

Literary Biomythography

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Myth-making is endemic in the life histories of novelists and poets. Literary biographies are complicit in the process even when they seek to demythologize their subjects. This article outlines a five-phase development in the Brontë myth as the paradigm of 'biomythography'. Life writings about Byron, Dickens and Sylvia Plath are then shown to follow a similar pattern and to exemplify, respectively, the characteristics of celebrity, idolatry and martyrdom that typify myth-making and which literary biography both helps to create and attempts to expose.

What are the Gospels but a series of varying attempts at the art of biography?
(A.S. Byatt, *Possession*, 1991: 384)

Several of Addison's *Spectator* papers were of the first importance in the growth of Bardolatry ... Dr Johnson's 1765 edition of the Works of Shakespeare and David Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee four years later were long-prepared milestones in the history of the Bard's reputation.

(J. Bate, *The genius of Shakespeare*, 1997: 169)

Samuel Johnson was the most fortunate event in English literary biography. In three major roles, as the first important theorist and an able practitioner of the art and then as the subject of the greatest biography, he is the giant who bestrides our story.

(R.D. Altick, *Lives and letters. A history of literary biography*, 1965: 46)

BIOMYTHOGRAPHY

Behind the latter-day literary myths, from the Brontë sisters to Sylvia Plath, stand three superordinate biographical myths of Olympian stature each casting a particular light through the historical mist. My epigraphs identify the subjects. The life histories of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels

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emit a sense of biographical sanctity down the centuries whose diffused light infiltrates later hagiographies, shines brightly in the nineteenth century (especially haloing the head of Charlotte Brontë), and can be detected even after Strachey. Shakespeare, the invisible man, whose biographical absence makes his artistic presence even more dramatic, occupies the throne of literary idolatry. Dr Johnson, whose biographical presence in Boswell looms massively over succeeding centuries, is biography's first national celebrity author. All subsequent biographies are touched in one way or another by these enduring presences. Since literary biographies have a special concern for the life of the imagination, mythologizing plays a bigger role in this sub-genre than with other subjects. In fact, saintliness, idolatry and celebrity appear so frequently in literary biography that 'biomythography' is a more apposite term since it recognizes the role of these aspects of myth-making. It encompasses the necessary invention of self and identity by the writer, and the virtual representation of the subject by the biographer. In doing so, it alters our perceptions of the genre by acknowledging that the biographer is dealing both with historical data and with the self-projections of the author in his or her life and literature. It expresses both the elevated status of canonical writers, the sense of their remoteness from the ordinary, that whiff of otherness that implies access to magic and the supernatural; yet it reminds us also of the fact that the painstaking, historical documentation of life writing is, by its nature, incomplete and can never hope to capture the elusive 'life' without the aid of narrative imagination (Runyan, 1984: 77; Denzin, 1989: 25). It will be apparent by now that I am not using the term 'myth' in its Classical sense, nor even in its most prominent sense in literary analysis where Frye (1957) and others have seen the genres and plot patterns of many works of literature as representations of basic mythic paradigms. I use 'myth' in the colloquial sense to mean notions that either lack a factual basis, or have evolved and left it behind. The questions I want to ask are the following:

- How are 'biomyths' formed within our literary culture in a genre where facts are supposed to be preeminent?
- What roles do saintliness, idolatry and celebrity play in their creation?
- In its efforts to deconstruct literary myths is modern biography free from perpetuating them?

Presently, I take Byron, Dickens and Sylvia Plath as examples of celebrity, idolatry and saintliness but, first, I need to consider what are the phases of biographical myth-making with which modern biographers are faced. Recent biographies of the Brontës (Barker, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Miller, 2001) illuminate this issue and suggest the paradigm for the process of myth-making.

MYTH-MAKING: THE BRONTË PARADIGM

Five overlapping phases can be distinguished in the biomythography of the Brontës:

1 Facts: selection and 'spin'

Mrs Gaskell, like any biographer, had her own agenda. Her concern was to select and edit her data to present Charlotte as both a martyr to duty and a writer blessed with extraordinary talents. She elides the two cleverly, seeing Charlotte as one who 'must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others' (Gaskell, 1975: 334). Literary genius, domestic duty and Christian principles are all blended in this phrasing; it catches in miniature the 'spin' that Mrs Gaskell gives throughout the *Life*, one which enables her to offset any criticism of her subject's supposed 'coarseness' (that very unsaintly term used by Victorian critics to describe anything they considered unfeminine and improper) (e.g., Gaskell, 1975: 335, 495–96) with a compensating image of the dutiful vicar's daughter. Exhibiting the skills of any present-day 'spin doctor', she has the cunning both to overstate and understate her case as required. Hence, in protecting the respectability of Charlotte and her sisters, she is prepared to all but deny them their imaginative capacities. 'Thoughtless critics ... who have objected to the representation of coarseness', she argues, 'should learn that, not from the imagination – not from internal conception – but from the hard, cruel facts, pressed down, by external life, upon their very senses, for long months and years together, did they write out what they saw, obeying the stern dictates of their consciences' (Gaskell, 1975: 335). This has the doubly curious effect of belittling the Brontës' imaginative powers and stressing the confessional nature of their fictions, as if the autobiographical explanation would deflate rather than exacerbate criticism – an oddly overplayed defence for a fellow novelist to mount. Conversely, she underplays the central and contentious issue in the Brontë story of Charlotte's relationship with Constantin Heger. Charlotte's strong affection for Monsieur Heger and her fictional portrayals of him and his wife in *Villette* and *The Professor* were a source of embarrassment to Mrs Gaskell, not least when she visited Brussels and Mdm. Heger refused to see her. Her technique is to understate the coolness that developed between Charlotte and Mdm. Heger and to explain the 'silent estrangement' between the two women in terms of religious differences (Gaskell, 1975: 263–64). Not only does the biographical process begin from inherently unreliable sources (partial evidence, uncertain memories, letters slanted towards their recipients) but the facts are soon spinning in the imagination of the biographer with her own agenda. Well

