

The Smile of Accomplishment: Sylvia Plath's Ambition · *Patricia Hampl*

I

NOVEMBER, 1966, and before me is a book titled *Ariel* which I am reviewing for the University of Minnesota student newspaper. It is the first book review I've ever written. I push on, past my timidity, with a lead I hope is punchy: "Women poets, as a rule, have a hard time of it."

I am the only girl on the student literary magazine. I am not really aware that I'm the only girl on the staff; I don't see things that way yet. It would never occur to me to say I am the only *woman* on staff. I want to be a writer, and I bring more urgency to this desire than to anything I actually want to write about.

That, roughly, was the situation when I asked to review *Ariel* in the fall of 1966. I had to do some fast talking to get the literary editor's permission. "Who's Sylvia Plath?" he said. "I can't see giving her any inches." Copy was measured in column inches.

"She committed suicide," I said, in an attempt to boost her reputation. He was convinced finally when he saw that a famous poet, Robert Lowell, had written an introduction to the book in which he called the poems a "triumph."

I hold now the elderly, fragile newsprint of the review. What in the world was I really thinking when I wrote this oddly chipper prose? I note approvingly that Plath "is no crusader." I compliment her for being "well past movements, improvements, or a better deal for the little woman intellectual." Rather, I say, Sylvia Plath "is trying to survive." I don't explain what I mean by surviving. I speak airily of Plath's "brand of femininity" which I say is composed of "concerns more basic to woman than the traditional feminine hang-ups of babies and repressed sexuality." I don't explain what is more basic than sexuality and babies. Nor do I seem to think it strange to refer to babies as a hang-up.

I don't remember writing the review. But I do remember *reading* it in the student union as soon as the paper came out Friday morning. The boldface Bodoni headline cut deeply into the unmarked surface of my ambition:

PLATH WRITES NASTY, BITTER, COMPELLING POETRY

And there below, a little smaller but just as boldly inky, was my byline. Then the inches and inches of words. My words. That's what I remember. That's what it was all about: I had managed to get published.

It is hard to think of a poet, certainly any woman poet, who has documented an ambition as ferocious as Sylvia Plath's. Her relationship with *The New Yorker*, faithfully logged in her journal, was positively operatic:

. . . My baby "The Matisse Chapel," which I have been spending the imaginary money from and discussing with modest egoism, was rejected by The New Yorker this morning with not so much as a pencil scratch on the black-and-white doom of the printed rejection. I hid it under a pile of papers like a stillborn illegitimate baby. . . .

She entered contests, sent off poems and stories dutifully in her SASE's. She raged and wept and castigated herself over rejections, then rose again to stuff fresh envelopes for other magazines, other contests.

As everyone knows, she sometimes prevailed. Before she left Smith, she was a literary figure on campus; she had published a prize-winning story in *Mademoiselle*, seven poems in *Seventeen*, and had won prizes for her poetry. She even received letters from admiring fans:

Hundreds of dreaming ambitious girls would like to be in my place. They write me letters, asking if they may correspond with me.

She seems bewildered that this success, along with "a few lovely clothes, and one intelligent, handsome boy," has not satisfied her.

In the very next paragraph of her journal, she turns to the ominous question:

Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide? Or Sara Teasdale or the other brilliant women? Neurotic? Was their writing sublimation (oh, horrible word) of deep, basic desires? If only I knew. If only I knew how high I could set my goals, my requirements for my life!

The assumption behind the question seems to be that, for a woman, the inner urge to accomplishment is not one of the “deep, basic desires” of life. Ambition is the shameful desire of an aberrant—because selfish—female life.

There is a breathless, fevered quality to Plath’s ambition, as if the stillborn illegitimate baby she must hide is not a poem rejected by *The New Yorker* but the private impulse that gave rise to the writing of the poem in the first place. Even her stunning discipline troubles her; it is not a good habit, but an addiction. “Why am I obsessed,” she writes in her 1951 journal, the summer before her sophomore year, “with the idea I can justify myself by getting manuscripts published?”

Plath suffered from crushing attacks of jealousy as well. Ambition at least was something she could give the name of discipline and harness for work. Jealousy, on the other hand, was a blight; it spread everywhere, seeping out of the bounds of literary or academic competition into the very fabric of her self:

I am jealous of those who think more deeply, who write better, who draw better, who ski better, who look better, who love better, who live better than I. . . .

This pattern doesn’t shift until she marries Ted Hughes. Then, for all the joy she expresses in finding a partner, the heavy plot only thickens: she becomes ambitious for two.

