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Who Owns the Dead? Biography, Archives, and Ethics

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The biographer and those who control the necessary sources live in different ethical worlds. The storyteller seeks to uncover the full personality and actions of the figure to be written about. The keepers of family memories, on the other hand, strive to have the public perceive their loved ones—even their loved ones' enemies—exactly as they do. Needless to say, revelations about the past can lead to violations of ethics and possibly law. Who should prevail in such circumstances, the guardians of family secrets or the literary exposé of them? The latter profession requires a thorough examination of leads wherever they may alight. The poet Allen Tate in "The Oath," asks of his friend Andrew Lytle, "Who are the dead?"^[1] The concern here, however, is to explore the question, who owns them?

We live in a glaringly confessional age. Dissecting and destroying reputations of the celebrated have no limits. In America weak libel laws offer little protection for those who feel they have been victimized. Be that as it may, when poets or novelists use their own lives as the substance of their work, they surely can expect investigations into what is pure imagination and what is factual. According to Charles Molesworth, it appears that the tranquilizing and vacuous 1950s aroused poets of that era to turn inward and expose what they found there. "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs," this formulation of Keats's," Molesworth writes, "might be the leitmotif for confessional poetry."^[2] No doubt, there was also a reaction against the more distant, ironic, and sometimes bloodless poetry of the T. S. Eliot's preceding generation. According to Lucas Myers, who was Ted Hughes's friend and a fellow poet, the Movement poets in England, expressed "logic rather than myth." It was prized chiefly for its celebrating the "stability of the state" and "social order but not the order of nature."^[3] Whatever the cause, a poetic trend toward self-exposure began in the late 1950s. The cost, however, lay in the intentional stripping of privacy. More circumspect writers may have a stronger case for retaining that valuable commodity against a prying world than those who let it all be gaspingly visible.

Just how complex these matters can become are discussed with regard to some American literary figures. I do not know if any great moral lessons can be drawn from them. But these instances involve the biographer's dilemmas in relation to his or her subjects' friends, descendants, and kinfolk on the one hand. On the other are a family's self-defenses that also have legitimate justifications. The tensions between heirs and authors can become quite ugly. Archivists, caught in the middle, must be well aware of them.

Moreover, there is the problem of what "truth" really is. Creative fiction may draw from the author's experience. Yet it can be altered either modestly or drastically. Sometimes, the law enters as the judge of the true and the overt lie in cases of libel and misappropriation.^[4] The illustrations come from three

literary situations, each with its own special complications. The first concerns the controversies engulfing Sylvia Plath, her husband, and others in the Hughes family. Plath's poetry, life, and sudden death have been publicized in print, television, and film. Her heirs have said enough is enough. But the controversies continue anyhow. The second sketch concerns the archival complications of Plath's friend, the suicidal poet Anne Sexton. In this instance, Sexton sought exposure of her psychological life not just in the character of her poems but also in her postmortem fame.

The third example raises the delicate matter of homosexuality. By today's terminology, the Mississippi memoirist and poet William Alexander Percy was a closet gay. Until recently, familial denials, however, kept the issue locked away. Should the biographer respect the wishes of Percy's collateral descendants or should the story be broadcast far and wide?

With regard to the first case, Sylvia Plath, the American poet who killed herself in a fierce London winter, 1963, has generated an amazingly ghoulish record in the popular imagination. She might be called the Elvis Presley of the poetry world, an almost mythical figure who seems larger in death than she was perhaps in life. Website and chat-rooms abound with Plath the subject of every sort of speculation.^[5] Her husband Ted Hughes, England's poet-laureate from 1983 until his death from liver cancer in 1998, became the object of incredible hatred. In the eyes of militant feminists he had betrayed her and abandoned their two children to live with another woman. Some of his more extreme critics chiseled out Sylvia's married name on her Yorkshire hillside gravestone at Heptonstall. The stone was returned two days after Hughes defended his action in the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. He had written that a "Plath Fantasia" had been erected that "obscured the life and death of Sylvia Plath." He had broken with custom when he had included her maiden name on the headstone "because I knew well enough in 1963 what she had brought off in that name, and I wished to honor it." Hughes had the mutilated object removed. That impulsive move simply caused another volley of protests.^[6]

The poet's reputation scarcely improved after his Israeli lover Assia Wevill, who had replaced Sylvia, killed herself in May 1969. Next to her was Shura, the couple's little girl, whom Assia had taken from her bed to lie on the kitchen floor while the oven gas seeped into the room.^[7] In dealing with this tragedy, Hughes was very Anglo-Saxon in his reticence, just as he had been regarding Sylvia's death. Silence, however, did not serve him well. His close friend Lucas Myers observes that anyone who knew Ted would be very aware how exposure of his and Sylvia's life together would pain him.^[8] "Hughes," biographer Diane Middlebrook asserts, "has been a screen on which people have projected fantasies, partly because he didn't wish to assume the public role as his own defender."^[9] Perhaps he thought that by being above the disturbance, he could escape unmolested. But that policy only made matters worse. After the death of two of his women by suicide, Hughes confessed to Myers that these losses were like "giant steel doors shutting down over great parts of myself leaving me that much less . . . to live on."^[10]

Hughes admitted that he had destroyed Sylvia's journal that covered the period from late 1959 to three days before her suicide. The poet claimed to have acted to protect the children from ever reading it. Olwyn Hughes wrote in a letter to the *New York Review of Books*, "I read it, and I think it could have been a nightmare for the [children]." Surely Ted's decision to destroy it was also an act of self-defense, since it chronicled the breakup of their marriage. He also felt some guilt about its contents. After all, among other lies and evasions, he had secretly taken a holiday in Spain with Assia and deliberately deceived Sylvia with misleading messages to prevent her from finding out where he was. Although Assia Wevill had her own marital troubles with her husband David, she was appalled to read in Sylvia's diary after her death how much Sylvia had loathed her. For her part, Sylvia had destroyed some of Ted's work more than once. According to Anne Stevenson's biography, in a fit of rage over fantasies that he was about to take up with another woman, she destroyed a play, some poems, and notebooks, "even his precious edition of Shakespeare; they had all been torn into small pieces."^[11] But when he did leave her

for Assia, she flew into a more justifiable rage. With Aurelia watching in horror at her daughter's mad distress, Sylvia burned all the papers in his study. Whatever the reasons for Ted's destruction of Sylvia's last journal, critics vigorously blasted him for a desecration as inexcusable as the Nazis' incinerating of Jewish books.^[12] What a loss to posterity his decision was, no matter how understandable his motives.

Not all the problems, however, are to be registered on Hughes's docket. Plath, for instance, had published her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, only in Great Britain. Toward the end of her life she admitted to friends that she had used the *nom de plume*, Victoria Lucas, to avoid libel suits from fellow patients. Aurelia Plath reluctantly agreed to its publication in America, just as the Hughes heirs wished. The English copyright would end soon, and, upon its expiration, any publisher in the United States could produce it without any of them receiving a penny from royalties.^[13] Sales of the novel were brisk. Yet when CBS Entertainment and Avco-Embassy Pictures brought out *The Bell Jar*, Jane Anderson sued them in a Boston federal court for six million dollars. She had been a patient at McLean's in Boston when young Sylvia was there after her first attempt at suicide. The film (though not the book) portrayed Anderson, who later became a practicing psychiatrist, as a lesbian. They had done so because Hughes would not permit a dramatization of the mother-daughter tensions which at first they had wished to employ. The choice of a patient rivalry, however, was not only fiction but, as Anderson saw it, personally insulting and highly damaging. The lesbian stigma caused her much emotional distress, she claimed. The slander could well affect her relationship with clients. In response, Ted's sister Olwyn blamed feminist "libbers" who sought to denigrate Ted's reputation. She argued for the right of poets and novelists to exercise free speech. She later reversed that commendable position when her brother Ted was the object of dispute.

