bell Jar* were appearing just before and after her death. Some critics praised the novel considering it as 'the first feminine novel in a Salinger mood.' and praised it for making brilliant criticisms of America, but the novel would soon have been forgotten if it hadn't been revealed that Victoria Lucas was the poet Sylvia Plath who had just committed suicide (Lerner). As for her poems, some critics already praised the quality of her poems at the time of her suicide. A. Alvarez maintained in the tribute article just after her suicide, "In her last poems, she'd made 'a totally new breakthrough in modern verse, which had established her as the most gifted woman poet of our time. . . The loss to literature is inestimable' (Alvarez *Observer*). Hayman considered that this article and her poems printed on the same page "provoked a flood of letters from readers. The cult of Sylvia Plath had already begun (185)." Since when the collection of her letters to her mother was published in 1976 by her mother and a collection of her journals was published in 1982 by Hughes, Sylvia Plath was in the way to become a larger than life figure surrounded by the myth as an cult figure of the 50's and the precursor of feminist poets.

When Ted Hughes died, he was one of the only truly great English writers of his time: poet, translator, interpreter of Shakespeare, author of beloved children's books, and poet laureate to the queen. But what has made Ted Hughes more famous and notorious as well was the fact that he had been married to the poet Sylvia Plath from 1956 until February 1963. After her suicide, the fame of her poems grew beyond any expectation and eventually *Sylvia Plath : Collected Poems* edited by Ted Hughes was awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1981, which was almost always given to living authors, not dead. It is quite an irony that Ted Hughes was the one who helped Sylvia Plath become a great literary figure, and at the same time, he was the one who had censored any attempts to write Plath's biography and even appealed to court when unfavorable comments were written or broadcasted.

The Hugheses and Biographies

Facts of Plath's real life have been a big issue because of several reasons. For one, her unfaithful but well-established husband, Ted Hughes, the poet Laureate in England, had been alive and active until recently and had been editing the collection of Plath's poems, providing notes, interpretations and evaluations on them, but never bothered to talk about their marriage or Plath's suicide. For another, his sister, Olwyn had been executing the power and control over the all materials on Plath including her journals, letters, notebooks and drafts, and eventually, she could control the information for biographers. People around Plath seem to have contributed to the making of myth of Plath as a cult figure in an ironic way. What is ironic is the fact that the Hughes had been a quite difficult and terrible barrier for the biographers who tried to put the facts together may have provoked more attempts to break it through the barrier and reach "true Plath" although this efforts contributed to build a statue of

Plath as a cult figure surrounded by many fragments of "true Plath" by so many biographers.

Since the 1963 suicide, many attempts have been made to write biographical works on Plath, but the efforts were made difficult by Ted and Olwyn Hughes's control (Hayman 191) over the copyright. Writers who wanted to quote from the poetry have been required to submit their work for approval, and have been told to cut material which reflects unfavourably on the Hughes family. The Hugheses had sometimes litigated and sometimes threatened litigation. Hayman mentioned the instance that even the review on a biography of Sylvia on a BBC television programme talking over the censorship and suppression of material by the Plath estate controlled by Olwyn Hughes, Ted's sister, received a letter of complaining. Hayman gave us another instance of the Hughes's censorship that a discussion of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on the radio Programme in 1988, was threatened by solicitors of the Plath estate to take legal action (191). In 1990 Ted Hughes issued a writ against a writer who privately published a memoir giving details of his meetings with Sylvia and of events in the maisonette after the funeral and eventually, Hughes accepted an apology (Hayman 192).

Not only Ted Hughes but also Olwyn Hughes was more notorious for being full control over the biographers. Ann Stevenson admitted that the influence of Olwyn was so great that her biography titled *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* was "almost a work of dual authorship" (vii) in the very book. According to author's note, Stevenson wrote:

In writing this biography, I have received a great deal of help from Olwyn Hughes, literary agent to the Estate of Sylvia Plath. Ms. Hughes's contributions to the text have made it almost a work of dual authorship. I am particularly

grateful for the work she did on the last four chapters and on the Ariel poems of the autumn of 1962 (vii).

This gives readers strange feelings as if the two opposite sides worked together. Biographers are supposed to work against those who try to keep family's secrets hidden and provide readers with some kind of truth as Janet Malcom indicates, "[t]he biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away" (8). Malcom maintained that the biographer's business is to "satisfy the reader's curiosity, not to place limits on it" (10). The biographer is supposed to go out and bring back the secrets, some of which "are difficult to bring away, and some, jealously guarded by relatives, are even impossible" (10). According to Malcom ;

Relatives are the biographer's natural enemies; they are like the hostile tribes an explorer encounters and must ruthlessly subdue to claim his territory. If the relatives behave like friendly tribes, as they occasionally do—if they propose to cooperate with the biographer, even to the point of making him "official" or "authorized"—he still has to assert his authority and strut about to show that he is the big white man and they are just the naked savages (11).