In the early girlhood journal entries she is crazed by her ambition, plagued by jealousy and scorekeeping. She is aware that her seriousness cuts her off from something else she craves: social life leading to intimacy. The experience of being a college grind is so painful she writes of it in her journal in the literary second person:

There comes a time when you walk downstairs to pick up a letter you forgot, and the low confidential voices of the little group of girls in the living room suddenly ravel into an incoherent mumble and their eyes slide slimily through you, around you, away from you in a snaky effort not to meet the tentative half-fear quivering in your own eyes. . . . You know it was meant for you, so do they who stab you. . . . So you hear her say to you, “we’d rather flunk school and be sociable than stick in our

rooms all the time,” and very sweetly, “I never see you. You’re always studying in your room!” And you keep your mouth shut. And oh, how you smile!

After her marriage, this changes. “And here I am,” she exults in the journal, “Mrs. Hughes. And wife of a published poet.” The humiliating loneliness of the scholarship girl has been companioned: she is Mrs. Hughes. And the ferocious ambition has been assuaged by projection: she is married to a *published* poet.

Plath’s ambition, which had been a shameful passion precisely because it was “selfish,” seemed more acceptable to her now. The attacks of jealousy are bleached away in the light of marriage, replaced by the happy fretfulness of a devoted wife:

. . . woke . . . depressed over Ted’s 3 rejections of poems from The Nation (after 3 acceptances in a row, a stupid letter from M. L. Rosenthal, rejecting them for the wrong reasons). . . . Ted is an excellent poet: full of blood & discipline, like Yeats. Only why won’t these editors see it???

When Ted Hughes’s first book, *The Hawk in the Rain*, is accepted for publication in 1957, Plath’s delight is touchingly absolute:

I am so glad Ted is first. All my pat theories against marrying a writer dissolve with Ted: his rejections more than double my sorrow & his acceptances rejoice me more than mine. . . .

It is heartbreaking to read such guilelessness from a person who in her earlier journal is a barracuda about her career, a woman whose ambition seemed her bosom companion. But for once we, her posthumous readers, are more ironic than she: ah yes, his rejections more than double your sorrow. The post-feminist eyebrow arches.

Through it all—college, marriage, babies, end of marriage—Plath kept writing. She remained steely about her discipline and steadfast about the value of publishing. “Being born a woman,” she writes in her early college journal, “is my awful tragedy.” That is, a tragedy to her ambition.

When I was reviewing *Ariel* in 1966, Sylvia Plath's suicide struck me as inexplicable. A few years later, with the extraordinary articulation of early feminist criticism, that suicide was so highly explicated it had become an archetype. It almost ceased to be the real death of an actual person; Plath's suicide "stood" for an unbearable inequity suffered by generations of women artists. Thus began her brief career as a feminist saint, as victim/martyr.

By 1970 it was already possible to read a great deal *about* Sylvia Plath. But her suicide did not speak to me; it remained a melodramatic finish to the real story. For the real story, to me, was the exemplary tale of her ambition. She was a woman who had not been afraid or ashamed to *try*.

She made ambition seem less wrong for a woman. I saw her ambition in wholly sociological terms and was cheered by it. I did not consider the psychological cost of her struggle.

My own early heroine-hunting had been all about seeking the model of the serious girl writer who prevailed. I deleted Plath's suicide, and put in boldface her strenuous discipline and all those self-addressed manila envelopes stuffed with poems sent to big magazines. Feminism latched on to Plath as a figure of the thwarted woman; I held on to her as an exemplary apprentice writer.

But now it seems to me that just as her victim/martyr role has since been dismantled, thereby liberating her poetry, so too her consuming ambition no longer seems "feminist." Her journals, in particular, show that this seething ambition was not merely a model of careerism.

Her fever pitch, in fact, was not fundamentally about literature. Plath's was a religious longing which never got the name it deserved: it was a spiritual, not a literary, quest.

Plath wrote most of the *Ariel* poems in the fall of 1962, just after the breakup of her marriage. On October 16, 1962, exactly in the middle of the *Ariel* month (thirty poems in that single month), she wrote her mother, "I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name. . . ." No one else had yet seen any of the poems.

This statement to her mother is reminiscent of Keats's famous remark in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law in 1818: "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death." Keats had his *annus mirabilis* (1818-19), as Plath had her miraculous autumn of 1962. Though Plath's genius is

notoriously self-absorbed and Keats's is unusually unself-conscious, they belong in some ways to the same tribe.

