



The Governor in the Garden: May Sarton, More and More

By Michael Finley
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She has lived a score of lives at least -- as actress, poet, novelist, teacher, writer of journals, scourge of critics, confidant of so many hundreds. At 70, sensing that the final act was being played out, she wrote a journal named just that, *At Seventy*.

Sometimes, with her vast amount of correspondence, the pilgrimages of people from all corners to her cottage in York, Maine, and her passionate mastery of detail, and of the edifices of art she has erected to stave off the chaos of the world, she seems almost like the governor of an invisible state or province -- a principality of flowers, friends and self.

Today, at 75, May Sarton is still a factor. Hampered late last winter by a stroke and "imprisoned" in bed for another nine months with a heart condition, she has been unable, for the first time in forty years, to begin her biennial novel. Fan letters continue to arrive in bales. The ability to answer each and every one is not to be relied upon as it once was. A year without the daily workout in the garden, or the walk down to the water. The wild fur-person (the Sartonian designation for actualized cat) Bramble has died, and been replaced by a woolly Himalayan.

"It's a nuisance, all right," says May Sarton. But she will go on tour in October, reading from her forty books of poetry (including *A Grain of Mustard Seed*, *A Durable Fire*, and *Halfway to Silence*), fiction (*Faithful Are the Wounds*, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, and *As We Are Now*) and nonfiction (*Plant Dreaming Deep*, *Recovering*, and *Journal of a Solitude*).

She will draw giant (for poetry) audiences, uplifting many and annoying several, for just as she has attracted friends so has she suffered fools with a minimum of solicitude. And she suffers critics hardly at all, not even at the allegedly serene age of 75.

It was not always thus. Born in Ghent, Belgium, of an artistic British mother and French-Belgian father (George Sarton, author of the massive study *The History of Science*), Sarton hardly figured to spend the bulk of her life in rural New Hampshire and Maine as one of America's premier poets of fixed place.

She never went to college, choosing instead an apprenticeship in the midst of the Depression with Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre, and tours abroad where she acquainted with the greats of the literary world, including friendship with Virginia Woolf. Her first book of poems, *Encounter in April* (1937), and first novel, *The Single Hound* (1938), were hailed critically as the stirrings of a major new voice in American letters, and Sarton's future as a sleek modernist seemed assured. But something in her swerved away from mere stylishness, and she commenced a more inward journey, far from the fashionable, bestselling path through solitude, personal revelation, and a loyalty to the more enduring spirits -- friendship, nature, and the perfectionist demands of a her art.

Hear what the critics were saying even thirty years ago: "When Miss Sarton talks to us we feel as though we were walking through a cultivated landscape in the early afternoon of a summer's day, with twilight far in the future."

She is: "serene-seeming despite her traumas"; "honest to the point of bluntness"; her work is "transparently about flowers and the seasons -- but these are simply the backdrops for the agony of fading love, sorrow at a friend's death, fatigue from creating and the need to be alone."

Her works are like those of Flemish painters "whose bold brushstrokes make clear the troubled humanity in a face..." Her tastes and styles: "immaculate and orderly, traditional, austere with overtones of grace and charm."

Not much has changed, and yet everything has. Her style has transmogrified, from the profligate phraseology of youth to the biting clarity of one who knows the price of distraction. The critics, who were with her at the start, long ago gave up on her as unreformable. (They complain that she has been too upfront about her sexuality. That there is not enough sexuality in the books. She is too male. She is too female. She is too traditional. She is

too radical. She is too intellectual. She is too emotional. Whatever you do, do not read a book by this vexatious person!)

She is not a girl any more -- she is, as she puts it, old. ("I don't mind that, though," she says.) And always, her writing has been about the driving need to be oneself. The book which has had perhaps the greatest impact, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1965) is about a woman poet in her seventies -- an extrapolation of Sarton herself when she was 50. A startlingly fresh work both in language and structure, Mrs. Stevens probes the memories of outrageous novelist Hillary Stevens to learn where the irrefragable choices were made -- and relives the episodes of pain and love which were the seedbed of her witness.

The book was also Sarton's own tacit coming out as a lesbian -- "I was trying to say some radical things about sexuality in a gentle way so that they might penetrate without shock." For Sarton, the Muse is not a disembodied occasional presence -- the Muse is a friend, a lover, a special person who unlocks the cabinetry and lets light in on what has been stored away, unexpressed. There have been several.

She is an astonishing amalgam of contradictions -- an intellectual entranced by nature; a formalist whose object is freedom; a friend to thousands who espouses the virtues of solitude; an exile who has grown her own roots. Not surprisingly, she is also Unitarian.

"My parents were not connected with any church, but when I was about ten I went to the First Unitarian Church in Cambridge, and I absolutely loved Mr. Samuel McCord Carruthers, the minister there, at that time quite a famous man, a writer. A very wonderful preacher, and when I joined the Sunday School, I got a ribbon for perfect attendance! It was all my own idea, of course."

Sarton added that Unitarianism was not that far removed from the beliefs of her parents. "My father and mother believed that, though Jesus was not God, he was a mighty leader and the spirit of Jesus, the logos of him, is the worship of God and the spirit of man. We Unitarians, after all, 'unite' in the spirit of Jesus in the worship of God and the spirit of man.

