

Review Article*

CAROL BERE

Since her premature death in 1963, the Sylvia Plath cult has proliferated, and she seems to have become the martyred high priestess of contemporary poetry. To a great extent the myth has been fed by feminist fuel and reams have been written about Plath, the super-achiever who fell victim to both the repressions of the woman's role and society's willingness to constrain female artists. Her brief career has generated a surge of psychological studies that explore the relationship of female creativity to madness and suicide. Over-analyzed poems such as "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Lesbos," have been cited as testimony while the very real development of Sylvia Plath, the poet, has been largely ignored.

Letters Home, the recently published letters of Plath to her mother, while compulsively interesting reading, will do little to dispel the myth. True, the collection does reveal Plath's indefatigable discipline and ambition, yet the portrait that emerges is finally unreal. Plath strove relentlessly to create a singular image; ironically, the Plath who emerges in this collection seems to be a persona fused by relatives and editors.

Over 600 letters were written during the period of 1950-1963, yet less than 400 have been included in this volume. The majority of these letters appear to have been selected to stress "Sivvy's" love of life, "gay philosophy," and continued resourcefulness. Rarely does she rail at circumstances, and the stilted, romanticized superlatives that proclaim her ability to cope are often embarrassing. The

*Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Edited by Aurelia Schober Plath. New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pp. 500, \$12.50.

letters of the crucial last six months of Plath's life are marred by obvious gaps in information and disconcerting ellipses. Separated from her husband, alone with two infants, ill, yet at the height of poetic creativity — the period of *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* — Plath is finally permitted (or permits herself) to drop the stoic mask: "I guess I just need someone to cheer me up by saying I've done all right so far."

Perhaps the person who emerges with most clarity in *Letters Home* is Mrs. Plath herself. Largely in an effort to correct the damaging portrait of the mother in the autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Mrs. Plath has attempted to show how Sylvia "manipulated experience" and "fused parts of my life with hers." Yet from beneath the outlines of Mrs. Plath's personal history, which is narrated with aggravating restraint, a life of self-sacrifice — and one lived mostly vicariously — surfaces.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Plath has exposed a minefield for psychological exegetes as she relates a story of childhood loneliness, denied academic opportunities and resentment of her husband. Otto Plath, the poet's father and a noted biologist and professor at Boston University, was a demanding, authoritarian figure. In order to circumvent potential marital problems, Mrs. Plath, in her words, became more "submissive," gave up a teaching position that she enjoyed and devoted herself entirely to her family. Her irritation is barely veiled as she recounts a life revolving around her husband's work, *THE BOOK*, and of evenings spent editing and typing, *THE CHAPTER*. The resentment was compounded when Otto Plath, who would not listen to the advice of physicians, died leaving Mrs. Plath a young widow, with two children and no life-insurance policies.

Thereafter, Mrs. Plath moved to Wellesley, Massachusetts, with her parents, worked tirelessly teaching medical-secretarial techniques at Boston University and gave herself totally to her children. The pressures that Sylvia Plath must have felt to excel, to both repay and justify her

mother's efforts, must have been excessive. In a letter written to her mother while she was on scholarship at Smith College, Plath conveys a permeating theme of the collection, that of filial gratitude: "You are the most wonderful mummy that a girl ever had, and I only hope that I can continue to lay more laurels at your feet. Warren and I both love you and admire you more than anybody in the world for all you have done for us all our lives. For it is you who has given us the heredity and the incentive to be mentally ambitious."

Curiously, Plath seems to have felt a recurrent need to explain herself to her mother, which she does in inordinately formal syntax: "My main concern in the next year or two is to grow as much as possible, to find out, essentially, what my real capabilities are, especially in writing and studying, and then to play my future life in consistency with my abilities and capabilities. Or, more tellingly, there is the letter in which she recapitulates the year's haul of prizes and awards. Finally, with the collapse of her marriage to the British poet Ted Hughes, and with what must have been a tragic sense of having failed her mother, Plath writes: ". . . as you can see, I haven't the strength to see you for some time. The horror of what you saw and what I saw you see last summer is between us and I cannot face you again until I have a new life: it would be too great a strain."

Outwardly, the Smith College letters replay the typical studies-dates-clothes syndrome of many college campuses of the 1950's and the jargon frequently is a distillation of English novels and ladies' magazines. But there are disturbing elements in the correspondence. Underlying the buoyant, artificial accounts of weekends at Yale or studies with renowned authors is a compulsive determination to perfect the self — to avoid mediocrity, to build a "strong inner life," to prepare oneself for the "big moments." To compromise at less than the full life — the honors, the publications, the great love, the family — is to fail. Thus,

the letters convey a sense of deferred expectations and a romanticized craving for experience.

Later, at Cambridge, she writes of her love for Ted Hughes: "I feel that all my life, all my pain and work has been for this one thing. All the blood spilt, the words written, the people loved, have been a work to fit me for loving . . . I see the power and voice in him that will shake the world alive. Even as he sees into my poems and will work with me to make me a woman poet like the world will gape at; even as he sees into my character and will tolerate no fallings away from my best right self." The psychological weight of this commitment to the marriage must have been enormous.

The importance of *Letters Home* as a key to understanding Plath, the poet, must ultimately be confronted. On a surface level, the collection will be an invaluable source for many of the early poems. The influences of Emily Dickinson, Theodore Roethke and the primitive painters can be tagged easily from comments and inserted poems. The admitted influence of the powerful Hughes, both on the subject matter and technique of *The Colossus*, is evident, yet Plath did retain her individuality. Hughes attacks all of creation in words that appear to erupt spontaneously from some natural, untapped source. Plath, conversely, is a more willed poet who explores her themes in direct, economical language. But her early poems, as Plath herself acknowledged, were "exercises," and it is on the late poems of *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* that she will be judged.

To resolve the obvious discrepancies between the Sivvy of the letters "singing" her "native joy of life" and the violent, destructive poet of *Ariel*, some critics have asserted that Plath suffered from a divided self. This assessment is too facile. Many of Plath's letters to her mother, while undeniably egocentric, were still assurances that she was succeeding at what must have been a mutually accepted blueprint for her "life experience." It would be unlikely that she would deliver less to a woman who asserts that

“. . . my motherhood was the most important thing in my life. It was what my whole life went to.”

It was in the last period, however, when the poetic sensibility and the life merged incontrovertibly that Plath assumed her own voice. Although she realized that “I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name,” little is advanced about the incredible depth and marked technical assurance of these poems. Sadly, we are left with Mrs. Plath's words which can only perpetuate what is already an overworked Plath literary machine: “She began at 4 A.M. each morning to pour forth magnificently structured poems renouncing the subservient female role, yet holding to the triumphant note of maternal creativity in her scorn of ‘barrenness’.” Surely, Plath's poetry deserves more.