

A Problem of Biography: Plath, Hughes, the Infinite Moment, and the Glass Crypt

Jonathan Fowler

A photograph of my grandparents sits on my desk, taken last year at a family dinner. My grandfather was in the middle of saying “cheese” when the camera snapped the photo, and thus he has a very funny look on his face. My wife and I decided to frame the photograph because of its candid nature. Regardless of what my grandparents have done before or after this photograph was taken, or how many other photographs exist, this particular image—and pose—remains for us to look at. It is, like the image on Keats’s Grecian Urn, an infinite moment.

Infinite moments are not limited to photography or pottery. Sylvia Plath created one in 1963, on the cold February morning of her suicide. In this moment, she is forever preserved as a woman driven to death by her husband Ted Hughes’s infidelity and her own emotional instability—a martyr of sorts. Any study of her life inevitably comes back to the circumstances of her death and must confront Hughes’s infidelity and Plath’s own psychological issues. The two are inextricably linked in life and death. Because of this, in writing a biography about either Plath or Hughes, the biographer is certain to encounter two obstacles in preparing the

manuscript. First, he or she must write about both Plath and Hughes, not one or the other. Second, the work will be cast by others to one side or the other of the Plath-Hughes argument, even if the writer has most neutral intentions. This is largely due to Ted and his sister Olwyn's handling of the Plath literary estate.

No biography of Plath to date has been able to overcome these two obstacles, and all have inevitably devoted much space to the Hughes-Plath marriage and the circumstances of her suicide. In his book on suicide, *The Savage God* (1972), Al Alvarez posits that once one succeeds in killing oneself, everything in the suicide's life seems to lead up that decision (121). Sylvia Plath is no exception. Every detail of her life—most notably, her marriage—seems to point to her suicide in 1963. At the time of Plath's death, she and Hughes were only separated, not divorced. Of course, even if they had been divorced when Plath died, it is likely that her fans and devotees would still hold Hughes responsible for driving her to her death. Regardless, with respect to her suicide, Plath and Hughes are not two separate individuals. They are one concept, fused together by their mutual experiences and held in an infinite moment. "To the readers of her poetry and her biography," Janet Malcolm writes in *The New Yorker*, "Sylvia Plath will always be young and in a rage over Hughes's unfaithfulness" (1993, 86). Thus he is, unwillingly, caught in that infinite moment, much like a photograph's subject is unwillingly caught in an awkward pose. Because of Hughes's role in Plath's life, anyone "who took an interest in [Plath's] life," in the words of biographer Ian Hamilton, "could claim the right to poke about in his" (1992, 298).

But it is Hughes's own difficulty with his place in the tableau of Plath's death scene, and the similar misgivings of Olwyn, that create the problem for biographers. Because he and Plath were still married (albeit separated) at the time of her death, Hughes became her literary executor. Regardless of any new endeavors he might undertake, Hughes was, as Diane Wood Middlebrook writes, "stalled [...] in a public role he was helpless to defy" (2003, 235). His job was made much more difficult by the autobiographical nature of Plath's work. She was brutally honest in her portrayal of those around her, and Hughes found himself torn between the roles of literary custodian of Plath's work and one of the subjects of that work.

In 1966, Hughes asked Olwyn to assume the role of executor. Multiple factors may account for this. Middlebrook suggests that this move "would keep the money in the family, and keep the noses of strangers out" (2003, 235). But one might also assume that, by passing the role to someone less

involved in Plath's life than he was, Hughes sought to avoid criticism of any perceived conflict of interest. Whatever the case, the move was, in Middlebrook's view, "immensely compromising to Hughes's own reputation" (2003, 235). It seemed as though he either did not want to be bothered with matters of the literary estate, or he wanted to further remove himself from the public eye. Furthermore, Olwyn had not known Plath closely and was not, according to Hughes' biographer Elaine Feinstein, bothered with archival research (2001, 221). What was her right to the "militant defensiveness" with which she went about her work? "It appeared to outsiders," writes Middlebrook, "that Hughes was using his sister to protect himself from questions, and he had appointed Olwyn to censor rather than broker the discussion of Plath's work" (2003, 235). Had Olwyn not been so abrasive in responding to inquiries and projects, this move might not have been so damaging to Hughes's reputation.

