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EXTREMIST POETRY:
SOME VERSIONS OF THE SYLVIA PLATH MYTH


As the Sylvia Plath cult continues to grow, it becomes more and more difficult to talk about her poetry as a verbal act. The cult prefers to see its high priestess as the belle dame sans merci of the early sixties, dangerous not to her would-be lovers but to herself, a courageous free spirit who sacrificed her life for her art, a brave gambler
who lost the gamble. Thus it is now almost un-American—or un-British for that matter—to question the artistic merits of Sylvia Plath’s posthumously published volumes of poetry, for anything Plath wrote is rapidly taking on the status of a sacred text.

On the surface, A. Alvarez’s memoir of Sylvia Plath, which first appeared in New American Review 12 (1971) and is the opening chapter of The Savage God, would seem to dispel the more melodramatic versions of this myth. Convinced that Sylvia Plath did not really intend to die when she put her head inside her gas oven, Alvarez laments that out of her suicide “a whole myth has grown . . . a myth of the poet as a sacrificial victim, offering herself up for the sake of her art.” Yet despite Alvarez’s moving and understated account of Plath’s last days in her pathetic little flat near Primrose Hill, his careful account of her brave efforts to appear “normal” and competent, and despite his protestations that what matters is Plath’s poetry, not extra-literary gossip about her private life, I believe that Alvarez himself is finally guilty of championing the myth rather than the poetry. One begins to suspect, in fact, that Ted Hughes may have had at least some cause to be incensed about the publication of the Alvarez memoir.

Why do people commit suicide? Again and again in The Savage God, Alvarez modestly insists that he has no real answer to this question. The stated aim of his book is simply “to counterbalance two prejudices: the first is that high religiose tone . . . which dismisses suicide in horror as being a moral crime or sickness beyond discussion. The second is the current scientific fashion which, in the very process of treating suicide as a topic for serious research, manages to deny it all serious meaning by reducing despair to the boniest statistics.” And, having presented a variety of current theories on suicide as well as some fascinating case histories of suicidal artists, Alvarez concludes on the last page of his book that suicide cannot properly be explained, that it is simply “a terrible but utterly natural reaction to the strained, narrow, unnatural necessities we sometimes create for ourselves.”

But one wonders if Alvarez is not protesting too much. Despite the sweet reasonableness of his middle chapters, which give a short, incisive account of changing attitudes to suicide from the Greeks to the present, followed by a very lucid critique of common fallacies about suicide (e.g., that suicide is promoted by bad weather, that it is a national habit, that it is more common among young people than old ones, that people commit suicide for unrequited love), Alvarez does have his own theory about the relationship of suicide to art in the twentieth century, and it is this theory, rather than the very interesting discussion of early Christian attitudes to suicide or of Freudian concepts of “primary aggression,” that is the heart of The Savage God.

We might note, to begin with, that the conceptual and historical study of suicide found in Alvarez’s middle chapters is framed by two personal memoirs: the first that of Sylvia Plath, the second, a rather puzzling and sometimes embarrassing account of Alvarez’s own suicide attempt at Christmas 1960. “I wanted,” writes Alvarez, “the book to start, as it ends, with a detailed case history so that whatever theories and abstractions follow can somehow be rooted in the human particular. No single theory will untangle an act as ambiguous and with such complex motives as suicide. The Prologue and Epilogue are there as reminders of how partial every explanation must always be.”

But when one looks at the book as a whole, these personal chapters seem to have quite another function from the stated one. Both Plath and Alvarez are viewed as
emblematic of the artist, of the special sensibility whose fate it is to wrestle with the knowledge of his own death. The difference between the two, Alvarez's account of his own suicide attempt implies, is one of degree: in his own make-up, the artistic sensibility was only one element, and therefore, when the youthful attempt failed, he was reborn a wiser, calmer, if a less exciting and creative human being, a man no longer expecting answers to ultimate questions—in short, an Odysseus or Aeneas who has gone down into the realm of the dead, returning to tell the rest of us what it feels like to kill oneself. Like Melville's Ishmael, he has earned the right to say with Job, "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

The core of Alvarez's argument about the relationship of suicide to modern art is an outgrowth of his earlier analysis of Extremist Art in Under Pressure (1965). It can be summarized briefly. In an age of world wars, extermination camps, atomic explosions, and genocide, an age of mass democracy, mass technology, and dehumanization, the artist has only two choices. He can practice "Totalitarian Art"—the art that "tackles the historical situation frontally, more or less brutally, in order to create a human perspective for a dehumanizing process." Beckett is Alvarez's prime example of Totalitarian Art: his characters "lead posthumous, immobile lives, stripped of all personal qualities, appetites, possessions, and hope." Only language remains, language ritualized and stylized to capture the full horror and grim humor of a Life-in-Death, a world that God has abandoned. Such "minimal art" in which the hero is "deindividuated" is one form of suicide; it abdicates all claims to a world of human choice, desire, or will.