Biographers should not accept limits to complete access to the papers so that they could quote what they liked and write what they liked. Biographers have to maintain their standards for biographical rectitude so that they could guarantee the quality of their works. Stevenson seemed to value good relationships with relatives than the quality of her work as a biography. Stevenson wrote in the preface of *Bitter Fame* that she avoided the interviews with

Plath's American family, her mother Aurelia and her brother Warren and his family (Stevenson xvii). It is more surprising that she wrote in the preface that;

Any biography of Sylvia Plath written during the lifetimes of her family and friends must take their vulnerability into consideration, even if completeness suffers from it," (xiv).

This is a most remarkable confession of surrender to the defence of family's privacy made by a biographer.

When we read the preface of *Bitter Fame*, we may feel that a burglar-Stevenson was in good terms with the people of the house he/she broke into-the Hugheses. That is why *Bitter Fame* was "brutally attacked" (Malcom 10) and the book became known and continues to be known "in the Plath world as a 'bad' book" (Malcom 10) though it was well written aesthetically comparing with other major but less satisfying biographies such as *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976), by Edward Butscher; *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987), by Linda Wagner - Martin; *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (1991), by Ronald Hayman; and *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (1991), by Paul Alexander.

However, there remains an irony that Ted Hughes might have spoken through Stevenson's voice about their marriage in *Bitter Fame* only because Stevenson could be in good terms with the Hughes (Malcom 12). Ted Hughes had written no memoir, he gave no interviews, his writings about her work (in a number of introductions to volumes of her poetry and prose) had been always about the work, and rarely touch on biography. Readers had to wait until he published *Birthday Letters* in 1998, in which he told his private memories of Sylvia Plath.

The Bell Jar and Letters Home

Plath's not-niceness is the outstanding characteristic both of the *Ariel* poems and *The Bell Jar*, and the voice of them was what Hughes celebrated, the voice of the "true self". However, not everyone shared this view. *The Bell Jar* is a fictionalized account of Plath's own breakdown and psychiatric therapy and suicide attempt in 1953. In that work, the mother of Ester Greenwood is described mercilessly without respect. Other characters such as Ester's college boyfriend and his mother were also unlovely people in the novel. There were many significant others for Plath who were treated with little affection or respect. Plath therefore published the book under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. In January of 1963, after two American publishers had turned it down, it came out in England under that name and then, after her suicide, under her own name. When *The Bell Jar* was finally scheduled for publication in America, in 1971, Plath's mother, Aurelia was beside herself. In a letter to the publisher she wrote that *The Bell Jar* "represents the basest ingratitude" (Malcom 18).

Aurelia tried to make up this not-nice personality shown in *The Bell Jar* with the "heart warming" letters she'd kept from her daughter. In 1975, Aurelia retrieved permission from Ted Hughes, Plath's literary executor, to publish Plath's letters. What was in Aurelia's mind was to "show that Plath was not the hateful, hating ingrate, the changeling of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, but a loving, obedient daughter" (Malcom 33). It seems never to have occurred to Aurelia that the persona of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* might be more "true" and the persona she showed her mother was not necessarily "true" one, or at least the one her daughter wanted to show the others. It is clear that Plath never expected that her letters to her mother would be published. 700 letters were "sloppily written, effusive, regressive; letters written habitually, compulsively, sometimes more than one a day; letters sent in the secure knowledge that they were for a mother's uncritical eyes alone" (34), according to Janet Malcom..

It is not surprising but still very ironic that the publication of *Letters Home* had a different effect from one Aurelia expected. Malcom indicated that;

Instead of showing that Sylvia wasn't "like that," the letters caused the reader to consider for the first time the possibility that her sick relationship with her mother was the reason she was like that. (34)

It had been widely accepted that her father's premature death was the shadow-event of her life and "the wound from which she never recovered" (Malcom 34). But after the publication of *Letters Home*, her poem "Medusa" in the form of a daughter's angry speech to a mother was connected with Plath's mother. The unnatural too-closeness of Sylvia and her mother is everywhere observed in *Letters Home*. It was clear that Aurelia failed to convince the world how nice and good-natured Sylvia Plath was and how wonderful the mother-daughter bond was. Aurelia in some way gave her daughter an insult by exposing her daughter's letters to the world's scrutiny. Janet Malcom criticized Aurelia:

Mrs. Plath not only violated Plath's writer's privacy but also handed Plath herself over to the world as an object to be familiarly passed from hand to hand. Now everyone could feel that he "knew" Plath—and, of course, Hughes as well. (35)

Ted Hughes was undoubtedly embarrassed by those shallow and hysterical letters where he himself appeared. There was no privacy either for Plath or Hughes. This might have been one of reasons why he published her journals edited by himself and with his foreword. This might be the way for Hughes to recover his dignity and that of Plath if we see Hughes favorably.