Increasing public suspicion of her role as Plath's literary executor was the known tension between Olwyn and Plath during the poet's life. Aurelia Plath's collection of her daughter's letters, *Letters Home* (1975), reveals Sylvia's first impression of Olwyn, from 26 November 1956:

Olywn, Ted's sister, stopped by this weekend on her way from a stay at home to her job in Paris. She is 28 and very startlingly beautiful with amber-gold hair and eyes [...] She reminds me of a changeling, somehow, who will never get old. She is, however, quite selfish and squanders money on herself continually in extravagances of clothes and cigarettes, while she still owes Ted 50 pounds. But in spite of this, I do like her. (Plath 1975, 288)

Perhaps more revealing of Plath's perception of Olwyn is her journal entry of July 9, 1958. In it, she confesses her phobia of prose writing and resolves to overcome it by writing a novel. Plath writes out a list of elements she can include in the story. Of jealousy, she lists "sister of newlywed husband" (2000, 403).

To write his London *Observer* essays on Plath, which were drawn from personal remembrances and later prefaced *The Savage God*, Al Alvarez did not need to consult Plath's literary estate, but, like later biographers, he met with opposition from the Hugheses. Alvarez was a writer and critic who had a close connection—as colleague, admirer, friend—to Plath and Hughes in the early 1960s. His editorial position at the London *Observer* had introduced him to Plath the poet. In 1971, his first essay remembering Plath and Hughes appeared in the *Observer*. Although the article was largely

dedicated to Plath, Hughes was frequently mentioned. This memoir, Malcolm notes, “set the tone for writing about Plath and Hughes that was to follow,” indeed laying a foundation upon which other writers cast them as victim and predator, respectively (1993, 92).

A second installment of Alvarez’s articles never made the pages of the *Observer*. Upon reading the first installment, Hughes was furious, writing Alvarez a lengthy letter in which he called Alvarez’s actions “unspeakable” and dismissing the memoir as a sensationalistic piece written by a “*Daily Mirror* TV keyhole, rat-hole journalist snoop, guaranteed to distort every observation” (Malcolm 1993, 128). Alvarez, who complied with Hughes’s request to pull the second article from the *Observer*, wrote an apologetic but firm letter back to Hughes, explaining that even Olwyn had found his article acceptable and that he had intended no malice towards Hughes. Yet Hughes fired back with more fury, this time targeting Plath’s fans:

Whether you thought of it or not, to a sensation-watching and half-hysterical congregation (which her followers now are), your article is the ultimate sensational desired event. Only one thing could go further: that she reappear and go through the whole [suicide] again, correcting all errors of report, on TV—stopping at intervals to answer interviewers’ questions, giving her feelings and intentions [...] (Malcolm 1993, 129)

With forty years’ hindsight, it seems presumptuous of Hughes to challenge Alvarez, let alone attack Plath’s fans. In *Keepers of the Flame*, a book about literary estates and the rise of biography, Hamilton asks the obvious question: “what *was* it that had got up Hughes’ nose?” (1992, 297). But what Alvarez did not know, and what made Hughes so furious, is that, until Alvarez’s article appeared, Frieda and Nicholas had been unaware of the real nature of their mother’s death. Hughes was now forced to tell them, and perhaps admit to himself that it was his separation with Plath that drove her to the edge (Feinstein 2001, 182).

Hughes’s reply to Alvarez reminds us of the infinite moment that Hughes is so uncomfortable with. He specifically references the scene of her suicide and sets it up in terms of photography and journalism. Perhaps, in this letter, he was acutely aware of the glass crypt that he shared with his late wife.

Hughes also had some foresight, mentioning the budding tide of public support for Plath and dislike for him. Although Alvarez made no overt jabs at Hughes in his article, those who wanted to construct Plath as the victim of a cheating husband were easily able to turn his words against Hughes. The

feminist movement essentially began the same year in both Britain and the United States (*Ms.* magazine, the major forum for feminist voices, first appeared in 1971 and, according to its website, sold 300,000 copies in eight days), and with Plath's image being solidified as a victim, Hughes was becoming the target of feminist ire. But should such public opinion have restricted Alvarez from sharing his memories? He wasn't pretending to write an authorized biography or firsthand account of the intricate details of the Hughes marriage. He was simply writing a memoir of his relationship with Plath and Hughes.