For his part, Hughes testified at the Anderson trial that *The Bell Jar* was pure fiction. Of course, it was not. Individuals, particularly Aurelia Plath, Sylvia's mother, saw themselves in the characters and had reason to be offended. As Jacqueline Rose points out, the appropriation of real people into a work of fiction understandably sets up a tension between rights of privacy and freedom of speech and press.^[14]

At the heart of these matters is the writer's intentions. Artists and their biographers cannot wholly escape the moral if not legal sanctions preventing devastating disclosures. But full license and sweeping confession have become more or less the rule of our times. One could argue that Sylvia Plath was the first modern writer to create out of her own mental illness a body of work that will be read and admired for years to come. Others would follow her path. Most writers of a distinctly melancholy inclination, however, have been more circumspect in their self-revelation. By and large, they have not swept their friends or acquaintances, and others into potentially libelous situations. William Styron, for one example, has drawn on his own despair but within limits.^[15] Such concentration on personal moods as Plath exhibited comes at a price. Sylvia was without much pity. As Ted Hughes once wrote, "her real creation was her own image" with everything she wrote directed toward the "central problem—herself."^[16]

However much Plath was indeed her own worst enemy, the partisanship about her was no less astonishing. Ted's friends found themselves on the defensive, and the uproar had a serious effect on how the Hughes heirs perceived the demands of press, biography, and film. Erica Jong reported that her public reading of Plath's poems in the 1970s prompted "radical feminists" to picket her because she had failed to blame Plath's suicide on him. Hughes himself was constantly interrupted by shouts and noise at poetry readings.^[17] The heat of the controversies was bound to influence the Hughes family's future decisions about films, fiction, and biographies. The 1970s libel suit no doubt also led to a resistance far greater than need would indicate. Although Olwyn Hughes tried mightily to stem the tide, biographies virtually flew off the press. Each of them took a heated position for or against the poet laureate.^[18] Olwyn would have liked to have her brother's wife depicted as a schizophrenic with whom no one

could long be married and still be happy. She fulminated against Anne Stevenson's portrayal of Plath in her biography, *Bitter Fame*. It was almost as if Olwyn thought she should have depicted the poet as a figure scarcely less degenerate than the one in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. A. Alvarez, who had failed to acclaim *Bitter Fame* in the *New York Review of Books*, aroused Olwyn to fury. She denounced his opinion that Stevenson had written a poisonous life. Alvarez rejoined, "Ms. Hughes is unstoppable . . . I have long ceased to take her statements of fact seriously, but for the record, I should point out, although she is not an executor of the Plath estate she is in fact its agent, and therefore has much to do with the use by outsiders of Sylvia Plath's writing." Some years earlier, she also assailed Karl Miller, a reviewer of three books on Plath, also in the *New York Review of Books*. "Miller," she wrote, "opens his review, in guise of indignation on my brother's behalf, by quoting an abusive line, seemingly from a poem by a member of the lunatic fringe of Women's Lib (which otherwise few of your readers or Ted Hughes himself would ever have heard of)." Still worse, she continued, he "inflates a recent incident in Australia where, during a group conversation, a woman asked Ted Hughes with obvious malice about Sylvia Plath and gives the totally false impression that Ted Hughes's poetry readings are regularly disrupted by hecklers from Women's Lib."^[19]

In response to Alvarez, Hughes himself insisted that Sylvia's poetry showed no sign of madness. In his opinion, they were disciplined, coherent, and clearheaded. When critics, English scholars, and biographers savaged Plath or misunderstood the couple's relationship, he expressed himself best in verse, as he best demonstrated toward the end of his life in *Birthday Letters*. In that poignant tribute to Sylvia, Ted warned his children not to let the tragic fate and notoriety of their mother affect their own lives. In *Birthday Letters*, he writes:

So leave her.
Let her be their spoils. Go wrap
Your head in the snowy rivers
Of the Brooks Range.^[20]

His poem, "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother," was likewise addressed to Frieda and her brother Nicholas. Some lines in it read: "Let them/ Jerk their tail-stumps, bristle and vomit/ over their symposia."^[21]

Despite Hughes's longstanding opposition to film renditions, plans at the BBC were underway not long before his death to dramatize the poets' romance and tragedy. Twelve million pounds, a modest sum by film standards, was invested in the project. Although Anthony Hopkins and Daniel Day Lewis were approached, the Australian actor, Russell Crowe, was originally assigned the part of the poet. When Allison Owens, associated with Miramax, asked Gwyneth Paltrow if she would play Sylvia Plath, Paltrow replied, "100,000 per cent yes." At that point, the producers had decided to change the name from "Sylvia" out of fear no one would know who Plath was.^[22] The star of *Shakespeare in Love* adamantly refused to take the role unless the producers retained the title and character. She was wiser than they. The film dealt remarkably fairly with the pair. Paltrow's performance was outstanding. She captured Plath's almost frantic dynamism, which was the only part of her I ever observed. But the film-makers also recorded the deadened eyes, the loveless expression of the depressive. All the same, something was missing under the New Zealand director, Christine Jeffs. One problem was Daniel Craig, who had taken Crowe's place as Ted Hughes. He was soft-spoken and slight. Such a physique and manner could scarcely convey a solid impression of Ted, who was huge, craggy, and mesmerizing. One critic complained, "Jeffs' fear of demonising Hughes (Daniel Craig) has reduced him to dull silence, incapable of inspiring any emotion let alone acting as a muse."^[23] While dramatic in various scenes, the movie did not reach the heights to which the film company and actors aspired. The obstructiveness of the Hughes family was a major factor in that result. The members wanted to see only their construction of the pair

as the dominant image on the screen. All else was to be hidden from view. Fame and privacy once again proved their incompatibility.^[24]

At age forty-two, Frieda Hughes, who had been only two years old when her mother took her life, was outraged by the film.^[25] She accused the producers of turning her mother into a saleable toy, a “Sylvia Suicide Doll.”^[26] Fear of having her mother’s death sensationalized was the reason Frieda had given for denying the company use of her mother’s poems. Frieda is a painter, a children’s writer, and a poet herself, with major published books of poetry, illustrated by her paintings.^[27] She had long lived under the shadow of her formidable father and suicidal mother.^[28] She put her objections in verse. “The filmmakers have collected/ disdain body parts . . . They want to use her poetry/ As stitching and sutures/ To give it credibility/ . . . they think/ I should give them my mother’s words/ To fill the mouth of their monster.”^[29] The poem shows the influence of Sylvia Plath’s famous poem, “Lady Lazarus.” Carol Hughes, Ted’s widow, forbade the use of her deceased husband’s work. As a result, in considerable indignation, Russell Crowe had withdrawn from his contract to play Ted, thus providing Daniel Craig with the part.^[30]

Although hoping to use *Birthday Letters* as the main source of the film, the producers were reduced to introducing Shakespearean lines into the script. These declamations at poets’ gatherings were quite true to the times but not quite to the point.^[31] Sylvia and Ted should have been discovering each other’s imaginations, not demonstrating their grasp of Renaissance poetry—which was indeed quite astounding. The Hughes’s decision to censor the film in this fashion was just as crippling as if a film about Michelangelo could unroll without sight of his paintings and sculptures or one about Beethoven without hearing any of his music. Ted Hughes and, in fact, that whole crew of his poetic friends at St. Botolph’s Rectory in Cambridge in the mid-1950s, were dedicated anti-capitalists. The film fails to make this point, but, like Olwyn and Carol Hughes, Ted, at least in his early years, was himself repelled by signs of commercial uses for his and Sylvia’s work or lives. Sylvia herself had found that attitude very exasperating at times. She had been compelled by his diffidence to become Hughes’s publicity and literary agent. He shrank from any form of hustling himself. Ironically, this anti-commercial spirit was conjoined with the Hughes’s deep sense of privacy. The combination limited the artistic possibilities which a freer use of the poets’ materials could have made possible.^[32]