"I'm awfully proud to be Unitarian. I think the Unitarian Service Committee is marvelous. We're humanists, you see -- the extreme right considers us devils, and that's something else in our favor."

Though there is no Unitarian Universalist church within driving distance of York -- the closest is in Portsmouth, NH twenty miles away, an hejira to downeasters -- Sarton worships in her own way, with her own skills, writing letters to the very old and very sick on Sunday mornings.

There are some who say that, despite the lack of tacitly theological matter in her books, Sarton's thrust in fact is a religious one. A group of Methodist pastors asked her recently to be one of three spiritual advisors at a recent retreat.

Last year Sarton delivered the Ware Lecture for Unitarian Universalists. She has taught at Thomas Starr King School of Religious Leadership in Berkeley. And when she travels to Indianapolis these days, she stays at the Carmelite monastery there -- "they are great admirers of *Journal of a Solitude*."

Nevertheless, she says, she is less interested in religion than in something she sees as broader, or at least vaguer. Spirit? "Yes, or perhaps just humanity," she says.

Sometimes surface objects in her journals, such as fritillaria or dragonfly nymphs, are exactly that; other times they are something very different, a key to another level of being, a way of talking about things which otherwise are undiscussable. "For instance, flowers -- I think very few people really look at Nature. I think I do, and I got that from my mother, a most remarkable woman.

"My last book, by the way, is not mine but hers -- letters to me, called *Letters to May*, published by Puckerbrush Press here in Maine. It was the Unitarian Universalists who, somehow or other, got Sarton "over the hump" from respectable small poetry audiences to the kinds of mass engagements she holds sway over today.

"The first one I remember was at Roy Phillips' Unity Church in St. Paul -- a huge audience, the poor church was full to bursting. I heard it had never been filled before for any occasion. I really do not know why it happened as it did, when it did. But I have taken note."

Perhaps it is the sense of the individual as shrine that Sarton addresses, especially in her nonfiction, and particularly in her breakthrough book *A Journal of Solitude*. From her earlier sense that an artist's art is the reason for her existing (perhaps even for the rest of us existing, too), Sarton suggests a less exclusive explanation -- that the window to eternity is this moment, lived and felt honestly and with intensity.

"I try to live as if every day might be my last and yet, is eternal. You can only do this well in solitude," she writes. "Solitude is the salt of personality.... I could live alone indefinitely and feel no need for company.... Solitude can be very exciting."

Or perhaps it is the heroic combat she has maintained for so many decades against the chaos around her -- in the turbulence of her own life and the lives of friends, the violence of world wars, the friction of cold wars, the grimace of political and sexual oppression, the growing sense of a mass culture seeking to obviate the inner quiet in the individual heart.

"My parents were both innocent and so am I, and this has perhaps been my undoing with the critics. I'm not a worldly person. I happen to be making a lot of money, for me, these days. But for years, until I was 65, I never did. That means that nature and animals and deep friendship are all extremely precious to me -- being asked out to cocktail parties is not."

Sarton suspects that this innocence, and her disdain for the desiderata of the marketplace, may have contributed to her inattention at the hands of the front line of critics (read, the New York Times).

"It's true, I cut my own throat," she says. "I haven't been able by nature to use others, I've never asked any of my high-powered friends for help, for blurbs."

The result has been a perceived snubbing from the critics. Not the trade reviews or the secondary outlets, where her reputation has been solid through the years, but at the holy mountaintop -- the New York Times. "After *Faithful Are the Wounds* (1955), I never got another positive review from them," she says. "And lately they've ceased reviewing my poetry altogether. I can't help feeling very bitterly about it."

One wonders about the bitterness of a woman in her seventies as honored as Sarton. Surely the books section of the Times is not one of those windows into eternity?

"No, it's not that," she insists of the war between York and New York. "It's bigger than pride. It's the fact that they have stood between me and the audience I have so wanted for my writing. And not for me, either -- my design has been that each of my books be usable in some way or other, usable truths that readers might apply to their way of seeing the world."

Sarton, while decrying her malfeasance, misfeasance, and nonfeasance at the hands of her critics, is still amazed at the audience she has managed to assemble, seemingly despite the sages of West 43rd Street. In addition to having sold at least a couple million books over the years, many of them read over and over again, she is at the point where today three of her novels are entertaining film options, one of them in Great Britain. She has not been the dominant mailing address in York by hiding her lamp under the bushel basket, or by being ignored by the reading public.

"It's true, I have what many regard as a fairly large audience, gathered over many years and mainly through word of mouth. And they are an enviable lot -- every day I get letters, sometimes from people who say I saved their lives. That I cherish.

"But then I ask myself what might that audience had I gotten the kinds of reviews Anne Tyler (whom I admire) has had? It's a maddening question, and I wish I could spare myself from asking it."

Bitterness may be a luxury that she cannot afford in the months ahead of her. Having suffered through a stroke in February, which she claims was "not so serious," it is a fibrillating heart, and the medicine she takes for that, which have laid her as low as she can remember being in her whole life -- worse than her breast cancer of six years ago, which she described in her journal *Recovering*.