might Mrs Gaskell say: 'And I never *did* write a biography, and I don't know how to set about it; you see you have to be accurate and keep to facts; a most difficult thing for a writer of fiction' (Gaskell in Uglow, 1999: 397).

2 *Fact into fiction*

The fictionalizing of the Brontës' lives took a variety of forms, three in particular: factual sisters promoted themselves as fictional brothers in the pseudonyms they adopted in an effort to protect themselves from the male chauvinist prejudices of publishers and reviewers; the use of their own lives as the imaginative source for their novels; and the images that two novelists, Charlotte and Mrs Gaskell, ostensibly writing biographically, created of the three sisters. The gender issue came to a head with the famous incident, recounted by Mrs Gaskell and subsequent biographers, of Charlotte and Anne setting out in a thunderstorm, travelling to London overnight, and revealing their true identities to Charlotte's publisher, George Smith. Charlotte gave her own account in a letter to Mary Taylor on 4 September 1848; George Smith gave his over 50 years later in his *Memoir* of 1902. Biography soon set to work, fictionalizing the incident in different ways. It had been interpolated by Mrs Gaskell (Gaskell, 1975: 345–47) and, among many others, has been depicted and evaluated (Barker, 1994: 557–60), and imaginatively dramatised (Gordon, 1994: 167–68). The seven major novels also make their contribution by showing heroines in adversity, none more so than Charlotte's last and most autobiographical work, *Villette*, 'the last ... of the writer's fictional attempts to come to terms with her own loveless existence' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 399–400). Lucy Snowe is but one of the many representations of the educated, single woman in the restricted, and emotionally deprived role of governess/teacher that recur in the Brontës' works. And, of course, both Charlotte and Mrs Gaskell had the motive and the talent to fictionalize when writing biography: Charlotte in her 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell' and 'Preface' to Emily's novel, creating images of unworldly, isolated young women living intimately amidst both the rough vulgarities and romantic beauties of Nature; and Mrs Gaskell portraying Charlotte the lonely suffering woman rather than Currer Bell the successful novelist.

3 *Fiction into myth*

The transition from fiction into myth is characterized by two particular features: the romanticizing of Haworth, the Parsonage, and the surrounding moors as an isolated, lonely setting against which these three mythic

figures could enact their solitary tragedy with the stoicism of Greek drama; and the tendency to use the characters in the seven novels to bolster the stereotypical images of the three sisters.

Haworth and the Parsonage are presented as a setting from a singularly gloomy fairy tale in Mrs Gaskell's *Life*. The latter is 'a dreary, dreary place literally *paved* with rain-blackened tombstones' and occupied by an old man 'brooding like a Ghoul over the graves' who 'hardly looked human'. Charlotte is placed in this setting: 'Miss Brontë put me so in mind of her own "Jane Eyre" ... there was something touching in the sight of that little creature entombed in such a place, and moving about herself like a spirit' (Gaskell, 1975: 429–31). Charlotte is here depicted as moving from fact to fiction to being 'like a spirit' from myth all within one brief paragraph.

Beyond the Vicarage and the village lies the wider mythic landscape of *Wuthering Heights*, created by Emily and deliberately mythologized by Charlotte in her 'Preface', which concludes with a paragraph of poetic prose that invests Emily's story with the qualities of Greek myth. *Wuthering Heights* is seen as a stone book, coming into being through an irresistible creative power that hews a gigantic statue from the granite rocks on the moors around Haworth (Currer Bell, 'Preface', 1965: 41).

And what of the characters of the 'three weird sisters', in Ted Hughes's unkind phrase, who are situated on the 'blasted heath' above Haworth? It is ironic that, though the Brontë sisters created complex characters in their stories, they themselves became fixed into stereotypes in their own life story: Charlotte as the long-suffering victim of duty; Emily as the wild child of genius; Anne as the quiet, conventional one who conforms to the demands of society and religion (Barker, 1994: xvii). So strong has the imagery of this landscape with figures become that the combination of biographical documentation and literary power has produced myths that seem endlessly adaptable. They can be shaped into our preferred likeness. Hence, to the respectable, the Brontës are decent, well-behaved, properly brought-up, conventional young women; to the religious, they are icons of piety; to romantics, tragic heroines in a wild landscape; to realists, spinsters of modest means and limited opportunities, reliant upon their own resources; to feminists, symbols of Everywoman struggling for freedom against the restrictions of a patriarchal society.

The malleability of myths is the key to their real nature: they evolve with the character of a living organism, and they adapt to the sub-cultures which they inhabit. What might seem like a sequence of discrete phases turn out to be loosely linked, unpredictable developments that spread like a cultural virus. The next phase accelerates this process.