In its very personal and somewhat confessional nature, the article is similar to Hughes's own *Birthday Letters* (1998), although two were published twenty-seven years apart. Both are products of men writing out their grief and guilt. Eleanor Wilner, in her review of *The Savage God*, notes Alvarez's guilty conscience:

[The] discussion of Sylvia Plath is not only meant to lead the mind to contemplate the connection between suicide and artistic creation, but also to help Alvarez exorcise a nagging guilt about his own inability at the time, because of his own depression, to help her; to allow him to deplore his own sniping at occasional lines of her poems in order to avoid a confrontation with their substance. (1972, 1002)

Feinstein's account of Alvarez's last visit to Plath partially explains my comparison of *Birthday Letters* and the *Observer* article.

He knew she would have liked a sexual relationship to develop between them [...]. When he was preparing to leave, she burst into tears and pleaded with him not to go. In the face of such extreme need, he was appalled; the responsibility was immense. He had never found her particularly attractive sexually, and was at that time getting back together with the woman who in 1966 became his present wife. He detached himself as gently as he could. (2001, 137–38)

Such a dramatic episode, particularly so near Plath's suicide, is understandable grounds for guilt. Alvarez rejected her, as did Hughes, and his later writing is, as Wilner suggests, an exorcism of sorts. Surely, if he had known what had happened between Plath and Alvarez, Hughes could have sympathized with Alvarez's guilt and left his writing alone. More probably, though, he didn't know, since it seems unlikely Alvarez would have told him. It might be easier to imagine Plath telling her husband about her attraction to Alvarez out of anger and frustration, but if she did, Hughes did

not reveal it. If, in its confession of guilt, Alvarez's article is indeed his own *Birthday Letters*, Hughes might be exacting a double standard. He may write and say whatever he wants about his late wife, but anyone else, regardless of connection, must be censored. Even if Hughes did not know about what happened between Plath and Alvarez, surely he could see Alvarez's sincere feelings coming out in the essay. Then again, if Hughes only read the first installment, this is unlikely, as the most introspective parts come in the second installment.

There is a more probable case for censorship in the Hugheses' affiliation with Anne Stevenson, whose 1989 biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, is said by Malcolm to have "been used by Ted and Olwyn to put forward their version of Ted Hughes's relations with Plath" (1993, 88). Stevenson's own intentions were to dispel the myth of Plath as the victim and to reveal Hughes's vulnerability. The Hugheses had named her the official Plath biographer, edging out Linda Wagner-Martin (Feinstein 2001, 219). Olwyn, already the literary executor, acted as Stevenson's literary agent for the biography, selling it to two publishing houses upon the understanding that Stevenson would include a substantial amount of new material that Olwyn herself made available (Rose 1992, 93). Despite these promising beginnings, the Hugheses proved to be difficult sources, and the project nearly fell apart amidst quarrels between Stevenson and Olwyn. Houghton Mifflin editor Peter Davison finally stepped in to rescue the project from complete meltdown.

Rather than scold the Hugheses for being difficult to work with, as Linda Wagner-Martin did in her 1987 *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, Stevenson focuses her vitriol on Plath. Her preface, however, belies the prejudice against Plath with which she began the project, setting up the biography up as an "objective account of how this exceptionally gifted girl was hurled into poetry by a combination of biographical accident and inflexible ideals and ambitions" (1989, xi). But only a few pages later, she characterizes Plath as "terribly vulnerable" and says her "raging vindictiveness would burst out like a shocking and violent bloom" (1989, xiv). Not surprisingly, John Haffenden finds her biography to be a poorly researched book of bad criticism.

Clearly Stevenson felt little need to comprehend the complex nature of the distress that impelled Plath's actions, which surely amounted to some kind of derangement. Instead, she promptly endorses Dido Merwin's prejudicial view that Plath's destruction of Hughes's work was an act of deliberate malice. "Sylvia had expressed her rage; her husband's punishment for

presumed dalliance was the destruction of his work and his most treasured book,” Stevenson observes. “The incident provides *yet another* example of Sylvia’s irrational and uncontrollable rage.” (1998, 25; Haffenden’s italics)

Even if Stevenson’s intentions were to be objective about Plath’s nature, her rhetoric suggests a very subjective approach.