The summer of 1951, when she had a baby-sitting job for a family in Swampscott, Massachusetts (she was 19), Plath wrote this luminous passage in her journal after a hike by the ocean:

A serene sense of the slow inevitability of the gradual changes in the earth's crust comes over me. A consuming love, not of a god, but of the clean unbroken sense that the rocks which are nameless, the waves which are nameless, the ragged grass which is nameless, are all defined momentarily through the consciousness of the being who observes them. With the sun burning into rock, and flesh, and the wind ruffling grass and hair, there is an awareness that the blind immense unconscious impersonal and neutral forces will endure, and that the fragile, miraculously knit organism which interprets them, endows them with meaning, will move about for a little, then falter, fail, and decompose at last into the anonymous soil, voiceless, faceless, without identity.

Though the word is not used in this passage, the subject clearly is the poet's mission. This powerfully serene voice is not the one usually associated with Sylvia Plath. It is very Keatsian in its radiance. His letter to his brother and sister-in-law in Kentucky comes to mind:

The mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness . . . but I must have a thousand of those beautiful particles to fill up my heart. I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds—No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed around me. . . .

The reverence, both in the passage from Plath's journal and in Keats's letter, emanates from a direct sensation of poetry experienced in nature. For Keats, the relation was as intense and fundamental as family: "The roaring of the wind is my wife and the Stars through the window pane are my Children," he says elsewhere.

The reverence for other writers and their accomplishments is, for Plath as it was also for Keats, sometimes a thrilling goad, sometimes an invitation to masochistic self-criticism. As Plath says in an early journal entry:

I am closest to Amy Lowell, in actuality, I think. I love the lyric clarity and purity of Elinor Wylie, the whimsical, lyrical, typographically eccentric verse of E.E. Cummings, and yearn toward T.S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, Conrad Aiken. . . . And when I read, God, when I read the taut, spare, lucid prose of Louis Untermeyer, and the distilled intensities of poet after poet, I feel stifled, weak, pallid, mealy-mouthed and utterly absurd.

In his biography of Keats, W. Jackson Bate addresses the issue of fame and the young genius-poet's positive need for models of greatness. He refers to Whitehead's remark that "moral education is impossible apart from the habitual vision of greatness." This is so, Bate says, because "the ideal of greatness, as the Greeks discovered, is ultimately self-corrective in its effect as well as self-impelling."

The *ideal* of greatness—not the evidence or even the example of greatness. But of course the ideal imposes the search for the actual. It sometimes caused Sylvia Plath to light her taper before rather unlikely icons ("the taut, spare lucid prose of Louis Untermeyer"?), just as the very young Keats felt an initial reverence for Leigh Hunt's poetry which he later recognized was inflated.

Plath's ambition was a thirst for greatness, and also a private, curiously humble recognition of her call to be "the fragile, miraculously knit organism which interprets" that she understood to be the poet's true identity. "Yes, God," she says in the same Swampscott journal entry, "I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night."

For a woman, a girl of 19, to wish to "walk freely at night" is a poignant wish, of course. Hardly less poignant than her perfect definition of the poet—a person who wishes to talk to everybody as deeply as possible. Her vision here is as incandescent and winning as Emily Dickinson's desire to write a "letter to the world that never wrote to me." In a later journal entry, Plath echoes Dickinson directly, wondering whether she has "the ability or genius to write a big letter to the world. . . ."

It is clear that at an early age Sylvia Plath understood her writing to be a vocation and therefore inevitably a spiritual quest—although neither her background nor the culture of her youth provided her with the language or models of such spirituality. She saw writing as “a trust, a creative pledge to affirm life, hell and heaven, mud and marble.” She was 20 years old when she wrote this pledge in her journal.

Greatness, perceived in others, can be held in mind as a radiant image. The icons come easily to mind: Mozart, Shakespeare, Picasso. But the *ideal* of greatness exists differently. Its dynamism must be an act of faith. It is not a recognition, as a perception of greatness in others is. The ideal is an imaginative act.

And this ideal inaugurates a struggle. As Plath says in a journal entry written in England about a month before she met Ted Hughes, “One cannot help but wish for those situations that make us heroic, living to the hilt of our total resources. Our cosmic fights, when I think the end of the world is come, are so many broken shells around our growth.”

Although Plath considers briefly in her journal a “splurge of altruism” in which she might sacrifice herself “on the altar of the Cause with a capital C,” there is no mention of what this Cause might be. She never identified deeply with any political cause for long.

She was casting her lot in the 1950s, and it seems clear, at least in the journals, that the struggle she knew she must engage in was interior. Not simply a struggle with her past—the impulse is not transparently autobiographical. Rather, the interiority is spiritual, an impulse toward transformation rather than confession. “I have long wanted to read and explore the theories of philosophy, psychology, national, religious and primitive consciousness,” she says in the journal, linking her search to disciplines related to spiritual life.