The other alternative is what Alvarez calls Extremist Art. The Extremist Poet cannot believe in the existence of a world outside his own self; consequently he presses deeper and deeper into his own subterranean world of psychic isolation, breakdown, and neurosis, confronting the confusions of his own inner life "along that friable edge that divides the tolerable from the intolerable." In facing the abyss in the depths of his soul, the Extremist Poet finally confronts his own absurd death. His double duty is thus "to forge a language which will somehow absolve or validate absurd death, and to accept the existential risks involved in doing so." Sylvia Plath, for example, seems to have decided "that for her poetry to be valid, it must tackle head-on nothing less serious than her own death, bringing to it a greater wealth of invention and sardonic energy than most poets manage in a lifetime of so-called affirmation." Her actual suicide, then, was simply "a risk she took in handling such volatile material," a "last desperate attempt to exorcise the death she had summed up in her poems."

Sylvia Plath, Alvarez suggests, is thus the archetypal modern artist, the emblem of a century characterized by its "sudden, sharp rise in the casualty rate among the artists." As art turns further and further inward, it inevitably becomes more dangerous to its creator, for life, Alvarez repeatedly insists with a kind of Paterian or Wildean fervor, imitates art. "Before the twentieth century," he writes, "the gifted artists who killed themselves or were even seriously suicidal were rare exceptions. In the twentieth century the balance suddenly shifts: the better the artist, the more vulnerable he seems to be" (my italics).

This is the heart of the matter. Alvarez assembles an impressive list of artists to illustrate his thesis: Arshile Gorki, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko among the painters; among writers, Hart Crane, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, Cesare Pavese, Vladimir
Mayakovsky, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, not to mention such psychological suicides as Dylan Thomas, who wilfully drank himself to death, or Kafka, who "wanted to turn his premature natural death from tuberculosis into artistic suicide by having all his writings destroyed." It is perhaps also significant that John Berryman, whom Alvarez calls one of the leading Extremist Poets of our day, committed suicide shortly after the British publication of The Savage God, almost as if to confirm Alvarez’s thesis.

Nevertheless, I find this thesis highly questionable. If one makes a list of major twentieth-century writers, a very different picture emerges. In France, after the tragic suicide of Nerval in 1855, and the self-proclaimed "litteraturicide" of the nineteen-year old Rimbaud in 1873, only the Dada poets seem to fit into Alvarez’s scheme, and he himself insists that "Dada was knowingly a dead end; its aims were incompatible with art in essence." None of the following committed suicide: Proust, Gide, Mauriac, Valery, Apollinaire, Claudel, Cocteau, Perse, Bonnefoy, Supervielle, Genet, Sartre, Camus—in short, the major French writers of the twentieth century. Of German writers, the most notable suicide cases are Trakl and Toller; again, the major figures—Rilke, Brecht, Mann, Benn, Hesse, Musil, and I would add Kafka, even though he wanted his writings destroyed—did not take their own lives. Of English and American poets, we may set the suicides of Plath, Jarrell, Crane, and Thomas over against those who lived on: Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Auden, Williams, Frost, Moore, Bishop, Roethke. Among the novelists, the suicides of Woolf and Hemingway can hardly be considered normative when one considers the non-suicides of Joyce, Lawrence, Conrad, James, Forster, Ford, Faulkner, Bellow, Malamud, Mailer, or Murdoch. Can we agree that "the better the artist, the more vulnerable he seems to be"?