Perhaps the problem with Stevenson’s biography, the Hugheses’ interference aside, is its betrayal of the glass crypt that Plath will always be preserved in. Above, I’ve noted that the Plath biographical endeavor always arrives at the broken young woman, wife of an adulterer, putting her head in an oven after leaving bread and milk upstairs for the children. Like a martyr, Plath is remembered for her death. So, if a biography of Plath is terribly unflattering, as is *Bitter Fame*, it borders on blasphemy in the minds of Plath devotees. Hughes knew this. But he was in the glass crypt with Plath, and had to step outside to get his editorial work done while remaining tethered to his wife’s memory. What is unfair about this, of course, is that Plath was not afforded that luxury.

The role of literary executor passed to Plath and Hughes’s daughter Frieda after Hughes’s death, and her first task was to prepare a restored edition of *Ariel*. In its foreword, Frieda acknowledges the glass crypt of her mother and its effects on her father:

[The] point of anguish at which my mother killed herself was taken over by strangers, possessed and reshaped by them. The collection of *Ariel* poems became symbolic to me of this possession of my mother and of the wider vilification of my father [...]. I saw poems such as “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” dissected over and over, the moment that my mother wrote them being applied to her whole life, to her whole person, as if they were the total sum of her experience. (Plath 2004, xvii)

Frieda’s words echo the idea of the infinite moment, although she applies it here to the moment of composition. But while Frieda indicts critics for finding certain moments of composition to be the “total sum” of Plath’s experience, I find her suicide to take on that role. As Frieda sees, Plath devotees find her experience to be only that of a victim, since it is their opinion that she was driven to death by a failed marriage and cheating husband. Stevenson, on the other hand, finds her suicide to be anything but the result of victimization and casts Plath as a selfish and capricious young girl.

Such a judgment of her suicide, and of her life, garnered unsurprisingly negative reviews. Just as Al Alvarez had begun the narrative tradition of Plath as a positive figure, he was the first to rake over Stevenson's biography. And, as Hughes did with Alvarez over his *Observer* article, Stevenson engaged in a public quarrel with Alvarez over his review. She claimed the book made fun of Plath's absurdities "sympathetically [...] as Plath herself might have today" (Malcolm 1993, 125). Alvarez charged that Stevenson had to have been "tone-deaf to her own prose" for such a reading (Malcolm 1993, 125). In a later interview with Janet Malcolm, Alvarez said that Stevenson accused Olwyn of making her write things she didn't want to, but he suspected the biographer to be a willing partner in the book's negative construction of Plath. He suggested that she was "corrupted by Olwyn and Ted" because of her passive nature (Malcolm 1993, 125). Indeed, Stevenson's acknowledgement of Olwyn Hughes in the biography ignores their angry correspondence over the manuscript:

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. (1989, x)

Compare this with a typical phrase from Stevenson's letters to Olwyn, from February 13, 1988: "I really don't think we have much more to say to each other, so please respect my wishes to be left in peace. No letters, no phone calls. You have brought me to the edge of breakdown many times in the past year" (Malcolm 1993, 124). Perhaps Alvarez was right about Stevenson being so passive—instinct leads one to trust personal correspondence over a public apology, and I suspect that Stevenson buckled under the pressure coming from the estate.

There is no such ambiguity in Linda Wagner-Martin's biography of Plath, published two years before Stevenson's. Wagner-Martin's frank account of her experiences in the book's preface gained her a great deal of respect from her colleagues, in particular, Alvarez. Wagner-Martin tells the reader about Olwyn's objecting to the manuscript at every occasion, essentially forcing her to severely limit quotations. Unlike Stevenson, Wagner-Martin is very open about her ill feelings toward the Hugheses. She tells of the personal circumstances and editorial disagreements that led to manuscript changes—that is, she alerts the reader to the problems and circumstances involved in her project.

Following Stevenson and Wagner-Martin was Jacqueline Rose, author of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992). The title itself suggests the biography's self-awareness—"haunting" in the sense of lingering or refusing to go away names exactly what the memory of Plath's suicide does. Malcolm reports that Rose had done her homework, researching both pertinent legal issues and the experiences of previous biographers, specifically Wagner-Martin and Stevenson. Rose's initial inquiries to Olwyn Hughes were pleasantly responded to. But after receiving the manuscript, the Hugheses treated her as "just another member of the pack of Ted Hughes's tormenters and pursuers, and they fought the publication of [her book] with their usual clumsy fierceness," e.g., attempting to revoke permissions for poems used and trying to dissuade Rose from using certain texts (Malcolm 1993, 146). Rose's approach was neither pro-Plath nor pro-Hughes. But all biographies have motives; according to Malcolm, Rose's was to call attention to Hughes' handling of the Plath literary estate (1993, 146).