The tension between the need for fame and the imperative of privacy rather echoed the nature of the poets themselves. Ted was manful through and through but also passive in some respects. He was a genius yet with little understanding of psychology, particularly Sylvia’s. Although an animated presence when in company, he could be stoutly defensive about his own life. Ironically, Hughes exploited myths in writing his poems but was snared in the legends surrounding him. According to the biographer Elaine Feinstein, after Assia Wevill’s death, he did confess to his brother that perhaps “it was he who was the true depressive, and that people who lived with him caught the darkness from him.”^[33] Actually, the remark was scarcely true. His two women had their own inner demons to deal with. Despite her amazingly creative gifts, Sylvia herself knew intimately and disastrously the emotional burden that bipolar disorder confers on some geniuses. While the malady seemed to prompt great poems, when she was in a hypomanic phase (that is, the interval between the cycles of depression and mania), it also divided her personality and finally raked her down.^[34]

Likewise, the public record of the poets’ lives has a bipolar character. The Ted Hughes collection resides handsomely in the Emory University Archives. The Woodruff Foundation had outbid all others. But researchers cannot use the contents. It is there but not there. Some folders require prior permission of Carol Hughes, seldom given. Other subdivisions are sealed until 2022 or to the death of Ted’s widow, “whichever is the greater.”^[35] Do these conditions add stature to the principals? It is most doubtful. The academic complaints about the inaccessibility of Plath and Hughes documents that my wife I heard

during a Plath session some years ago at the Modern Language Association, San Francisco, seemed understandable for those seeking tenure. But they were also self-serving. Ted's closest friend, Lucas Myers, who was seated with us, turned visibly purple, no doubt an overreaction.

Clearly, however, there are no easy answers. Hughes's situation demonstrates the point. He had little patience with the journalists and professors who pursued him and his tragic circumstances. Even the sympathetic Anne Stevenson, whose biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, was kindly disposed toward Ted earned her no credit with him. He refused any a connection with it, and he explained to Stevenson "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." Hughes knew his silence only aggravated the issue. Yet, he refused "to be dragged into the bull-ring and teased and pricked and goaded into vomiting up every detail of my life with Sylvia for the higher entertainment of the hundred thousand Eng Lit Profs and graduates who . . . feel very little . . . beyond curiosity of a quite low order . . . no matter how they robe their attentions in Lit Crit Theology and ethical sanctity."^[36]

One of Hughes's motives, perhaps, was to keep some part of the deceased alive and self-possessed instead of being dismembered, as it were, by the biographer's scalpel. Certainly that was the conclusion that the journalist Janet Malcolm reached in writing *The Silent Woman*, a study of the Hughes-Plath relationship. Despite her own commitment to feminist principles, she discovered during her inquiries that Hughes had become the victim of injustice at the hands of the feminist phalanx as well as some journalists like A. Alvarez, a former friend of the two poets. Hughes himself found that he no longer owned himself. "Of our marriage you know nothing . . . It is infuriating for me to see my private experiences and feelings re-invented for men, in that crude, bland, unanswerable way . . . as if I were a picture on a wall or some prisoner in Siberia. And to see her used in the same way." Alvarez responded with courtesy but little understanding of Hughes's state of mind. In fact, he thought that "he'd gone kind of barmy, and I suspect that, however, tactfully handled, this was public-domain stuff."^[37] Such is the newspaperman's rationale of our times.

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Turning now to a different setting but similar issues, consider the case of Diane Wood Middlebrook, author of *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, published by Houghton Mifflin. Her subject was 45 years old when, in the garage, she turned on the car's engine and died from carbon monoxide poisoning. In her researches, Middlebrook used transcripts and tapes from the suicide's four-year sequence of sessions, some 300 hours with her psychoanalyst. Dr. Martin J. Orne, a Philadelphia specialist in hypnotism, is well regarded as a well-published scholar in his field of psychiatry. A public controversy arose over how medical and biographical ethics should apply to such intimate revelations. Reacting to heavy criticism, Orne replied in the *New York Times*, "Few would dispute that a patient's right to confidentiality survives death, but what about a patient's right to disclosure?" Anne Sexton, he pointed out, urged that the full record be made public.

At this point, did the family have a right to privacy since undoubtedly Sexton would discuss intimate family matters? In fact, Middlebrook comments, Sexton had already written about her kin "harshly and cruelly, selfishly and subjectively" in her work.^[38] In handing over the tapes to Middlebrook, Orne thought he was simply carrying out the writer's wishes. His analysand was a confessional poet. That was her professional position. "Ethical rules of confidentiality," he argued, "are intended for what applies in most cases," but surely not all.^[39] In response, Howard D. Kibel, a Cornell Medical School psychiatrist, mocked Orne's allegedly "weak defense." He contended that the patient is scarcely aware of all that "he or she said" in the clinician's presence. Indeed, Middlebrook notes that in the course of her research, she became "convinced that she [Anne Sexton] did not herself know the truth status of her own

memories, and eventually came to a wise insight about them: that once she had put a feeling into words, the words were what she remembered.”^[40] Sexton’s own unreliability about what she might have said of others could have been only one of several problems associated with this case. The issue for Kibel and other psychiatric critics was the effect of exposure on future analysands. They might become reluctant to speak freely. Therefore, Kibel charged, Orne “is guilty of violating the ethics of the profession.”^[41]

Middlebrook was luckier than Orne, the psychoanalytic source for her remarkable study. A *New York Times* editorial declared that she justifiably “rose to the bait, as the trout to the fly.”^[42] The Sexton estate had given the biographer permission for full disclosure. Thus Middlebrook had not only the words transcribed to the typewriter but also the audiotapes that revealed Sexton’s emotional state when she spoke them. Could a biographer demand anything more? Although personally in the clear, so to speak, in a very thoughtful spirit Middlebrook pondered what might be the ethical obligation of an author. Is there anything prohibited from a moral as opposed to a legal perspective? In a sense, she had been thrice blessed to have Anne Sexton, Martin Orne, and Linda Sexton, the poet’s daughter and literary executor, all fully cooperating with her study. There was only one impediment for complete exposure. Just before her suicide, Sexton had set aside one file that she had inscribed, “NEVER TO BE SEEN . . . NEVER TO BE PUBLISHED.” Middlebrook might have dismissed this demand from the dead and exposed the forbidden material. Instead, she solved the problem deftly. With Linda Sexton complying, she opened the document and realized that it consisted not of embarrassing revelations but some poetic juvenalia that Sexton thought unworthy of notice. Needless to say, she obeyed the poet’s stipulation.^[43]

Middlebrook argues that over time the legacy of the dead gradually loses any sense of the subject’s individuality. The papers and materials become “cultural property,” as she puts it. “This definition holds that culture has an interest in the products and documentation of human activity.” The dead own nothing. Every question, Middlebrook asserts, can be asked and answered within the limits set by a probated will. That does not excuse, however, two kinds of offenses, she continues. The first is the misuse of historical figures in fiction. Their quotations are placed in the characters’ mouths, giving the impression that real people had spoken them. Edmund Morris committed that offense in *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*.^[44] Second, Middlebrook says, the biographer cannot invade the current, hidden lives of the heirs as if they were also dead. The United States Supreme Court in 1965 agreed that the Bill of Rights casts a “penumbra of privacy” about us. Yet, a “penumbra” is a vague or indefinite borderline by definition. The right of privacy remains a black hole in constitutional law.^[45] In any event, Middlebrook and Orne weathered the storm. The American Psychiatric Association debated for two years over the matter before dropping the case.