I am not saying that these writers were not, at some point in their lives, given to suicidal thoughts. But so were poets of earlier ages. Goethe, as Alvarez himself notes, tested his own attitude toward suicide by keeping a dagger at his bedside and trying, night after night, to send the sharp point an inch or two into his heart. When he realized that he simply could not perform the act, he threw the dagger away and decided to live. The important point here is that in Goethe’s case, as in that of many poets, the will to live triumphed over the more morbid suicidal impulses. One might even argue, contrary to Alvarez’s theory, that the artistic drive itself has kept many writers alive. It cannot be purely coincidental, for example, that Mayakovsky shot himself to death while Pasternak clung to life under the most adverse conditions, that Hemingway killed himself while Faulkner did not, that Thomas drank his way to oblivion while Williams became the lovable sage of Rutherford, New Jersey. Conversely, if Yeats became, in the final decade of his life, the heroic “Wild Old Wicked Man,” it was not, as Alvarez implies, because he invented a pseudo-religion to allay his self-doubts, but because he knew that he was at the height of his poetic powers. Again, Proust became in his final years an ardent fighter against the death he had actually longed for two decades earlier when his mother died, because he simply had to finish his great novel. The best twentieth-century poets, perhaps, have been those who could transcend their own death wish, moving beyond death to a larger vision encompassing both life and death.

Alvarez is surely right in arguing that the contemporary poet is peculiarly committed to the truths of his inner life, to an art that is profoundly autobiographical. But his insistence that such an inward search necessarily places the artist on the narrow
precipice between life and death strikes me as essentially a Romantic and specifically a *fin-de-siècle* myth, analogous, say, to the Werther Myth which Alvarez treats quite objectively in his chapter “The Romantic Agony.” Even Robert Lowell, Alvarez’s Extremist Poet *par excellence*, has expressed some hesitation about the new myth of the artist’s vulnerability. In his obituary essay on Berryman for *The New York Review*, Lowell writes, “I must say something of death and the *extremist poets* as we are named in often prefunerary tributes. Except for Weldon Kees and Sylvia Plath, they (i.e., Berryman, Jarrell, and Thomas) lived as long as Shakespeare, outlived Wyatt, Baudelaire, and Hopkins, and long outlived the forever Romantics, those who really died young. John himself lived to the age of Beethoven….” This is a very telling point. The ostensibly “sharp rise in the casualty rate among the artists,” like the rise in the divorce rate, may have something to do with the simple fact that we live so much longer today than did our ancestors.

I cannot, then, view Sylvia Plath’s suicide as an attempt “to get herself out of a desperate corner which her own poetry had boxed her into.” If we accept this explanation, what shall we make of the fact that, at the time of her first suicide attempt, Plath was writing rather careful and derivative poetry, in no way confronting her deepest self? Yet this first attempt was, as Alvarez himself argues, much more carefully planned and likely to succeed than the final one. It seems more likely, then, that Plath committed suicide, not as a “last desperate attempt to exorcise the death she had summed up in her poems,” but as an act of despair in the face of a renewed attack of mental illness. “How did I know,” says the heroine of *The Bell Jar*, “that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?” Evidently it did in February 1963. And the facts of Plath’s life suggest that if this particular suicide attempt had failed, as it well might have since the au pair girl arrived just a few hours after the poet turned on the gas, there would have been another one some other time. The pattern was too well established to change.

All this is in the realm of speculation, but such speculation is naturally prompted by the elusiveness of Alvarez’s central argument. We are on firmer ground, at any rate, when we talk about the poems themselves. But here we run into another problem, for unfortunately Ted Hughes’ editions of Plath’s previously uncollected poems—*Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*—serve her poetry at least as badly as Alvarez’s memoir serves her biography. These two slim volumes of poems must surely be regarded as one of the scandals of recent publishing history.

The dust jacket of *Crossing the Water* announces that “The poems in this collection were written in the period between the publication of *The Colossus* (1960) and the post-humous book *Ariel* (published in England in 1965). As a group, they illuminate an extremely important period in Sylvia Plath’s life; they also mark the point at which her work moved beyond great promise and competence and began to burn with genius.” But a quick check through the bibliography compiled by Mary Kinzie, Daniel Lynn Conrad, and Suzanne D. Kurman for Charles Newman’s symposium *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (Faber, 1970), makes clear that these are not, in fact, primarily “transitional poems” as they are subtitled. Of the thirty-eight poems in the volume, eleven were published before the end of 1960, and internal evidence suggests that an addi-
Almost half the poems in the volume, in other words, belong to the period of *The Colossus*. On the other hand, certain poems in *Crossing the Water* are contemporaneous with poems in *Ariel*. “In Plaster,” for example, is the companion poem of “Tulips” (*Ariel*, p. 10); both were written in March 1961 when Sylvia Plath was in the hospital, recovering from an appendectomy. To consider *Crossing the Water* a transitional volume is therefore puzzling to say the least. One wonders what Ted Hughes meant when he said in a BBC broadcast, reprinted in *Critical Quarterly* (Summer 1971), that “this work from the interim is fascinating and much of it beautiful in a rich and easy way that we find neither in *The Colossus* nor *Ariel*.” Which *Colossus*, which *Ariel*? For the confusion is compounded by Hughes’ prefatory note to *Winter Trees*: “The poems in this volume are all out of the batch from which the *Ariel* poems were more or less arbitrarily chosen and they were all composed in the last nine months of Sylvia Plath’s life.” But, leaving aside the radio play “Three Women,” of the eighteen poems in *Winter Trees*, three—“Lesbos,” and “The Swarm,” and “Mary’s Song”—had appeared in the U.S. edition of *Ariel* (1966), although not in the British edition of 1965.