The Hugheses are openly chastised in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, not for Hughes's unfaithfulness, but for his and Olwyn's editing and censorship of Plath's work. And, like Linda Wagner-Martin, Jacqueline Rose speaks the hard truth:

In correspondence with the Hugheses, this book was called "evil." Its publisher was told it would not appear. At one point an attempt was made to revoke previously granted permissions to quote from Plath's work. I was asked to remove my reading of [Plath's] "The Rabbit Catcher," and when I refused, I was told by Ted Hughes that my analysis would be damaging for Plath's (now adult) children, and that speculation of the kind I was seen as engaging in about Sylvia Plath's sexual identity would in some countries be "grounds for homicide" [...]

On the points over which we have failed to agree, it appears that for Ted and Olwyn Hughes there is only one version of reality, one version—their version—of the truth. [...] In fact, I do not suggest that we can, with any certainty, believe either Plath's statement or its repudiation, but that together they confront us with a moment of indecision which in turn generates anxiety—an anxiety that can be productive if we allow it to indicate how uncertain truth can be. My suggestion throughout this book is that we should try, as I believe Plath did constantly in her writing, to stay with that anxiety and not resolve it. Nothing demonstrates more to me the futility of the too hasty resolution than the demand for singular truth, which,

throughout these negotiations, has been directed to me by the estate of Sylvia Plath. (1992, xii)

Rose was given what appeared to be the standard treatment by the Hugheses, reflecting a fierce desire for their “singular truth” to be published. This proved beneficial to the reception of her book, though. The very public controversy between Rose and the estate gave the book notoriety, just as the quarrel between Olwyn and Wagner-Martin had done for Wagner-Martin’s biography. Like Plath’s mother’s attempt in publishing *Letters Home*, the actions of Hughes and Olwyn in regard to Rose had a much different effect than they desired. They wanted to put their version of the truth forward in this book, hopefully to quell the growing storm of criticism against them by using Rose as a biographer supposedly independent of the Hugheses’ editorial grasp. Aurelia, with her publication of *Letters Home*, had had a similar desire to counteract readers’ response to *The Bell Jar* (1971), which put her in very bad graces with Plath’s fans. She hoped to show readers that the characters in *The Bell Jar* were exaggerated if not fictional, and that her real daughter was quite loving and, in Aurelia’s eyes, normal. Nonetheless, *Letters Home* only fueled the criticism of her as Sylvia’s mother that the novel had sparked.

Despite her history of conflict with Plath biographers, Olwyn has little to say in defense of her actions as executor. Of Anne Stevenson, the biographer who supposedly collaborated with Hughes and Olwyn to create the derisive *Bitter Fame*, she says, “I regret I didn’t get somebody brighter, somebody like Hilary Spurling. Sylvia was an intellectual—Anne is not. I had to nanny her along. She wasted a year of my life” (Malcolm 1993, 102). According to Elaine Feinstein, Olwyn saw Stevenson’s project strictly as an opportunity to “set the record straight and release Ted from the many rumours that surrounded him” (2001, 223). When Janet Malcolm asked her why she didn’t write an account of her own, her reply was terse:

“Why didn’t you write your own book?” I asked.

“I’m not a writer. And, as Ted’s sister, I wouldn’t have been believed.”

“*Bitter Fame* isn’t believed, either,” I said. “If you had written a sister’s frank account, it would have been read as such. People would have known where they stood. This way, they are suspicious. They feel something is being hidden from them and put over on them.” (Malcolm 1993, 102)

Malcolm here makes an excellent point, which Feinstein echoes (2001, 223)—for Olwyn simply to write her own book would be much better than attempting to censor biographers. If as husband and sister-in-law, the Hugheses had put out their own memoirs, instead of trying to control what others wrote, might the biographers and critics have an easier time with their own work? I believe so, for the silence on the part of Hughes and Olwyn has only made the biographies more cryptic than they would have been had the Hugheses not interfered. Because, except for their editorial work, the Hugheses remain silent about Plath, biographers are left with the task of satisfying readers' curiosity on their own. Despite Hughes's refusal to elaborate on his life with Plath and his bemoaning of the industry budding around their private life, surely he knew that a memoir of his own would have helped to fill in the gaps that readers inevitably create only because they know there is more to the story than what is being told. A prose account by Hughes of his life with Plath would have left little room for speculation. In a letter to Anne Stevenson, he reveals a sense of sheer futility; he assumes, just as Olwyn did, that no one would listen to his story: "I have never attempted to give my account of Sylvia [...] because I saw quite clearly from the first day that I am the only person in this business who cannot be believed by all who need to find me guilty" (Malcolm 1993, 133).