The biographer Victoria Glendenning, however, had quite the opposite result. Her life of the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen did not mention her bisexual interests. The original draft did make full and candid disclosure of Bowen’s “Sapphism,” but before publication she was obliged by law to have the manuscript inspected by Bowen’s literary executor, Spenser Curtis Brown. He was horrified, called Glendenning by phone, and shouted that she was “a horrible, horrible woman.” All permissions would be withdrawn unless she removed what he considered offensive material. As a first author she lacked the confidence to be defiant and acquiesced. “He had all the power,” she wrote recently in the *New York Times*. Spenser Curtis Brown “was a horrible, horrible man, and it was the 1970s,” Glendenning remarks. She concluded that “today, such behavior would surely be unacceptable, as would a biographer’s compliance.”^[46] Yet, under circumstances that could threaten the integrity of an entire biography, the author would really have no choice but to comply or withdraw from the project altogether. Sometimes the problem arises from sheer competitiveness. Anne Wyatt-Brown completed a study of the English novelist Barbara Pym, but required permission from Hazel Holt who was Pym’s literary executor. Holt was herself writing a very different, non-academic biography and refused Wyatt-Brown permission to quote anything from the Pym papers at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Wyatt-

Brown was compelled to limit her quotations to the “fair use” standard.^[47] Thus, as biographers or aspiring biographers, the ethics question still remains about who owns the dead. However much we might wish a categorical black-and-white set of rules, they do not exist; nor perhaps, should they.

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A somewhat different case concerns William Alexander Percy of Mississippi, whose desires for privacy contrast with Anne Sexton’s self-revelations. His reticence had its roots in his fears of exposure for homosexuality. He is best known for his rearing of his cousin the southern novelist Walker Percy. After the death of both their mother and father, he had undertaken the burden of guardianship of all three Percy youngsters--Walker, LeRoy, and Phinizy. Their father LeRoy Percy was Will Percy’s first cousin and a Birmingham, Alabama, attorney. He had killed himself in 1929. Soon thereafter Martha Susan Phinizy, (Mattie Sue), their mother, moved herself and boys to Greenville into Will Percy’s house. In 1931, she also died in a sudden and baffling way. Her roadster had run off a rickety Delta bridge with herself and young Phinizy in the car. The accident looked suspiciously like a second suicide. Outwardly the Percy household arrangement appeared to be quite satisfactory. Will Percy had the financial wherewithal from his plantation ownership and law practice. Adah Williams, one of the Percy family’s closest friends, was on hand to serve as a representative of the feminine side of life.^[48]

Despite all appearances, the Greenville poet and planter was not committed to complete reticence about his sexual drives, having written poems about “lads’ loves,” as he declared in one of them. A restless traveler, Percy had sought inspiration from his hotel window at Taormina, Sicily looking toward Mount Etna. Taormina was a favorite resort for fellow Uranians, as members of the Edwardian minority tribe called themselves. (Tennessee Williams was a later and frequent vacationer at Taormina.)^[49] In Florence and Capri, Percy struck up a friendship with Norman Douglas. The prolific, bisexual writer Graham Greene was also an admirer and friend of Douglas, who was also an accomplished novelist. The latter’s most important work, *South Wind*, was a bestseller in the 1920s. According to Will Percy’s friend John Seymour Erwin, the English novelist “had never been very reticent about his preference for the companionship of young men. Will was more circumspect, at the same time enjoying the Douglas group.”^[50]

The Greenville bachelor was acutely aware of southern attitudes toward “fairies,” “faggots,” and “queers,” the standard epithets of the time. He had to fear family and community repercussions from any confessional signal. Percy shrank from the kind of public exposure that Anne Sexton or even Plath to lesser degree exhibited in their works. The burden he bore was in some ways more damning than that of mania and depression. As his young friend John Erwin recalled, “throughout his life innuendos were inevitable, [but] facts [were] never to surface.”^[51]

Just as the youthful Sylvia garnished the truth in *The Bell Jar* to suit her emotional needs, so too did Percy in *Lanterns on the Levee*.^[52] Plath’s work is filled with angst and anger, Percy’s with melancholy and nostalgia. However much he yearned for male sexual partnership, he never revealed when, where, or how he found it—if, in fact, he ever did. So great a degree of self-enclosure was scarcely unique to this sensitive figure in that cultural era of sexual repression. Instead, *Lanterns on the Levee* dwells on his sense of being forsaken: “I was sick for a home I had never seen and lonely for a hand I had never touched.” Throughout that year he could venture nowhere without his companion of “loneliness until she was so familiar I came not to hate her but to know whatever happened in however many after years she alone would be faithful to me.”^[53] Only hints of a more serious deviation from convention were permitted in the text.

Percy was a complex, tortured individual. At the same time, he had the deepest affection for the three young cousins whose lives were then in his hands. He also took care of his maiden and widowed aunts, an old alcoholic friend, Tommy Shields, along with a few young men, more openly gay than he. For all we know, though, he never had relations with any of these youthful protégées. One of the group, however, deserves notice. Young Erwin, also of Greenville, was a distant Percy kinsman.^[54] He became one of Will Percy's artistic and gay wards. No doubt the senior patron had found it consoling that a kinsman shared his attraction to males. The planter paid for Erwin's New York education in music and art. In return Erwin composed a piece for soprano and orchestra, called, "Sappho in Levkas." It was based on one of Will Percy's more ambitious poems.

Sadly, though, Erwin was not intellectually and artistically equipped to realize his ambitions. He did not have the mental stamina and professional discipline to shape what he knew in a clear, compelling voice, with commanding detail and acute sapience about the motives and temperaments of those around him. Unlike Will Percy, whom he so admired, nor like Walker Percy, he could not translate personal experience into something speaking beyond himself. There were too many evasions, too little understanding of what the reader might need in the way of preparatory information to grasp his innuendos or even larger implications and the context of his actions.^[55]

Nonetheless, Erwin had a most captivating career, one that included the death of his first love. In 1940, over a decade after a tragic accident, in which Erwin's beloved boy had died, Will Percy had been at first dismayed to learn that his homosexual cousin had secretly married Catherine Seigné. She was the sister of Julian Seigné, whom he loved still more. The Seigné siblings were seventeen-year-old twins. In Erwin's words, "they were beautiful, with dark yet golden complexions as if they had lived out of doors all their lives." On a picnic in 1927, young Catherine and John Erwin had watched in horror when Catherine's brother Julian slipped on a ledge and fell to his death at Fiery Gizzard, a waterfall near Monteagle, Tennessee. Ordinarily he would have run at once to his "cousin-confessor Will Percy" in any moment of crisis. Erwin recalled, "I often entrusted my inmost thoughts" to Percy, but Uncle Will was not at Brinkwood, his nearby Sewanee summer cottage.^[56] Throughout the 1930s, Erwin continued to withhold the news of the marriage for fear of losing Percy's financial help. Out of pride, he could not bring himself to involve his wealthy, aristocratic Italian in-laws.^[57] Erwin also remained silent because, as he wrote me, Will Percy "knew of my sexual inconstancy and was interested in who I was seeing, what I was up to now." Erwin failed to confess the marriage to his mother nor did he tell anyone else in the immediate family. He explained to me that his people mixed "naiveté and sophistication" with "a staid, ethical outlook on behavior." They were "Presbyterians from toe to bald heads; behavior, to their standards, was ALL."^[58]