Plath's Journals

We have now two versions of Plath's journals. One was edited by Ted Hughes with his introduction, which was published in 1982. In this early version, Ted defended that the journals were exceptions among Plath's "false selves". He called her earlier works including the short fiction in popular magazines; her novel, *The Bell Jar*; her letters; her apprentice poems, published in her first collection, *The Colossus*—"were like impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by-products of the internal work" (*Journals* xi). Hughes saw many complex faces in Plath, but he divided them into false faces and real self:

Some were camouflage cliché facades, defensive mechanisms, involuntary. And some were deliberate poses, attempts to find the keys to one style or another. These were the visible faces of her lesser selves, her false or provisional selves, the minor roles of her inner drama. . . . Her real self had showed itself in her writing. (*Journals* xii)

This simplification of real-self and false-selves would not fit with the disturbingly complex faces of Sylvia Plath. What is more interesting about the foreword is that Hughes admitted that his editing the journals was not done only with aesthetic motives but also with more personal and defensive reasons. In his foreword, Hughes put his revelation about the lost journals of Plath :

The journals exist in an assortment of notebooks and bunches of loose sheets. This selection contains perhaps a third of the whole bulk, which is now in The Neilson Library at Smith College. Two more notebooks survived for a while, maroon-backed ledgers like the '57-'59 volume, and continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of

these contained entries for several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The other disappeared (*Journals* xiii).

This made it clear that even a great poet like Hughes could not value disturbing "real/true self" more than the peace of mind, and even destroyed the voice of true self for his survival. Hughes endured the bitter criticism against this behavior and his control over Plath's works. In the year 2000, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* was published, when Ted Hughes was already dead. Two-thirds of the journals which were omitted in the earlier version came into public view for the first time. This new version included two journals "sealed by Ted Hughes until February 11, 2013." (*Unabridged* ix) which were unsealed just before his death in 1998 by Hughes himself. Although the missing journal and the one destroyed by Huges were not included, the new journals signalled the time had come when Sylvia Plath was truly a larger-than-life, literary figure that could endure scrutiny and interpretation. According to the review in *Publishers Weekly*, in the new journals readers would :

see an even more complex, despairing psyche struggling to create in the face of powerful demons. Plath's intense bitterness towards her mother emerges in full force, particularly in her notes on her psychoanalysis by Ruth Beuscher in Boston from 1957 to 1959. Plath's writing is by turns raw, obsessive, brilliant and ironic.

It is suggestive that the review pointed out that "omissions are sometimes as important as its inclusions." With this missing misteries and the complex quality of her character, Plath had become more mythic and larger presence after her absence (death).

The Play, *Edge*

40 years after her death, we are still enthralled with the 1950s sweater girl who transformed herself into the poetic persona of Lady Lazarus... No surprise, then, that this is once again the season of Sylvia Plath. In fall, Gwyneth Paltrow stars as a fine poet in the new film *Sylvia*. Off-Broadway theater offers a less pretty version of Plath's life, with the one-woman show *Edge* ...On a recent episode of the television show *Gilmore Girls*, the show's clean teen heroine Rory reads Plath's diaries. (Quart)

In the summer of 2003, I happened to be in New York. In the DR2 Theatre off Broadway, New York, I had a strange feeling surrounded by far older and quieter audience than those in other Broadway theaters. I remembered the days when I was an ordinary English major graduate student maybe because people around me reminded me of the American teachers in my school days and the class where we read *The Bell Jar*. I was sort of sentimental to think that I survived without any accomplishment, while Plath didn't make it but left a great works and a myth. I barely noticed that the play was written and directed by Paul Alexander, the author of *Rough Magic*. The performance of Angelica Torn playing the role of Sylvia Plath was powerful and sometimes very sinical and funny, which fit in my image of Plath. Matthew Murray reviewed the play:

And this is her dying day (February 11, 1963) on which *Edge* take place. Plath, in the form of journal entries, describes the events that have brought her to the brink of despair and suicide. ... But Plath is constantly battling her own personal demons, and her own expectations and beliefs are as much her enemy as Hughes is. As each anecdote is

heard from her perspective, her analysis is hardly balanced or objective, and that's where Angelica Thorn works her own magic. She embodies Plath from the inside out, working feverishly to bring Plath back to life.

I was impressed by the powerful performance of Angelica Thorn but also by a sort of an atmosphere of quiet sympathy and nostalgia shared by audience. After 40 years, people do remember Plath. And I truly realized there must be thousands of selves of Sylvia Plath, and I cannot find a clear distinction between lesser /false selves or real/true self. Moreover, it would not make much sense to stick to the distinction. What is clear now is that disruptive and disturbing nature of her works and her life never leaves our mind. We see some of her selves even as a fictional character in a novel, as a central character under the name of Sylvia Plath in a novel, *Wintering*. Then, we cannot see where the real Plath ends and where the fictional Plath begins. Plath is now a collection of fragmental selves, fictional, false or real/true. And she comes back again and again until her layer of selves grow into a huge, colossal figure, and then, she is no more oppressed under the massive pressure of huge manhood. Plath herself is now a colossal figure.

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