"Eight days after the mastectomy I was driving again," she says. "This time I was unable to do anything for nine months. It was prison for me, and even though I'm 'better' now, the medicine still makes me ill. It's a difficult life, with no notion of making 'progress.' Still, I'm determined to make it like my real life."

This current recovery has been so slow that she has been unable to begin a longer work, content to write entries to a new journal called *After the Stroke*. "People say I sound marvelous but they don't know how my poor head feels."

And of course, there are the poems. Sarton has never been one to play poetry against fiction against nonfiction. One is clearly superior in her mind, and that is the art of the poet.

"To me, if you're a poet you're a poet first. I've been writing poetry since I was twelve and getting published since seventeen. If you're a poet, it's a gift. Whereas you can start a novel on will alone, and intelligence and sensitivity -- you can't do a poem with just that equipment."

The other side is that the novel is so limited by its length, she said. "How can anything so long be perfect? When I knew Virginia Woolf, before I had published anything but poems, she used to tease me, saying, 'It's so much harder to write a novel, too many ways it can fail.' She was right of course, and I know that now, but on the other hand the poem has possibilities a novel can never have."

Which helps explain why, following the success of her first, lushly written books, she worked so hard to separate her poetic and fictional writing styles. "My first novels were poetic and got wonderful reviews, but I didn't want that. I don't want people to say, 'Oh, you've got such a wonderful style.' I want them to say, 'I can't forget that character.' Or, 'Your book changed my life.'"

In *As We are Now*, she pared her style down to the point where an especially obtuse critic claimed the writing was at the 9th grade level. The novel, a heartbreaking love story taking place in a nursing home, was made deliberately spare. "The book is a descent into hell, and the last rung on the ladder was when true love was made dirty, when Carol's feelings for Anna, which were not homosexual, but simply love, were made dirty by the awful women there." The story was strong enough to do the telling for her, Sarton said -- writing it "up" would have only muddled the issue.

"I also like that there's a minister in the book who is not a caricature or hypocritical or cardboard. Ministers are seldom given much respect in fiction, you know."

Some have suggested that, just as Sarton prefers formal poetry to free verse (though she claims to have enjoyed writing without form in *Gestalt at Sixty*), that explains her defense of the art in her fiction above the less formal craft required of her journal writing.

"I do enjoy free verse, but how do I know when I am done with it? There are no brakes, and the process of revision looms eternally."

"I love the freedom that comes from form, not just in art but in life as well. I know that, as an artist, the form my day takes, which is my routine, is terribly important -- you write for a certain number of hours every morning, not just when you feel like it. If you waited free-form for inspiration, you'd wait a long time."

A routine which looks confining is what actually refines one, she said. Sarton's view of writing is of an intellectual (novelist?) grappling with feeling (poet?) -- and in her mature works the two forces have come into balance.

"What is good about the journal, I think, is that it is so much more spontaneous -- it has no particular structure, but it requires an intensity of being. Therefore it is a very spiritual form of writing. People don't read journals for wise sayings but for the intensity of being that is approached, the life that is lived in them. When it is authentic it is very comforting, and very powerful, too."

In an address to students at Scripps College in 1957, Sarton laid down the rule she lived by, and expected other poets to live by as well. "Writing poetry is a life discipline maintained in order to perfect the instrument of experiencing -- the poet himself."

Thirty years later, one wants to ask how that process of perfectability, so innocent and impossible (so Unitarian?) has proceeded. Is the instrument, today, perfect?

May Sarton smiles. "I don't feel it is," she says, "but the process has remained remarkably intact and alive. And I truly do believe that a point can be reached, as in a poem, where nothing more can be changed, no paraphrase is possible. And that is a beautiful thing."

Looking back, would she wish to be a young writer just starting out, with the same brash head full of ideas, the same record (as at Sunday School) of perfect attendance, the same heart shining with passion?

"It's always hard, I think. There might be a few more grants and sponsors today, but I don't think I would make that switch. The truth is, I love being older, and I always knew I would. I dislike being sick -- that's the nuisance, right there -- but I would never want to go back. You pay a high price for emotional involvement, the love affairs and so on. I'm rather glad to be out of that.

"I know so much more, I'm more balanced. Things are less intense, but deeper."

A Farewell

by May Sarton

*For a while I shall still be leaving,
Looking back at you as you slip away
Into the magic islands of the mind.
But for a while now all alive, believing
That in a single poignant hour
We did say all that we could ever say
In a great flowing out of radiant power.
It was like seeing and then going blind.
After a while we shall be cut in two
Between real islands where you live
And a far shore where I'll no longer keep
The haunting image of your eyes, and you,
As pupils widen, widen to deep black
And I able neither to love or grieve
Between fulfillment and heartbreak.
The time will come when I can go to sleep.
But for a while still, centered at last,
Contemplate a brief amazing union,
Then watch you leave and then let you go.
I must not go back to the murderous past
Nor force a passage through to some safe landing,
But float upon this moment of communion
Entranced, astonished by pure understanding --
Passionate love dissolved like summer snow.*