At this time Erwin mourned intensely about Julian Seigné's accidental death. He still grieved, he wrote, over "the earth-shaking aftermath, the bitter sequel—the first great love and what I then supposed—the last great love" of his life. Again the meaning remains obscure because of the ambivalence that the old social order placed upon such confessions. Erwin himself was appalled when he attended a Greenwich Village party with his wife Catherine: "men were dancing with men, women with women." Erwin continued, "Today my attitude would be called closeted in the extreme. But that is the way I was and the way I remained, as did many others, particularly those from the socially and sexually conservative South"^[59] (It is worth mentioning that Catherine and John Erwin had a son, named "Giovanni,"—"Gianni" for short—who grew up in wartime Switzerland with his mother who had escaped Italian fascism. At age twenty-three Gianni died in a drowning accident off the coast of Capri. Erwin confessed to me that he took no interest in his offspring. He was even indifferent when he received word of Gianni's death not long after he and his mother had returned from their refuge in Switzerland when the war's ending made that possible.)^[60]

In 1940, after completing a *roman à clef* based on the tragic accident and aftermath, Erwin asked Percy for advice about its publication. His friend quickly overcame his surprise upon learning of the marriage to Catherine Seigné and gently observed, “Your book holds great promise—perhaps even more than that.” He was too kind to point to its likely defects—a lack of believable fictional characterizations and a timid, tentative quality to the whole. (Erwin refused to lend me a copy of the novel.) In a diary entry of June, 1940, Erwin had written, “Manuscript of *Dark Symphony* came back from Doubleday D. Much to Will’s relief (I could tell) along with a note from Mr. W G saying that he thought not letting it go through a mistake; it had, he said with some editing, great possibilities.” Nonetheless, in a gesture that gave evidence of his generous spirit, Will Percy handed over the fledgling work to his friends the New York editor Maxwell Perkins and to the English novelist Ford Maddox Ford. One wonders what they thought of it. It was, however, never published. In writing about the novel, Percy declared, “There is a pathos and something approaching compassion for a world that does not still exist that makes me see you in a different light.” Before John Erwin died in 2000, he confessed to me that these were still the failings of his literary efforts. Percy, however, chose a different rationale when at last he advised Erwin to suppress *Dark Symphony*, the novel’s tentative title. Percy wrote him, “Due to the subject treated, and to the subsequent repercussion upon your family (in a small community) it is just not for today. Perhaps some years hence all the inhibited things will become less so and the world will develop a policy of live and let live (although I doubt this, and don't count on it.)” On another occasion, he praised Erwin for “keeping quiet” about such things. As for the marriage, it was just as well the pair had broken up. “Divided affections are bad enough,” Percy wisely warned, “but divided—genuinely divided inclinations must be unspeakable torture. For your happiness, as you know only too well, does not lie in that direction.”^[61] Percy knew whereof he spoke. Rumors had traveled the Greenville circuit that he was to marry the Percy boys’ mother Mattie Sue, the widow of his suicidal first cousin LeRoy. He could not bring himself to that decision. Before she died, she might well have realized his incapacity to meet her kind of love.

Percy’s letters to Erwin did offer good advice. The Greenville attorney was always very prudent about his sexuality, not only out of respect for a southern family’s honor but also to shield his three young charges from the humiliating gossip that he knew rumbled beneath the ground he walked on in Greenville. Without consciously being grateful for his protection, the boys had found in their surrogate father a caring, witty, and intellectually exciting mentor. Commenting on Uncle Will’s facility as a mentor, Walker Percy wrote in his introduction to *Lanterns on the Levee*, “I had a great teacher. The teacher points and says Look; the response is Yes. I see. But he was more than a teacher. What he was to me was a fixed point in a confusing world.”^[62] How infinitely sad that Walker and his brothers could never accept Will’s entire character but had to disbelieve in their beloved paternal figure’s inner nature. After reading Walker Percy’s essay in the *Saturday Review*, November 6, 1973, Shelby Foote wrote his friend Walker, “What a thing it would be to try really to recapture him as he was in life; except of course it couldnt [sic] be done. All we can do is take pieces of him and distribute him here and there through our books”^[63]

All their lives the three Percy sons have belligerently and faithfully denied the issue of Will’s sexuality whenever occasion arose, even scores of years after Will Percy’s death in 1941. Moreover, Walker’s lifelong friend the late Shelby Foote has adopted the same position. Early in my researches, I interviewed him in his spacious Memphis home. We sat in his library. I read him lines from Will Percy’s poem, “Lancelot.” At once he ordered, “Turn off that tape recorder.” But, even then, he refused to say whether or not Percy was gay. The same was true for everyone I talked to in Greenville. Some time later on a return visit, I was hoping to gain information from one of Percy’s former gay proteges, Leon Khoury. Like John Erwin, Khoury had won Percy’s interest in his artistic career back in the 1930s and paid for him to study with the well-known Manhattan sculptor, Malvina Hoffman. Khoury’s quarters in Greenville were as dilapidated as Miss Haversham’s wedding chamber. But no sooner had our

conversation begun in the gloomy, spidery warehouse-like quarters than the old man turned about in his wheelchair and announced, "LeRoy Percy called me last night. He asked if I needed any medicine from the drugstore. He would pay all my bills." Every question posed thereafter received a lengthy, circumambulating non-answer. Mississippi is a big state. Nonetheless, gossip travels faster there than it does in the local jailhouse. Someone, perhaps Khoury himself, had alerted the Percys that I was about to descend on Greenville.^[64] No one in the Greenville community was going to reveal anything noteworthy.

Like Ted Hughes, the Mississippi and Louisiana Percys have striven mightily to keep their lives free of publicity. Although others made a literary stab at the mythical Will, the investigations preparatory to my book, *The House of Percy*, set off a cascade of Percy alarms.^[65] In the course of piecing together the family's lengthy genealogy, I came across a Princetonian named William Armstrong Percy III. He was Will Percy's great-nephew and Walker Percy's cousin. This Percy was a professor of classics at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and founder and president of the Gay-Lesbian Alliance of the American Historical Association. Our first phone conversation was a revelation. In virtually the second sentence, he announced his sexual interests and reported, "Well, of course, you know that Uncle Will was as gay as I am." I asked, if he had evidence. "Yes, indeed. Barbara Commodore, a black woman, lives around the corner. She grew up in Greenville." Mrs. Commodore had told Bill Percy that her mother had warned her and the other teenage girls in the black quarters to stay away from Ford Atkins, Will Percy's young chauffeur. "Don't you gals fool with Ford," she used to say. "Ford belongs to Mr. Will."^[66]

Like Diane Middlebrook on receiving news of her psychiatric lode of gold, I was, of course, gratified and taped the ensuing conversation with Barbara Commodore. But some weeks later, I received a letter from Walker Percy who, until then, had been most congenial and cooperative about my plans to write the family's history with its rich creative powers and tragic problems of genetic depression. Typewritten, unlike all his previous communications, he announced that he had learned from his cousin Bill Percy by phone that I planned to "out" Uncle Will in a malicious and scandalous spirit. Triumphantly Bill Percy had decided that I was to be the instrument of reveille to awaken the family with a blast of unwelcome reality. Walker's reaction was, of course, apoplectic fury. The letter announced that he would have nothing further to do with my researches and that he wished to be completely dissociated from anything I put on paper.^[67]

At once I called him at his home in Covington, Louisiana. I declared that, as a historian, I was obliged to listen to anyone but that scarcely meant the material gathered would be put on the page without satisfactory corroboration. I pledged not to violate this policy. To a degree, he was mollified but still suspicious. Luckily, I had just received galley proofs of an essay entitled, "Will, Walker and Honor Dying." In it, I had characterized Will Percy as simply an eccentric bachelor.^[68] In haste I posted it to him Federal Express. Before the week was out, he called back. In highly emotional tones he expressed his appreciation of the account given of his relationship with his foster father and the general style of the piece.