4 Myth into 'faction'

'Factions' in the world of journalism and television are stories with a basis in fact but embellished with invented elements. The Brontë myth has been repeatedly appropriated in this way in our culture. Charlotte has become the iconic figurehead, Haworth the shrine (Miller, 2001: 106). Factions in different media have proliferated: ballets, plays, romantic fictions, Hollywood blockbusters, TV films ... Spielberg is due in on the act with a new film, *Brontë*. All this serves to detach the Brontës from factual biography and to give them new lives as fictional characters. The job of the modern biographer is to demythologize this process, knowing, even as the attempt is made, that it is in the nature of the organism to reconstitute itself.

5 Demythologizing the Brontës

Virginia Woolf famously described the aim of biography as the effort to unite the 'granite-like' solidity of verifiable evidence with the 'rainbow-like' intangibility of personality (Woolf, 1967: 229). Barker's monumental biography, *The Brontës* (1994), certainly provides solid evidence, emphasizes context and historicity, and counters the myth with exhaustive data on the family and the wider community. Gordon (1994) probes the interior emotional life of her subject, representing Charlotte as driven by a passion for words – for exploring in the language of her fictions the nature and role of women. She leaves the granite to Barker and seeks the rainbow, conscious no doubt that the search for such an end is illusory. Miller (2001) situates the Brontës' works and family history in the larger context of cultural myth-making. She is alert to her own potential vulnerability, admitting that her background as a literary critic may be perceived as giving a distorting slant to her study. All three confront the myth that Mrs Gaskell released. Barker is blunt:

The portrayal of Charlotte as the martyred heroine of a tragic life, driven by duty and stoically enduring her fate, served its purpose at the time. Charlotte's wicked sense of humour, her sarcasm, her childhood *joie de vivre* which enlivens the juvenalia, are completely ignored. So, too, are her prejudices, her unpleasant habit of always seeing the worst in people, her bossiness against which her sisters rebelled, her flirtations with William Weightman and George Smith and her traumatic love for Monsieur Heger. What remains may be a more perfect human being, but it was not Charlotte Brontë.

(Barker, 1994: 829)

Gordon is succinct: 'Mrs Gaskell tells a coherent story ... a lasting imaginative truth based on a selection of facts' (Gordon, 1994: 329), a

description that simultaneously both hints at Gaskell's particular mythologizing and offers a general definition of biography. Miller (2001: 169) is subtle. She acknowledges the advances in modern scholarship but reminds us that every biography remains a provisional statement, a child of its time. Each generation reconceives the Brontës in its own terms, tells 'their story from a new perspective'. Neither heavy data nor imaginative insight will abolish myth-making; indeed, their combined power ensures its continuance.

Three distinctive approaches reflecting three preoccupations of current literary biography: the fashion for no-stone-unturned research and biographies with massive documentation; the wish to identify the springs of the creative impulse and their workings in art; and the impetus towards metabiography – the search for transferable principles in the studies of particular authors. The paradox of this whole process through its various phases is that the very effort of demythologizing can also lead to further mutations of the myths it attempts to explode.

The five overlapping phases of the paradigm can thus be summarized as follows:

- 1) the first biographer is commissioned, selects and establishes a factual history, giving the 'facts' a particular 'spin';
- 2) the facts become fictionalized, typically through the writings of the subject as well as those of the biographer;
- 3) the fiction, in turn, becomes mythologized as its characters and landscape become symbols;
- 4) the myth is transmuted into a variety of 'factions' in different media – stories accepted as based on fact but embellished with invented elements; and
- 5) modern biographers attempt to demythologize this process by returning to primary sources.

VARIATIONS

How plausible is it to generalize from the Brontë paradigm and apply it to Byron or Dickens or Sylvia Plath? Clearly, in the biomythographies of these subjects the emphases will necessarily differ from author to author: celebrity reaches new heights with Byron; it metamorphoses into idolatry with Dickens; and, given the late twentieth-century post-Christian culture, saintliness is replaced by secular martyrdom in the case of Sylvia Plath. Biography, of course, is not solely responsible for such developments but, in describing and accounting for them, it both shows a willing complicity in the processes and appears to conform to the phased pattern of biomythography discussed above. The variations which follow exemplify the

three dominant themes with which I began: in each instance, the *initial* thrust towards celebrity, idolatry or martyrdom owes much to the energy and behaviour of the biographeer. I introduce each with a contemporary ‘snapshot’.

Byron

Here is Byron, as described by Lady Blessington:

Byron had so unquenchable a thirst for celebrity, that no means were left untried that might attain it: this frequently led to his expressing opinions totally at variance with his actions and real sentiments ... there was no sort of celebrity he did not, at some period or other, condescend to seek, and he was not over nice in the means, provided he obtained the end.