To make matters even worse, many Plath poems, published in periodicals in the early sixties, are not included in either volume. Thus “Ouija” originally appeared in *Hudson Review* (Fall 1960) together with “Electra on Azalea Path”; the first is included in *Crossing the Water* (p. 44), the second omitted. No explanations are given. Yet “Electra,” an earlier variant of the famous “Daddy,” seems at least as relevant to a study of Plath’s interim work as does “Ouija.” Again, all the poems published in the March 1962 issue of *Poetry*—“Widow,” “Face Lift,” “Heavy Women,” and “Love Letter”—find their way into *Crossing*, with the exception of “Stars Over Dordogne.” Why is this omitted? “Purdah,” published posthumously in *Poetry* in August 1963 appears in *Winter Trees*, but its companion poem “Eavesdropper” does not. And one of Plath’s most interesting poems, “The Jailor,” published in *Encounter* in October 1963 is not reprinted in *Winter Trees*, although “Thalidomide” and “Childless Woman,” printed in the same issue, are.

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1The eleven poems published before the end of 1960 include the following: “Candles,” “Black Rook in Rainy Weather,” “Metaphors,” “Maudlin,” “Ouija,” “Two Sisters of Persephone,” “Who,” “Dark House,” “Maenad,” “The Beast,” “Witch Burning.” Of these, the two earliest are “Two Sisters of Persephone,” first published in the January 1957 issue of *Poetry*, and “Black Rook in Rainy Weather,” originally published in *Granta* in May 1957. All the rest, except for “Candles,” which appeared in *The Listener* on November 17, 1960, were first published in the British edition of *The Colossus* in the late fall of 1960. Five of these poems— “Who,” “Dark House,” “Maenad,” “The Beast,” and “Witch Burning”—were originally part of the seven-poem sequence, *Poem for a Birthday*, written at Yadoo in late 1959. The remaining two poems in this sequence—“Flute Notes from a Reedy Point” and “The Stones”—were published as separate poems in the U.S. edition of *The Colossus* (1962).

I believe that the following poems were written before 1960: “Private Ground,” “Sleep in the Mojave Desert,” “Two Campers in Cloud Country,” “On Deck,” “Crossing the Water,” and “Finisterre.” Most of these poems refer specifically to the camping trip across the United States and Canada which the Hugheses took in the summer of 1959. Since Plath’s poems always stem from her immediate experience, it is highly unlikely that she would have used such settings as Rock Lake, Canada or the Mojave Desert a year or two after the trip. After she returned to England in December 1959, she never came back to the United States.

2 Ted Hughes calls “In Plaster” “the weaker twin” of “Tulips” and says that it was written “at the same time and in almost identical form,” *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman, p. 193.
Surely such careless posthumous publication of Plath's work is a disservice both to the poet’s memory and to her readers. The absurdity of making sweeping conclusions on the basis of these badly edited volumes is illustrated by a comment of Lyman Andrews in the *London Sunday Times*, reprinted on the dust jacket of *Crossing the Water*: “Assurance was sometimes lacking in her earlier poems, and in the last poems at times there was a loss of control, while these poems are an almost perfect marriage of strength and elegance.” A remarkable feat indeed, considering that half the poems in the volume were written at the same time as half the poems in *The Colossus*!