Needless to say, I realized that Walker, as a professional writer, had much more literary experience than his family and brothers. They would not be so forbearing. In fact, in 1991 I received an unstamped letter in my mail box in Gainesville, Florida, from Phinzy Percy, Walker's youngest brother. He was a professor of admiralty law at the Tulane University Law School in New Orleans. Phinzy Percy was prepared, he wrote, to sue me for libeling his great-uncle Senator LeRoy Percy. I had published an article in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* entitled "LeRoy Percy and Sunnyside: Planter Mentality and Italian Peonage in the Mississippi Delta." While severely questioning Senator Percy's management of the huge plantation, I was far less critical than others in the journal on his use of foreign peonage labor.^[69] As Phinzy Percy later admitted, the real issue, of course, was his and the family's worry about how I would

characterize Uncle Will in *The House of Percy*, then under preparation.^[70] Only two states in the Union permit libel suits about dead relations—Florida, where I was living, and Louisiana, where Professor Percy resided. It was an action, however, unlikely ever to reach the courts because the Percys would have recognized that any legal action would only make more sensational whatever might appear in the publication. It was simply a means to inhibit my reportage. The threat demonstrated the commitment to family silence that still persisted.

Later, I called LeRoy Percy long distance to ask for help. I sought to obtain a photograph of a portrait of one of his ancestors. He replied, “Mr. Wyatt-Brown, I can’t help you. You are about to make public our history of chronic depression and suicide. I have a son who suffers from that complaint. I have grandchildren who may be affected as well. And you want to expose this story to them and the world?” My reply was that the book certainly would treat those unavoidable factors. It would also discuss, however, the remarkable literary and financial creativeness and resiliency with which these victims of melancholy faced their ailment. Besides, the old stigmas attached to the mental illness were fast eroding as the public gained more understanding of the medical reasons for it. But there matters stood.

The House of Percy came out in 1994. It was not reviewed in any scholarly or journalistic publication in the state of Mississippi. I was formally dis-invited as a speaker at a conference on the late Walker Percy that was held in the Jackson Public Library. Mississippi ETV conducted an interview with me in Jackson when preparing a documentary about Will Percy. I said nothing remotely controversial. Nevertheless, the program was never aired for reasons that could or could not have to do with the protectiveness of the family about Will Percy. It was once said of the ancient and noble Percy family of Northumberland, England that the people of that region “knew no prince but a Percy.” That seemed to be true of the American House of Percy as well. I learned from others that its members were determined not to read the family biography or have it promoted in any way that they could prevent.

Then, Jack Barry’s *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927*, appeared in 1997. With Bill Percy’s eager assistance, Barry had interviewed Mrs. Commodore in Boston. Using her testimony alone, he concluded that chauffeur Ford Atkins was his boss’s teenage black sex partner. It is always best to have more than one source, according to the often breached rules of journalism. In this case, there was only one, and she recalling anecdotes as a teenage girl. John Erwin, who knew Will Percy better than even his closest kin, wrote me that the story was utter nonsense. “After reading *Rising Tide*, I am tempted hourly, to burn it. That is the most infuriating piece of reporting I have ever read . . . Barry is so typical of the Percy detractors—a matter of a willingness to accept every rumor as fact . . . Will had a loathing of physical contact with black people. I KNOW.”^[71] On that score, Percy was more obviously southern than he was in other aspects of his intimate life.

In contrast to the best-selling *Rising Tide* with its portrayal of Will Percy as weak, vacillating, and queer, my book now seemed perhaps much more palatable to those interested in preserving cousin Will’s reputation. In 1997 Phinzy wrote me a letter of congratulations. He explained, “At the urging of my brother LeRoy, I’ve read *The House of Percy*. I write to say it’s a fine piece of work, and although I inevitably disagree with some of your observations and conclusions, on the whole I find the book to be eminently fair. I’ve always felt that the toughest job for a writer is a biography, and I now realize that there is a far more formidable task, to wrestle with the saga of a southern family. Congratulations on a superior job.” Then a few days later, LeRoy sent me a copy of Phinzy’s message with this kind remark of his own: “I agree with my brother Phinzy.” In an interview with the literary historian David Harwell, Phinzy more recently declared that he regretted his earlier hostility toward me and the book and even declared, “I’ll never understand how he did all that research. It was an enormous project.”^[72]

A price must be paid, however, for withholding information, no matter how justifiable. In the *Journal of Southern History*, an English professor charged that “in the present climate” it would seem that my rendition failed to highlight sufficiently the fact that Percy was “gay.” Furthermore, I had stopped “short,” he continued, “of linking Will’s depression with his enforced life of solitude.”^[73] The reviewer was reading a different book. With considerable emphasis, I had characterized Will’s loneliness as an aspect of his deep melancholy and made it clear that it did bear on his despised sexual orientation. I had entitled one of the four chapters on him, “An Acquaintance with Grief.” In my judgment, to have concentrated too heavy-handedly on Will Percy’s sexual interests would have thoroughly distorted his quality as a man, one of considerable strength, intellect, and kindness. For me personally it would have been a betrayal of trust—sworn to Walker Percy—to have sensationalized what was not really pertinent to the subject’s whole being. The biographer cannot be entirely free to use all the data, rumors, and speculations that may float about, even if it increases sales tenfold. One of Diane Middlebrook’s insights well applies. She writes, “What the biographer owes the subject is very like what the psychoanalyst owes the analysand upon encounter with hidden material: not judgment but insight.”^[74]

It seems to me that in all these cases of ethical concern, the important thing is to strive for a balanced and informed understanding. The task is not as easy as it might first seem. As Michael O’Brien wisely observes, “This age is not Carlylean, but suspicious of greatness.” We have “weakened,” he explains, “the doctrine of the solidity of character.” So, in belittling the moral fiber of the individual whose life we pursue “we have derogated character from both without and within, and left very little in between.”^[75] In treating such figures as Sylvia Plath and Will Percy, for example, we could readily exploit their emotional life to the point that the true significance of their lives and art diminishes. We do not really know if Will Percy ever consummated any male relationships. The closet door is locked. The key has been thrown away. But does it matter very much? Of course, gayness is very much in the public mind, but the stigma has considerably lessened in most of urban America.

Nor can we fathom who should be held the most responsible for another’s decline in madness or suicide. Hughes, for instance, was able to reclaim ownership of his life with Sylvia when he explored it in *Birthday Letters*. As the philosopher Nigel Hamilton points out, by that autobiographical means the poet beat the unscrupulous biographers at their own game.^[76] On the other hand, Victoria Glendenning had no option but to surrender to the demands of Elizabeth Bowen’s literary guardian. Yet, we still must wonder if Dr. Orne did the right thing even if his patient Anne Sexton demanded full disclosure. What about the living relatives and friends that she, in her distorted reasoning or fantasies, denounced in the privacy of his office. Such are the issues in the treating of archival records of the dead, the writing of biographies and the composing of memoirs that cannot be readily resolved. After all, who among us could bear the relentless scrutiny of a determined exposé? Who would welcome the prospect of public humiliation?

Notes

[1] Allen Tate, *Poems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 108.