(MacCarthy, 2003: x)

How did biography react to such a personality? From first to last, biographers have conspired, deliberately or indirectly, in the making of the Byronic myth. The phases follow the Brontë paradigm. Byron’s friend and fellow poet, Thomas Moore, wrote the first authentic *Life* in 1830 being both helped and hindered by Byron’s surviving family, friends and acquaintances (as Mrs Gaskell was in researching Charlotte Brontë). His facts were also subject to selection and ‘spin’: he does not – indeed, dare not at the time – deal with Byron’s homosexual experiences. The fictionalization of Byron’s life was self-generated, initiated in the persona of the moody, passionate, lonely wanderer who crossed Western Europe thinly disguised as Childe Harold and carried forward in the more explicitly autobiographical *Don Juan*. From these poems, *Manfred*, *The Corsair* and others arose the Romantic figure of myth – the Byronic Hero, a figure described by Macaulay as ‘a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection’ (quoted in Christiansen, 1989: 201). As Christiansen notes, the Byronic myth mutated rapidly. It was soon compounded with over 30 biographies, memoirs and critiques published within five years of Byron’s death; and, according to Holmes, the biographical tally alone now stands at over 200 (Holmes in Batchelor, 1995: 18). The shift from myth to ‘faction’ is described by another recent biographer who comments on ‘the monster known as Byronism ... the mythologized Byron that virtually rose from his corpse at Missolonghi’:

From Byron’s lifetime to the present day, competing voices have invoked the poet as an idol in their own image: hero and martyr of revolutionary struggle, aristocratic aesthete and dandy, transgressive rebel of polymorphous sexuality fuelled by forbidden substances and with sulfurous whiffs of the

Prince of Darkness swirling about him. These last mutations were recharged by rock culture's canonisation of self-destructive artists hallowed by early death: Elvis and James Dean, while 'His Satanic Majesty' Mick Jagger still pays tribute to the sneering, demonic Byron of Victorian nightmare.

(Eisler, 2000: 752)

Byron's 'posthumous life', like that of the Brontës, has been littered with relics, paintings, literary imitations, operas and musical compositions, ballets, plays, films and, of course, the inevitable 'legacy of kitsch' (Eisler, 2000: 758). There are few more formidable myths anywhere for the modern biographer to demythologize, as the exhibition 'Mad, bad and dangerous: the cult of Lord Byron' (National Portrait Gallery, 2003) demonstrated. Eisler and MacCarthy are free from the constraints imposed upon Leslie Marchand who produced the first thoroughly researched modern biography in 1957. MacCarthy comments: 'Marchand, writing at a time when homosexuality was still a criminal offence under British law, was compelled to temper his account not only of Byron's incestuous relations with his half-sister Augusta but also, more crucially, of his recurring loves for adolescent boys (MacCarthy, 2003: xii). Both these recent biographers have enjoyed a more open climate and had access to the John Murray archive so that a much fuller account of their subject emerges. Yet the myth continues to mutate. MacCarthy faces it squarely in her title and in her part headings: 'The making of a legend', 'Celebrity in exile' and 'The Byron cult'. The effort to demythologize is explicit. Yet, at the end, even she cannot resist a dramatic finale, recalling the Gothic scene in 1938, which she paints with a novelist's relish, when the Byron family vault beneath the parish church of Hucknall Torkard was re-opened. Officially, this was for archaeological reasons; unofficially, it was because the vicar wanted to see if Byron was still in his coffin! It was nearly midnight before the embalmed corpse was finally revealed, still intact and recognizable as when it was placed there 114 years earlier (MacCarthy, 2003: 571-74). On such stories myths continue to thrive.

Dickens

The snapshot of Dickens is from his first American visit in 1842, taken by Edgar Johnson, following Forster's account:

... his lionization began to swell to embarrassing proportions; [Dickens was mobbed], women clinging to him while they furtively snipped bits of fur from his coat to treasure as souvenirs, and filling the passage with a soprano clamour of adulation.

(Johnson, 1986: 202-03)

Like Byron, Dickens was a celebrity at the age of 24 – Pickwick did for the novelist what Childe Harold had done for the poet (Kaplan, 1988: 82). Unlike Byron, whose fame turned into notoriety and ensured his exile in Europe, Dickens was idolized at home and feted in America. Unlike Byron, too, whose celebrity was primarily focused in the upper classes with knowledge of his life and works, Dickens spoke to and for a mass audience. Chesterton was not alone in elevating Dickens into a god: ‘He approached the people like a deity and poured out his riches and his blood’ (Chesterton, 1975: 77). Johnson makes the specific link with Bardolatry and concludes that Dickens alone among English novelists can stand with Shakespeare (Johnson, 1986: 570).

The pattern of Dickens’s biomythography is the familiar one, but there are some significant variations. Both Dickens and Forster knew from an early stage that the latter would be his biographer. Forster as Dickens’s closest friend had unparalleled access to data and personal knowledge of his subject over a period of 33 years. But the ‘spin’ here, while different in substance from Mrs Gaskell’s on Charlotte Brontë, is typically Victorian. Forster gives a minimalist account of Dickens’s separation from his wife, omits Mrs Dickens and Nelly Ternan from the biography altogether, and elects not to draw upon his own unrivalled store of personal reminiscences but upon public documents which he then destroyed. There is no conspiracy here but there are elements of collusion which censor the facts and then ‘spin’ them to create the image of a life that is suitable for public veneration.

The fictionalization of the facts of his life was Dickens’s own. Dickens called *David Copperfield* his ‘favourite child’ (Preface to 1867 edition). This is the novel where Dickens shows his skill in blending truth and fiction (Kaplan, 1988: 245). This ‘interweaving’, as he called it, occurs most powerfully in his two first-person *Bildungsromane* (the other being *Great Expectations*) and is also reflected in the rich variety of his characters many of whom are based upon real people.