Bolstering Hughes's refusal to write was the protection from the public his sister gave him. Such protectiveness by sister of brother only furthers the suspicion of their hiding something. Anne Stevenson, despite her letters and telephone conversations with Hughes, never worked with him face to face without Olwyn present. To Janet Malcolm, she said, "Olwyn guarded him very carefully. He would only meet me at Olwyn's house" (Malcolm 1993, 120).

Olwyn's protectiveness, of course, was a product of her desire to show the world the "real" Plath and the "real" Hughes. She wanted to overturn the characterization of Hughes that the infinite moment created. However, it must be remembered that Hughes is but one of the survivors of Plath's suicide. According to Malcolm, these survivors "never recover [from the suicide]. The suicide goes away, and the survivors are forever in the wrong. They are like the damned, who can never make amends, who have no prospect of grace" (1993, 103).

A case in point is Aurelia Plath. She and Hughes fretted over publication of *The Bell Jar*, as its characters were largely autobiographical. But an editor at Harper & Row informed Hughes that U.S. copyright law only protected *The Bell Jar* for seven years; then it was up for grabs. To

secure the royalties for himself and the children, Hughes agreed to publish it. Afterward, as I've noted, Aurelia sought to correct her own public image by publishing *Letters Home* in 1975—according to Malcolm, hoping that readers would see the loving girl she knew was her “real” daughter. Aurelia’s collection of letters produced a much different effect than desired, however. Prior to 1975, Plath’s readers had held her father, Otto Plath, responsible for her nature; *Letters Home* shifted focus to the mother-daughter relationship. Readers considered “for the first time the possibility that her sick relationship with her mother was the reason she *was* like that” (Malcolm 1993, 96). The book also broke the Plath story wide open, allowing readers into her private thoughts and creating a much more vivid picture of her life than her poetry and novel had afforded them.

For Hughes to read the biographies of Plath released in Hughes’s lifetime must have been like watching himself being operated on, or analyzed, or made an absolute villain, over and over. Malcolm enlists the tale of Prometheus to illustrate this experience: “Like Prometheus, [...] Hughes has had to watch his young self being picked over by biographers, scholars, critics, article writers, and newspaper journalists” (1993, 86). Indeed, Hughes’s main objection to the Plath biographers, in Malcolm’s words, was “being treated as if he [was] dead” (1993, 104). But, by capitalizing on his late wife’s literary career and constantly linking himself with her in the public eye, he continued to place himself in the glass crypt that he also wanted to escape. Regardless of his wishes, he is with Plath in the infinite moment created in February 1963—or in terms of my photography metaphor, caught in an unflattering pose in a candid photograph. Of course, Hughes would have liked to have edited the photograph, making himself much more presentable, but Jacqueline Rose suggests that the anxiety over this moment should never be resolved in favor of either party. In true post-structuralist fashion, she encourages multiple voices in the discourse by and about Plath and Hughes.

But aren’t biographies supposed to answer questions, resolve ambiguities, clear up mysteries—aren’t they supposed to attempt to arrive at some truth? Especially in the case of Plath and Hughes, biographers are left with the problem of “how to write about people who can no longer change their contemporaries’ perception of them, who are discovered frozen in certain unnatural or unpleasant attitudes, like characters in tableaux vivants or people in snapshots with their mouths open” (Malcolm 1993, 111). Rather than trying to obscure the open mouth in the photo and make the public wonder what is behind the black square or Sharpie marker cover-up,

why not show the photo for what it is, revealing nothing more than an awkward pose? Getting past Plath's death—and thus turning the view away from the infinite moment, the awkward pose—would certainly allow us to focus more on her life, a life outside of the suicide. Such an examination might yield new images to view, and thus more images for the biographer to arrange and narrate.

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