[2] Charles Molesworth, "With Your Own Face On: The Origins of Confessional Poetry," *Twentieth Century Literature* 22, no. 2 (May 1976): 165. Molesworth continues: "But at least these four confessional poets (Berryman, Plath, Snodgrass, and Sexton) we find one common denominator: a split between revealing intimate details in an unvarnished context and obscuring the occult curve of their own dissociated, self-concealing emotional lives" (p. 168).

[3] Certainly that resentment of the prior generation's continued dominance was evident in the conversations with the poets Ted Hughes, Lucas Myers, Daniel Huws, Daniel Weissbort, and others at Cambridge in the mid-1950s. See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Sylvia, Ted, and St. Botolph's: A Cambridge Memoir," *Southern Review* 40 (March 2004): 69–78; quotations from Lucas Myers, *Crow Steered Bergs Appeared: A Memoir of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (Sewanee, Tenn.: Proctor's Hall Press, 2001), 7.

[4] The David Irving-Deborah Lipstadt libel case about the authenticity of the Holocaust immediately springs to mind.

[5] See for instance, Sylvia Plath Forum Home Page: <http://www.sylviaplathforum.com/>. There are 46 single-space communications that cover only from January through March of 2006.

[6] Matthew C. Vita, "Poet Sylvia Plath Stirs Passions, Controversy from the Grave Tombstone Vandalism Renews 30-Year Battle of Husband, Feminists," *Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution*, 21 May 1989, sec. A, p. 27.

[7] Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 171–72; Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, *Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes's Doomed Love* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007), 200–5.

[8] Myers, *Crow Steered*, 136. "Neither they nor Ted," Myers declares, "reckoned sufficiently with nature's abhorrence of vacuums."

[9] Hillel Italie, Associated Press, "Ted Hughes' Papers Shed New Light on Sylvia Plath, Himself," 4 April 1999.

[10] Middlebrook quoted in Italie, "Ted Hughes' Papers."

[11] Olwyn Hughes, "Letters to the Editor," *New York Review of Books* 36 (7 December 1989); Koren and Negev, *Lover of Unreason*, 106–7; Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 206; for a thorough and thoughtful reflection on these events, see Lynda K. Bundtzen, "Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's *Burning the Letters*," in *Contemporary Literature* 39 (Fall 1998): 434–51.

[12] See Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, 126–27, 150–51.

[13] Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, 184–85.

[14] Steven Erlanger, "Plath Case Kindles Debate in England over Impact on Two Literary Reputations," *Boston Globe*, 24 January 1987; Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, 220; Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 105–13. The trial was settled between the film company and Jane Anderson out of court.

[15] William Styron, *Lie Down in Darkness* (New York: New American Library, 1951); William Styron, "Why Primo Need Not Have Died," *New York Times*, 19 December, 1988, sec. A, p. 17; William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Random House, 1979); William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (New York: Random House, 1990); William Styron, *Set This House on Fire* (New York: Random House, 1960); William Styron, *A Tidewater Morning: Three Tales from Youth* (New York: Random House, 1993); James W. L. West III, ed., *Conversations with William Styron* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985).

[16] Bundtzen, "Poetic Arson," and Ted Hughes, "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals," in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 177–8; Myers, *Crow Steered*, 108 (Hughes quotation), 116.

[17] Erica Jong quoted in Italie, "Ted Hughes," Bo Emerson, "In a New Light Open to Scholars at Last, Emory archives are painting a fuller picture of late British poet laureate Ted Hughes" *Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution*, 19 March 1999, sec. F, p. 1; Nicci Gerrard, "The Colossus Diminished," *Guardian Unlimited Observer*, 28 October 2001.

[18] Eileen M. Aird, *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976); Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*; Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*; Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking, 1991); Paul Alexander, King's Head Theatre, London, with Angelica Torn playing Plath; Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 2001); Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Elisabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath* (Plymouth: Northcote House, in association with the British Council 1998); Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath—A Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2003); Emma Tennant, *Burnt Diaries* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999); Emma Tennant, *Sylvia and Ted* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001); Kate Moses, *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003); "Biography: Sylvia Plath," A & E Television Network, 2004–2005.

[19] A. Alvarez in *New York Review of Books* 36 (7 December 1989); Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*; cf. Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 76; Olwyn Hughes, "Letters to the Editor: Reviewing Sylvia Plath," *New York Review of Books*, 23 (30 September 1976).

[20] Ted Hughes, "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother," in *Birthday Letters*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998), 195–6.

[21] Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, 193–4 (quotation 194); Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, 222.

[22] Simon Davies, "Paltrow Set to Play Sylvia Plath: Hollywood Film to Portray the Love Affair between British Poet Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath and Her Subsequent Suicide," *Ottawa Citizen*, 14 August 1999.

[23] Natasha Hulugalle, "Edge, King's Head Theatre, London, Sylvia, Christine Jeffs," in *Culture Wars* (Institute of Ideas, 2004).

[24] Al Alvarez, "Ted, Sylvia, and Me," *The Observer*, 4 January 2004, in *Guardian Unlimited* argues that Paltrow's Sylvia in the film gained in representativeness from the absence of her poetry. I somewhat disagree but what about the absence of Ted's? That omission, backed by law, diminished his representation in the film considerably.

[25] BBC News, "Plath Film Angers Daughter," 3 February 2003.

[26] Ibid.

[27] See Felix Cheong, "Cross-Pollination in Poetry, Frieda Hughes Channels Voices and Images," in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* 3 (April 2004); Frieda Hughes, *Waxworks* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002); Idem, *Stonepicker* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2001).

[28] See James Lough, "Current World Lurks in Frieda Hughes' Writing," *Denver Post*, 8 November 1998; and Dan Schneider, "This Old Poem #62," <http://www.cosmoetica.com/TOP62-DESS9.htm>. Frieda Hughes's poetry has won some praise but also some contemptuous dismissal.

[29] Frieda Hughes, "My Mother." Frieda Hughes loyally supported Ted Hughes's claim that the couple were moving toward a genuine reconciliation at the time she killed herself. But she had only his word, of course, on this matter. See Suzi Feay "Books: A Literary Collaboration that Began with Love," *The Independent Online Edition*, 7 March 2004.

[30] "Gossip and Rumors Archive," 7 March 2001.

[31] I listened to some of the St. Botolph's poets recite their verse; it seemed a part of their vocation. Admittedly, though, I never heard Sylvia and Ted engaged in readings together.

[32] On Sylvia's efforts to help Hughes's career, see Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, 67–8. On the attitudes of the poets toward commercialism, see Wyatt-Brown, "Ted, Sylvia, and St. Botolph's," 352–68.

[33] Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, 171.

[34] See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Sylvia Plath, Depression and Suicide: A New Interpretation," in Frederico Pereiro, ed., *Fourteenth International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: Las Navas, Avila, July 1997* (Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada, 1998): 177–97; Idem, "Reuben Davis, Sylvia Plath, and Emotional Struggle," in *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 431–59. See also, Jane Feinmann, "Rhyme, Reason and Depression: New Research Supports the Claim by Sylvia Plath's Doctor that an Inherited Condition Led to her Suicide," *Guardian Unlimited Observer* 16 February 1993. Also see Jillian Becker, *Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003). Dr. John Horder, Plath's psychiatrist, years later realized that "chemical imbalances" in the brain, usually inherited, affected Plath's mental state and that Aurelia Plath, along with a "sister and niece all suffered from severe depression."

[35] <http://specialcollections.library.emory.edu/guides-lit-britir.html>. "Restrictions: Access to selected files is restricted without the written permission of the copyright holder. Other selected files are closed for

a period of 25 years (2022) or the lifetime of Carol Hughes, whichever is greater. Writings by Ted Hughes and photographs may not be reproduced without the written permission of Carol Hughes.”