The shift from fiction to myth is easily effected from this basis that Dickens himself created; and biography is implicated. Kaplan, more than any other modern biographer, interprets Dickens’s life and works in mythic terms, seeing *David Copperfield* as Dickens’s transformation of ‘his private memories and his emotional life into a public myth about himself’ (Kaplan, 1988: 249). Dickens not only transforms himself and others; he also initiates a topographical myth that biographers right down to Peter Ackroyd have helped to develop: Dickens’s London vies with Hardy’s Wessex and Wordsworth’s Lake District as one of the prime sites in the literary biomythography of Britain. The starkest evidence of myth detaching itself from fiction is the small, half-timbered house in Portsmouth Street, off Kingsway which still claims to be The Old

Curiosity Shop, even though Dickens made it clear that his shop no longer existed.

This fake has been photographed countless times, appeared in TV documentaries and is a seemingly permanent symbol of the factions that have been derived from Dickens's life and works. Plays and films are endlessly recycled and reworked every decade, testimony not only to the power of the Dickensian myth within our culture but to the singular affinity that both his life and works have with theatre.

There was much for the biographers of the late twentieth century to demythologize. Two examples must serve to show how biographers have, in fact, re-mythologized Dickens's story. The first is Dickens's relationship with Nelly Ternan. The modern biographer's task is to establish its nature with hard evidence; but, when the evidence is merely circumstantial, there is ample scope for further myths to flourish. Was Nelly Ternan Dickens's mistress? Edgar Johnson (1986: 500) judges it as 'not unlikely'; Kaplan (1988: 410) says it is 'likely'; Ackroyd (1999: 967) disagrees and says that 'it seems inconceivable that theirs was in any sense a "consummated" affair', and he suggests that their relationship was an acting out of one of Dickens's most enduring fictional fantasies; that of 'sexless marriage with a young idealised virgin'. So much for Dickens's biographers; what of Nelly Ternan's? Claire Tomalin suggests two narratives for the years 1861–65, one which accounts for Nelly's time in France by the need for secrecy over her pregnancy with Dickens's child; the other which sees this foreign travel as just part of the education which Dickens had supported for her and her family for some years (Tomalin, 1991: 147–49). In her final chapter, 'Myths and morals', she comes off the fence and suggests, on balance, that it seems most likely that Nelly was Dickens's lover and mistress (Tomalin, 1991: 261). Yet, even then, there is a postscript. Tomalin adds a final few pages on 'The death of Dickens' with fascinating fresh evidence that she received only in 1990/91 that Dickens did not die at Gads Hill as Georgina and Forster testified but at the house he rented for Nelly in Peckham some 25 miles away. With the same sense of fictional freedom that MacCarthy shows in her description of the opening of Byron's tomb, Tomalin constructs a dramatic 3-hour journey for Nelly and her dying lover in a closed carriage drawn by two horses in order to get him home for a decent, respectable death in his own dining room (Tomalin, 1991: 277–79). New evidence or new myth? Biomythography feeds on doubt.

The second example is Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1990/1999). It is long (1200 pages), exhaustively researched, and innovative. Written by a novelist on a novelist, its one-word title signals its focus on the complexities of character, with all the contradictions that Dickens's restless energy entailed. It also interprets the art of literary biography afresh. Some common

biographical conventions are not observed: there are no chapter titles, no part divisions, no running heads with dates. The flow of life seems to be Ackroyd's aim. Nor is his Dickens allowed the comfort of historical distance. In the fifth of the seven imaginative interludes scattered through the book, Ackroyd takes part in a dramatized conversation with the novelist in the Geffrye Museum (Ackroyd, 1999: 793–96), which turns on the issue of biography and fiction as means of understanding the self. In the course of some polite fencing between the biographer and his subject, the fictional Dickens bursts out with, 'Oh, biographers! Biographers are simply novelists without imagination!' After a few more probes at his subject's identity, which Dickens counters with the remark: 'Are you saying that I live in a world of my own devising?', Ackroyd throws in the towel and replies: 'Actually, I don't know. I'm making all this up.' This interlude figures as a *mise en abyme* for the whole biography, a biography which deliberately blurs the boundaries between history and fiction. In doing so, Ackroyd in effect re-mythologizes the figure of Dickens as a man who, as he says in another interlude, 'saw reality as a reflection of his own fiction' (Ackroyd, 1999: 994).

Sylvia Plath

The snapshot of Sylvia Plath is a self-portrait:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it –

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade ...

She possesses – is possessed by – a unique skill:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

(From: 'Lady Lazarus', *Ariel*, 1965: 16–17)

Sylvia Plath's suicide on 11 February 1963 has provoked a 'posthumous life' of over 40 years, a decade longer than her actual life, during which time she has achieved remarkable fame. Search the net and Google takes just 1/10th of a second to record 83,800 references under her name. Why this extraordinary interest in someone who published just one novel and

one slim volume of poems during her own lifetime? Clearly, the reasons are more than literary. Here are four:

- 1) her suicide at the age of 30 by a woman whose writing was uniquely personal – writing that anatomized her own identity as daughter, wife and mother;
- 2) fascination at her marriage to an even more famous poet, Ted Hughes; their often troubled relationship and separation in 1962; and Ted Hughes's admission that one volume of Plath's Journals 'disappeared' and that he burnt her last Journal in his desire to protect their children (Hughes, 1994: 177–90; Wagner, 2001: 12);
- 3) the rigorous control that the Plath Estate, in which Ted's older sister Olwyn played a significant part, exercised over the poetry, novel, letters and journals, making any publication both legally difficult and highly protracted; and
- 4) her death at the time when the 'second wave' feminist movement was getting underway in the 1960s for which she quickly became an iconic figure.