In her *Chapters in a Mythology*, Judith Kroll sees in Plath’s poetry “one overriding concern: the problem of rebirth or transcendence.” The late poems in particular and Plath’s definition of poetic vocation exhibit a calling which gave her “access to depths formerly reserved to primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and Holy men,” as Kroll quotes Ted Hughes on the subject of Plath’s sense of mission.

Plath herself seemed baffled by her fascination with “poetic identities of characters who commit suicide, adultery, or get murdered. . . .” She can

only explain her attraction to these subjects by admitting in her journal that, for her, “What they say is True.” This truth, though she does not embody it herself until the *Ariel* poems, is the truth of conflict, struggle—that which effects fundamental change. In these dramatic conflicts, Plath instinctively senses the theater of death and rebirth. The struggle is not simply a spectacle. It has a spiritual purpose, recognized as such:

I want to get back to my more normal intermediate path where the substance of the world is permeated by my being: eating food, reading, writing, talking, shopping: so all is good in itself, and not just a hectic activity to cover up the fear that must face itself and duel itself to death, saying: A Life is Passing!

The real horror here (in strictly religious language, the real *sin*) is not death but the featureless “passing” of a life. Death is the greatest struggle, like those that leave “so many broken shells around our growth.” It is not an end, but the deepest metaphor possible, literal and yet also a model for any re-creation of the self, any search for the real self beneath the litter of false selves of “hectic activity.”

After her breakdown in 1953, Plath underwent a course of electric shock treatments which she always maintained had been administered incorrectly and almost electrocuted her. (One political event she notes in her work with eloquent feeling and particular horror is the death of the Rosenbergs.) She saw the experience as her own brutal high-tech death and resurrection. As she says in her journal of 1956, she wanted to write

a detailed description of shock treatment, tight, blasting short descriptions with not one smudge of coy sentimentality. . . . There will be no hurry, because I am too desperately vengeful now. But I will pile them up. . . . the inevitable going down the subterranean hall, waking to a new world, with no name, being born again, and not of woman.

This is the selfless “will to bear witness” of the survivor, a phenomenon Terrence Des Pres describes in *The Survivor*. It is an urgency shared by those who emerged from the death camps and felt compelled to speak “for the others.” It is not a self-involved morbidity, nor a fascination with pain

for its own sake. The *experience* of such extremity is not the “witnessing.” Only the writing of it, only the telling, can approach transcendence.

The relation of a poet of mythic sensibility to autobiographical material is bound to be paradoxical. The unformed autobiographical material is like a bright shred of plastic which the poet breathes into, creating a balloon. The self is inflated and floats aloft for all to see. Most American poets write such poems of lyric autobiography.

A poet of mythic sensibility, however, seems compelled to reach up and puncture this rounded autobiographical shape, to end the severe limitation of meaning imposed by the merely personal use of autobiography. Plath, in the *Ariel* poems, is such a mythic poet, grasping at the inflated balloon of her life, causing it to collapse. This collapse of autobiography is a longing for a more powerfully resonant voice, the voice of mythic significance. Myth, after all, is that voice Plath identified in her journal, the voice which allows the poet “to talk to everybody . . . as deeply as possible.”

The victims of extreme suffering that Terrence Des Pres writes of inherit a passionate “will to bear witness” and are not, he argues, suffering from “survivor guilt” but from an urgent need to perform the task given them by history: to testify. They need to be useful.

Similarly, poets who undergo this collapse of the autobiographical self in the service of an emerging mythic self speak in a rinsed, shining voice which moves from personal loss to spiritual gain. Adrienne Rich, when her work began to reflect the experience of her feminist transformation, began to speak of the longing to be *useful*, to use rather than explore or exhibit the self:

*. . . I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind.*

Judith Kroll notes a similar impulse in Plath’s remark at the end of her life when she was writing the *Ariel* poems:

*I feel like a very efficient tool or weapon,
used and in demand from moment to moment.*

It is chilling, even repellent, to see the human recede into usefulness. It is deathly. But then, nothing less than death can cause the self to burn away, to cease to be the stuff of autobiography, lost in a new task, no longer personal, but a mythic tool—or as Plath feared—a weapon.

Why would anyone want to die? Even in a poem, why die? The pain of spiritual death keeps most poets—most people—safely within autobiography, repeating the lyric sensation of buoyancy that, after all, is what is usually meant by “being alive.”

But once the autobiographical balloon bursts (usually through some form of unwilling loss), all the rules change. The laws of autobiography form the humanistic code of logic, of the beauty and supremacy of the body and the senses, and of lyric sensibility. In autobiography, I matter. In the post-autobiographical world, I am matter.