[36] Hughes quoted in Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and the Story of the Birthday Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 25–6.

[37] Malcolm, *Silent Woman*, 129, 130.

[38] Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 329. See Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (New York: Little, Brown, 1994). Her daughter wrote a candid memoir about her difficult relationship with her mother.

[39] Martin J. Orne, “The Sexton Tapes,” *New York Times*, 23 July 1991, sec. A, p. 21. See also, Orne’s Foreword in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 39–42. Natania Rosenfeld denounced some of Middlebrook’s critics as “incoherent” and unable to recognize that there is no “such a thing as unmediated truth.” Letters to the Editor, *New York Times*, 6 October 1991, p. BR34. See also, Alessandra Stanley, “Poet Told All: Therapist Provides the Record,” *New York Times*, 15 July 1991, sec. A, p. 1–2. Diane Middlebrook well explains her relationship to Orne in “The Poet’s Art Mined the Patient’s Anguish,” *New York Times*, 26 July 1991, p. A26. She and the publishers were quite aware of the “moral complexities” involved. Since Linda Sexton was most cooperative, Middlebrook felt that she owed her and Dr. Orne her deepest gratitude.

[40] Middlebrook quoted in Eugene Garfield, “Psychiatrist and Biographer Differ over Anne Sexton’s Suicide. Was it Preventable?” *Current Comments*, no. 11 (16 March 1992): p. 38.

[41] Howard D. Kibel, “Sexton’s Psychiatrist Violated Ethics,” *New York Times*, 9 August 1991, sec. A, p. 26.

[42] *New York Times* quoted in Diane Middlebrook, “Telling Secrets,” in *The Seductions of Biography*, Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 124.

[43] Middlebrook, “Telling Secrets,” 126–27.

[44] *Ibid.*, 128; Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1999).

[45] Middlebrook, “Telling Secrets,” 11; *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479, (1965). This case concerned the Connecticut law by which married couples were prohibited from using contraceptives. The statute was overruled. *Roe v. Wade* was seen as an extension of the doctrine.

[46] Victoria Glendenning, “The S Word,” *New York Times Book Review*, 27 March 2005, 4.

[47] Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992); Hazel Holt, *A Lot to Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym* (New York: Dutton, 1991).

[48] See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 253–70.

[49] William Alexander Percy, *Collected Poems of William Alexander Percy* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1943); William Alexander Percy, *Sappho in Levkas and Other Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915).

See Jean-Claude Lemagny, "Photographies du Baron de Gloeden" in Wilhelm von Gloeden, Baron, *Taormina, Debut de Siecle*: (Paris: Chêne, 1975), 5–11; Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970), 62–3; William Stanley Braithwaite, ed., *Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1914 and Year Book of American Poetry* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1914), 180, 190.

[50] John Seymour Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 8A, copy of the text in author's possession. An insert later adds the comment that Will Percy and his First World War friend Gerstle Mack met the poet Siegfried Sassoon in England. Will remembered, when talking to Erwin, that Mack was "fascinated at the man's intellect and physical beauty and so was I, I suppose." Erwin continued, Sassoon "was a British Army Officer, staggeringly handsome, sensitive, with great talent, a homosexual whose masculinity placed him beyond most gossip and innuendo." Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 8A. On Will Percy's sophistication and travels abroad, see Ben Wise, "The Cosmopolitan Strategies of William Alexander Percy," paper kindly lent by the author.

[51] Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 19.

[52] William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 16–41.

[53] *Ibid.*, 111 and 112.

[54] Erwin's grandfather, Captain John Seymour McNeilly, was married first to May Percy. She was Will Percy's great aunt. But McNeilly remarried after the childless May Percy's death, and by that union John Seymour Erwin's father was born. The McNeillys, however, were Percy cousins by another line. John Erwin explained all this to the novelist Walker Percy, who had inquired into the genealogical errors in a family history. See Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 21.

[55] John Seymour Erwin, Resume, in author's possession.

[56] Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," Chapter entitled "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 3.

[57] Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," Chapter entitled "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 3; Erwin to the author, 13 January 1995, in author's possession. Erwin wrote me, "The nearest that I can come to explaining my complete acceptance of my financial affairs and Catherine's, and the totally unimportance of WHO had the money is that our feelings were at all time in that first two years concerned with each other—not with any material thing. After all I had some money from my grandfather Erwin's estate. But my guilt on continuing to allow Will Percy to pay for my tuition plus a generous living allowance—now that was something I never liked at the time. Nor do I even now. I told him this later."

[58] Erwin to author, 13 January 1995, in author's possession.

[59] Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 16–17.

[60] Erwin, "A Harp Tuned for Mourning," 11.

[61] See Percy to Erwin, 20 June 1940 and n.d., 1940, Erwin papers in author's possession.

[62] Walker Percy in Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*, xi. See also Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975), 4.

[63] Shelby Foote to Walker Percy, 11 December 1973, in Jay Tolson, ed., *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy* (New York: Center for Documentary Studies in association with W. W. Norton, 1997), 181.

[64] Malvina Hoffman fashioned and cast the bronze statue of the knight that Will Percy had commissioned to preside over the grave of his father, Senator LeRoy Percy, in the Greenville cemetery. See Wyatt-Brown, *House of Percy*, 3, 4, 10, 21, 258, 259, 331, 354. Even Kenneth Haxton, the ex-husband of the novelist Josephine Haxton, offered nothing at all at an interview in his Greenville residence. Under the pen name of Ellen Douglas, she had written a deeply bitter roman à clef, in which a woman discovers the hidden homosexual life of her husband. Also see Ellen Douglas, *A Lifetime Burning* (New York: Random House, 1982).

[65] See Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930–1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 85–93. King criticizes Walker Percy's sentimentalizing of "Uncle Will's" undoubted racism. King, however, does not seem to guess that Will Percy's lifelong melancholy had much to do with his homosexual inclinations and his recognition of how that orientation affected his relationship with his father, family, and southern community.

[66] I have a tape of the conversation, but it is not very audible.

[67] I have so far been unable to locate the letter.

[68] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Will, Walker and Honor Dying: The Percys and Literary Creativity," in Winfred B. Moore, Jr. and Joseph F. Tripp, eds., *Looking South: Chapters in the Story of an American Region* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 229–58.

[69] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "LeRoy Percy and 'Sunnyside': Planter Mentality and Italian Peonage in the Mississippi Delta," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1991): 60–84. The essay was reprinted in Jeannie M. Whyne, ed., *Shadows over Sunnyside: An Arkansas Plantation in Transition, 1830–1945* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 77–94.

[70] See correspondence with the author. See also Gary Neal Richards, "Another Southern Renaissance: Sexual Otherness in Mid-Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction," (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1996), 22.

[71] Erwin to Anne and Bertram Wyatt-Brown 16 July 1997, in author's possession.

[72] David Horace Harwell, ed, "Walker Percy Remembered: The Words of Those Who Knew Him," (under consideration at a university press). I am grateful to Professor Harwell for supplying me with these excerpts from his work. Harwell asked Phinizy Percy, "What specifically in the book did you have objections about? Was it all over Uncle Will, or what?" He replied, "I think it was in part about Uncle Will, probably. It is a very candid book. But I believe in the First Amendment. As I say, though, I'm particularly impressed by the research. How anyone would get that interested in another family, I just can't understand it" (p. 223).

[73] See Michael J. Kreyling, review of *The House of Percy*, by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Journal of Southern History*, 62 (February 1996):193.

[74] Middlebrook, "Telling Secrets," 8–9.

[75] Michael O'Brien, *Placing the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 86–7.

[76] Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 275–8.