In all, a potent mix for both myth-making and martyrdom. Biographers continue to be fascinated (Malcolm, 1995: 66) and to have a hard time making sense of it. What is pertinent here is the opportunity to observe the process of mythologizing while the pattern is mutating. Currently, we are in phase three and edging into the next, the phase of commercial and media exploitation.

The facts have been subject to distortion and 'spin' from the start. The three main sources are:

- 1) the censorship of information by the Plath Estate – not even Aurelia Plath can quote from her own daughter's letters home without official approval;
- 2) the 'spin' that the first biographers put on her life where Anne Stevenson (1989) was seen as unduly influenced by Olwyn's view of Sylvia as sick, violent and self-destructive; where Paul Alexander (1991) seemed to express the fawning admiration of a Plath devotee; and where Linda Wagner-Martin (1987) could be regarded as an opportunist intent on creating a feminist icon; and
- 3) the perception of Sylvia's life that emerges from her novel, poetry, journals and letters, as well as from Hughes's writings (1994: 177–90), of her two 'warring selves': her external image, notably in her *Letters home*, of 'Sivvy', the happy-go-lucky success; and her private, tortured self beneath this surface which emerges in her *Journals* and in *Ariel* (Stevenson, 1989: 22–23, 163–65, 262). Given that

her autobiographical motivation is a pervasive, deliberate search for self-knowledge and its literary representation, biographers cannot ignore its data.

The facts of her life and her descent into suicide have been fictionalized both by the two poets and by the writers of memoirs and biographies, all spinning their stories in a sophisticated game of Chinese whispers. The posthumous life was aptly described by Alvarez as 'the myth of the poet as a sacrificial victim' (Alvarez, 1974: 55); and his memoir became 'the foundation text of the Plath legend' (Malcolm, 1995: 20). The focal period is, inevitably, the end game – the six or seven months from July 1962 to her death the following February when much of *Ariel* was written and *The Bell Jar* was published. Both interrogate her own identity – fictionalizing it, symbolizing it, attacking it, celebrating it and finally destroying it. Has there ever been such a self-lacerating analysis by a writer? Identity is the subject for both the writer and the biographer. Plath's self-representation is expressed differently in the novel and the poems. Esther Greenwood's story falls into two distinct halves before and after a suicide attempt similar to the one Sylvia Plath made in 1953. It is a novel that falls somewhere between autobiographical fiction and self-administered psychotherapy (see the American publishers' comments quoted in Stevenson, 1989: 285). Biographers have responded uneasily to the challenge this poses, showing varying degrees of willingness to read the life through the fiction (Stevenson, 1989: 152; Wagner-Martin, 2003: 34; Hayman, 2003: 152).

With Sylvia Plath, self-representation is more than just fictionalizing her own experiences; she mythologizes both her life and her death. Having mythologized her mother in *The Bell Jar*, she did likewise with her father and husband in her most famous poem, 'Daddy', written like an incantation, an angry nursery rhyme chant to dispel Otto's ghost with which, in the last four stanzas, Ted Hughes becomes associated. The poem interpolates her earlier dicing with death as trying to get back to her father:

But they pulled me out of the sack,
 And they stuck me together with glue.
 And then I knew what to do.
 I made a model of you,
 A man in black with a Meinkampf look

 And a love of the rack and the screw.
 And I said I do, I do.
 So daddy, I'm finally through.

(From: 'Daddy', *Ariel*, 1965: 56)

Plath's own bleak comments explain the self-mythologizing.

The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.

(Quoted by A. Alvarez in Newman, 1971: 65)

The vampire and Nazi imagery that pervade the poem are ways of heightening the victim–oppressor relationships she projects with her father and husband. This mythic Sylvia, engendered by the equally mythic male and female figures symbolized by Otto/Ted and Aurelia, is at the core of all her writing and most powerfully in these *Ariel* poems.

But, if the foundations of the cult and the legend were self-laid in 1963 (Hayman, 2003: 198), it took the biographers to develop the actual myth. The battle lines were sharply drawn from the start and the Plath Estate was a major combatant. Olwyn Hughes's intervention in Anne Stevenson's biography resulted in a highly unusual 'Author's Note' which (despite the singular position of the apostrophe) described the book as 'almost a work of dual authorship'; and Olwyn complained that Wagner-Martin (1987) (who according to her 'Preface' had clearly found negotiations frustrating), 'hadn't been writing a biography, but a feminist thesis on "Plath-as-the-libbers-wish-to-iconise-her"' (Hayman, 2003: 207). However, Olwyn's judgement is lent some credence in the light of Wagner-Martin's diatribe 16 years later against Ted Hughes's *Birthday letters* – 88 poems, all but two of which are addressed to Sylvia Plath, written over a 25-year period. They give us, according to Andrew Motion, 'his [Hughes's] account of her psychic history inside a portrait of their domestic history' (*The Times*, 17 January 1998). Hughes's last act in these quasi-biographical poems, coming as they did only months before his own death from cancer, polarized opinion. Elaine Feinstein, Hughes's biographer, argues that 'These poems should be read not as self-exculpation but as a form of self-discovery. ... This whole book resonates with loss and love' (Feinstein, 2002: 265). In contrast, Wagner-Martin's account shows feminist biomythography at its most virulent and ill-considered.