My own view is that *Crossing the Water* does not generally rise above the level of *The Colossus*. Despite such notable exceptions as “I Am Vertical” and “Parliament Hill Fields,” the poems in *Crossing* tend to be ingenious rather than intensely moving. “Insomniac” is a good example. Ted Hughes calls this poem, which won the Guinness Award at the Cheltenham Festival of 1961, “an egg from *The Colossus* and *Ariel* is just cracking out of it.” Superficially, “Insomniac” does look ahead to the *Ariel* poems, in its concern for extreme psychic states, for the sufferings of the individual who cannot adjust his mental landscape to that of the outside world, here symbolized by the insomniac, for whom the slightest sound or glimmer of light become threatening intrusions, forcing him further and further into the dark chambers of his hyperactive mind.

Yet the poet herself seems to be standing outside the experience portrayed, carefully commenting in the third-person on the insomniac’s anguish, rather than exploring the movement of the mental process itself. In conceit after dazzling conceit, she defines his state of mind: the stars in the night sky are “much-poked periods” in blueblack carbon paper, peepholes letting in the “bonewhite light, like death.” The insomniac’s pillow takes on the irritating texture of desert sand; his past haunts him like an “old, granular movie”; “Memories jostle each other for face-room like obsolete film stars.” Again, sleeping pills are seen figuratively as “Those sugarly planets whose influence won for him/ A life baptized in no-life for a while,” but because the insomniac has built up an immunity to them, they have become “worn-out and silly, like classical gods.” And so on.

There seems to be nothing behind these clever analogies. The line “His forehead is bumpy as a sack of rocks,” for example, recalls “le front plein d’énormes” of Rimbaud’s seven-year old poets, but whereas Rimbaud, in the poem of that title, establishes an elaborate thematic contrast between images of dryness and rigidity on the one hand, and those of dampness, succulent grass, and fragrance on the other, thus defining the world to which the poet longs to escape, Plath’s poem has no such central design. Pills alternately resemble communion tablets or classical gods; cats howl like “damaged instruments”; parental faces appear like flowers swaying on their stalks, but ultimately there is no reflexive relationship between these individual metaphors, and the poem, despite its complicated surface, does not really say much more than that insomnia is a highly unpleasant experience.

Very few of the poems in *Crossing the Water* have the oracular, transfiguring vision of Sylvia Plath’s best poems: “Ariel,” “Words,” “Little Fugue,” “Fever 103.” Too often the poet seems concerned with the individual detail rather than the total construct: the sheep of “Wuthering Heights” are “All wig curls and yellow teeth/ And hard, marbly baas”; the candles, dimly lighting the room where she is nursing her baby, are
"the last romantics," "Upside-down hearts of light tipping wax fingers," and "Nun-souled" in that they "burn heavenward and never marry." But the poet does not identify with her images as she does in Ariel; she remains too detached, too knowing; she strains for effects that her materials won't yield.

Winter Trees raises slightly different problems. The fifteen "new" poems in the volume all stem from Sylvia Plath's "great period"—the last nine months of her life. On the whole, they could easily be included in an expanded edition of Ariel; they burn with the same central passion to destroy the old ego and create a new self, to undergo death and rebirth, to enter the lives of animals or plants thus transcending one's humanity. In "Gigolo," for example, we are squarely in Plath's unique world of angst and animism:

Pocket watch, I tick well.
The streets are lizardy crevices
Sheer-sided, with holes where to hide.
It is best to meet in a cul-de-sac.... (p. 14)

Nevertheless, the effect of reading these poems is oddly deflating. Sylvia Plath is, after all, a poet of narrow thematic range, and passages like the following, which immediately recall the Ariel poems, take on air of déjà vu:

And my baby a nail
Driven, driven in.
He shrieks in his grease.... ("Brasilia")

The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go. ("Childless Woman")

The sun blooms, it is a geranium. ("Mystic")

The blood that runs is dark fruit.... ("The Other")

Any reader can compile his own list of comparable passages, lines that often look like first drafts of the Ariel poems, and one begins to wonder whether Sylvia Plath is really the major writer Alvarez describes, or whether she is not perhaps an extraordinarily gifted minor poet, whose lyric intensity seemed more impressive when we encountered it in the slim and rigorously selected Ariel than when we view it in the new perspective afforded by the publication of her uncollected poems. That her influence on younger writers is currently a major one cannot be doubted. But we will have to wait for a Collected Poems, now projected by Faber & Faber for 1973 (and hopefully more carefully edited than Crossing the Water and Winter Trees!) before we can begin to determine the real place of Sylvia Plath in the history of modern poetry.