Before I justify that judgement, it is worth recording that, for 30 years, Ted Hughes was abused and heckled at poetry readings; reviled on arrival in Australia with placards accusing him of being a wife-murderer; tormented by the repeated desecration of Plath's grave in Yorkshire – the letters HUGHES hacked off her name on the headstone; and vilified by feminists in print, one of whom (Robin Morgan, later the editor of *Ms* magazine) published a poem, 'Arraignment', which accused Hughes of Plath's murder and threatened his dismemberment

(Alexander, 2003: 357–58; Wagner, 2002: 10–11). (Some myth-makers, it seems, cannot bear too much reality: it does not do to defrock a saint.) Wagner-Martin's vocabulary is less violent than Morgan's yet as unworthy as it is misguided: *Birthday letters*, she says, is 'a secret missile'; it is 'conceived to infuriate Plath readers'; it is 'an affront' which 'argued with' and set about 'the task of correcting her story'. It is 'a betrayal'; Hughes's poems 'usurp the authority of Plath's narrative; they nearly erased her voice'. The poems are mostly 'skewed'; the book is Hughes's final 'insult'; feminists (the inclusive "we" of her last paragraph) are 'angered'. Propelled by all this fury, Wagner-Martin's critical judgement spins out of control. She states: 'There are several dozen poems in which Hughes begins with a poem that readers of Plath would recognise, and then rewrites her text so that nothing sensible remains of her original work' (Wagner-Martin, 2003: 150). Apart from the distortion that Ted Hughes often begins with a Plath *poem* rather than with experiences they shared, the idea of him rewriting her text and obliterating hers in the process is bizarre. Both remain available – the more valuable through their complementary nature. Alvarez (1974: 30) understood this and prefigured it. Germaine Greer has given a more measured assessment: 'Ted Hughes existed to be punished. We'd lost a heroine, and we needed to blame someone' (quoted in Wagner, 2002: 11).

So, this is where we are in the myth-making. Hughes and Plath have associated their own myth with that of the Brontës, weaving the supposed setting for *Wuthering Heights* into their poetry, becoming the Cathy and Heathcliff of their generation (Miller, 2001: 250). The 'factions' have begun: there was a film of *The Bell Jar* in 1979 and another, *Sylvia*, went on general release on 30 January 2004. Emma Tennant has published *Burnt diaries* (1999) and *The ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001). Paul Alexander, capitalizing on his work as a biographer, has written a one-woman stage show, *Edge* (2004), set on the last day of Sylvia Plath's life, which 'unashamedly mythologises Plath as victim and confessional genius' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 22 February 2004). The publication of *Ariel* (2004) with the poems in Plath's original MS order instead of that of Ted Hughes's edited version (1965) will, no doubt, provoke renewed controversy. In this third unfinished case, what biomyths have yet to come? The key to their future is, literally, secure: they will feed not on a corpse in the crypt, not on a covert death at a mistress's cottage, but on a locked chest. It was deposited four years ago along with two and a half tons of papers collected in the Plath Archive at Emory University, Atlanta. It is not to be opened for 100 years and (who knows?) may contain the last journals of Plath, not burnt or lost by Hughes after all (Williams, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 March 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

My conclusions take the form of 10 brief reflections on the notion of biomythography.

- 1) Biomythography is a term that subverts any concept of life writing based on a simplistic account of supposed 'facts'. It acknowledges the importance of context and historicity; but, more than that, it reflects the ways in which what we take as facts are subject to narrative representation and cultural mutability (Denzin, 1989: 81). Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë myth* (2001: x), is the most explicit example but instances of the metabiographical interest she demonstrates are evident too in several recent biographical studies. For example: the opening and closing chapters, entitled 'Biography' and 'Biographer', that frame Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (1997); Jonathan Bates's description of his book, *The genius of Shakespeare* (1997: x) as 'a kind of biography', one which covers not only the life of the man but the living body of his 'words and stage images'; and Adam Sisman's account of Boswell the biographer, rather than Boswell the man, and his 'presumptuous task' in writing his *Life of Dr Johnson* (Sisman, 2001). In such books, literary biography has begun to interrogate itself. Reflexiveness is their common quality, one shared with Ackroyd's *Dickens*. They recognize in different ways that literary biography deals not only with life stories but with biomyths.
- 2) Biomythography dissolves the distinction between the 'actual life' and the 'posthumous life', between the period of the biographee's existence and the period of biographical interpretation that succeeds it. Successive biographies ineluctably take account of their antecedents and perceive the subject's life through a historical lens that, tantalizingly, both clarifies and obscures. It offers a sharper focus on facts, yet becomes more opaque as the myths mutate over time and become absorbed into the biographer's vision.
- 3) Virginia Woolf was right – biography is an impossibility (Woolf, 1967: 234). Fact, fiction and myth (not to mention forgery, lies and innocent error) are so interwoven in our perceptions of human lives that 'life writings' must not assume to tell the truth. Holmes's description of biography as 'inventing the truth' (Holmes in Batchelor, 1995: 18) reminds us that the genre is a construct of historical narrative. Biomythography is a way of expressing this and of indicating the sort of truths that myths tell: not literal truths but symbolic ones. We must resist the pressure for a single, legalistic 'truth' (Rose, 1992: 104–05); at best, it is a mere convenience, an attempt at fairness or balance. Biography must embrace the more difficult concept of multiple 'truths', versions of the self as

expressed in different contexts, driven by different motives, for a variety of purposes (Denzin, 1989: 81). Cultural myths, as indicated earlier, are malleable; so are the 'truths' they carry.

- 4) Biomythography signals that there is no such thing as 'the definitive biography' – a phrase that still occurs frequently and indicates our psychological need for certainty more than anything else.
- 5) Biomythography acknowledges our 'unconscious hunger for explanatory myths'. The phrase is again Richard Holmes's, writing recently about the Shelley myth (*The Guardian Review*, 24 January 2004). 'We like our "lives"', he goes on, 'to conform to archetypes, or fables, or even fairy tales ... myths are easily formed but difficult to change'. As I have argued, we need our heroes and heroines, celebrities and idols, saints and martyrs – they are the leading characters in these explanatory myths.
- 6) Biomythography is as susceptible to a gendered concept of characters and roles as traditional myths and fairy tales are. (The latter, particularly, have been reconceived in recent decades with books like the aptly titled, *The practical princess and other liberating fairy tales*, Williams, 1980). It will not have escaped the reader's notice that, of my four writers, the men are portrayed as heroes, the women as martyrs. Feminists have seen both women as martyred on the patriarchal cross. In Charlotte Brontë's case, she is the martyred saint to Christian duty and Victorian respectability – both things controlled by being the daughter of a vicar and, latterly, the wife of another one – and subject to all the constraints of male-dominated, nineteenth-century provincial England. Sylvia Plath has become a secular martyr in our post-Christian society, her life dominated by the spectral love affair with her father, and her death seen as directly attributable to her husband's infidelity. While feminism has a good deal more to offer (Rose, 1992; Malcolm, 1995) than the vandalism and abuse of its extremists in explicating the gender roles inherent in biomythography, it is surprising to find that a standard account of psychobiography, published at a time when the Plath story was at its height, ignores her case completely, citing instead the safer instances of Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf (Runyan, 1984).
- 7) The fictionalizing of personal experience in *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, *Childe Harold* and *David Copperfield* moves into a new dimension with *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*. With Sylvia Plath, we have a myth within a myth. The autobiographical compass swings 180 degrees with these fictions: whereas Charlotte Brontë, Byron and Dickens drew upon their own lives and externalized their experiences in their art, Plath uses her art to interrogate her life, constantly internalizing and reliving, dramatizing and analysing her experiences in her effort to exorcize her past and understand it. Hughes describes her poems as 'chapters in a

mythology' (Hughes in Newman, 1971: 187). The personal myth she created lies inside the cultural myth that has grown up since her death. Richard Murphy, the Irish poet whom Sylvia Plath visited in 1962, speaks of her then as sowing the 'seeds of the future myth of her martyrdom' (Stevenson, 1989: 245, 352). Literary biography is uniquely susceptible to the biomyths created by its subjects' writings.

- 8) Biomythography needs a good death. Often it will act as the prologue to a 'life' as it does in Ackroyd's *Dickens*; sometimes its importance is enshrined in a title, as in Hayman's *The death and life of Sylvia Plath*. If it is premature, youthful, violent, in a good cause – so much the better. Of my main examples, Dickens is the only one to outlive the '30-somethings'. And even then we find Claire Tomalin promoting a new version of his final hours. Death defines the 'life' with its mythic shadow as well as its chronological full stop.
- 9) Biomythography is a process of gathering and organizing the scattered fragments of the past to meet the needs of the present. Actual living is experienced as an unpredictable mixture of the known and the unforeseen, of planning and serendipity. Yet its biographical representation into holistic narrative patterns is more than the mere ordering of events; for biomythography acknowledges a sense of fate in this narrativizing, recognizing that the 'lives' of those we mythologize assume a predetermined character as we look back retrospectively for the 'red thread' linking beginnings, middles and ends. This urge to create a uni-directional, teleological reading of a literary life reflects our profound human needs both to define a consistent sense of identity and to give shape and coherent meaning to the pattern of events that make up an individual's life.
- 10) For, biomythography is all we have. Poets and novelists, writers and readers of biography, all have to live with 'epistemological insecurity' (Malcolm, 1995: 154). Faced with the fumbling uncertainties of self-knowledge and the limitations of knowing another's life, we mask our instability and partial ignorance with myths. Suspending our disbelief is not an option with biography. This is not the 'as if' of fiction; it's real life and we want to know about it. Life writing cannot sustain the anxiety of uncertainty: so its writers and readers keep it at bay by perpetuating the necessary myths – which is why, in this article, I have urged the insertion of 'myth' into our concept of 'biography'.

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