In this spiritual realm, where the narrative line of one’s life burned away, survival is based, as it is in art, on paradox: you must lose your soul to find it; die that you may live; surrender that you may be free. The world of spiritual life, therefore, is not unduly impressed by death. Or rather, it has found a central usefulness for death: death is that which effects resurrection.

Still, pain is a fact, and the autobiographical self is firm about pain: it is bad . . . or at least, it is too bad. The autobiographical self, after all, is no fool: it knows who must do the dying.

II

I can think of no contemporary poet who shares Plath’s struggle as fully as the philosopher Simone Weil does. But to call Weil a “philosopher” in this century suggests a secular identity that misses her subject and her importance. She was, of course, a religious writer. She has much to say about suffering, that inevitable bridge from self to spirit. Weil’s life is a fitting companion to Plath’s attempt in her final poems to die and be born again, to locate her true, useful self under the false selves of ambition and personal loss, humiliation and impotence.

Simone Weil was, in her own fashion, a suicide. The starvation saint. She died in England in 1943, refusing nourishment and medical treatment for tuberculosis in an act of solidarity with those in the French Resistance. An unnecessary death, as far as the autobiographical self is concerned, a willful

death, like any suicide. But for the moment, I read her—death and life—from the world where I think she finally lived, the post-autobiographical position of spiritual transformation, not from her “life,” which was not her goal. It is the world also of Plath’s great work, the *Ariel* poems.

More to the literary point, Plath and Weil share a voice—the scorched voice of the spiritual pilgrim. This is Weil: “Love is a sign of our wretchedness. God can only love himself. We can only love something else.” And here is Plath:

I am too pure for you or anyone.

Your body

Hurts me as the world hurts God.

“We possess nothing in this world,” Weil says, “other than the power to say I. This is what we should yield up to God, and that is what we should destroy.” A statement made from the precarious bridge between autobiography and spirituality. To “carry one’s cross,” Weil explains, is precisely to cut down the tree of self, fashion it into the cross, “and then, carry it every day.”

Weil calls this process “decreation.” It is the way the self ceases to matter—and becomes matter. It is the experience Plath imagined during her *au pair* summer by the ocean in Swampscott: “. . . an awareness that . . . the fragile, miraculously knit organism which interprets . . . will move about for a little, then falter, fail, and decompose at last into the anonymous soil, voiceless, faceless, without identity.”

Death is central to the usefulness the spirit seeks as its true identity. “We have to die in order to liberate a *tied-up* energy,” Weil says, “in order to possess an energy which is free and capable of understanding the relationship of things.” That may be the best definition of usefulness: an energy capable of understanding the relationship of things.

Once this truth is established, Simone Weil turns to pain, that constituent of death. In a central essay, “The Love of God and Affliction,” she explores the essential role affliction plays in the “decreation” of self.

She is careful to distinguish affliction from “simple suffering.” To her mind, “the great enigma of human life is not suffering but affliction.” She

makes several attempts in the essay to characterize what she means by the word:

Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistably present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain.

Affliction is essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity.

In the end, she presents a three-part definition of this form of suffering “which leaves the victim writhing on the ground like a half-crushed worm”:

There is not real affliction unless the event which has gripped and uprooted a life attacks it directly or indirectly in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical. The social factor is essential. There is not really affliction where there is not social degradation or the fear of it in some form or other.

Weil comes back several times in the essay to this triad which forms affliction. “Extreme affliction,” she writes, “means physical pain, distress of soul and social degradation, all together. . . .” She adds that “it is the essence of affliction that it is suffered unwillingly.” The dizzying sensation of senselessness, of *uselessness*, must accompany its first stages. The “Why?” or “Why me?” of all grievous laments. “There can be no answer to the ‘Why?’ of the afflicted,” Weil says, “because the world is necessity and not purpose.”

She pursues the point further. “People often reproach Christianity,” she says,

for a morbid preoccupation with suffering and grief. This is an error. Christianity is not concerned with suffering and grief, for they are sensations, psychological states, in which a perverse indulgence is always possible; its concern is with something quite different, which is affliction. Affliction is not a psychological state; it is a pulverization of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances.

Weil goes on immediately to locate human purpose in the light of affliction: “It is our function in this world to consent to the existence of the universe.” The autobiographical self dies hard—as it must to be true to itself. The cruellest aspect of affliction, as Weil describes it, is the guilty sensation of complicity it inspires in its victim. “Like a red-hot iron,” affliction

stamps the soul to its very depths with the contempt, the disgust, and even the self-hatred and sense of guilt and defilement which crime logically should produce but actually does not. Evil dwells in the heart of the criminal without being felt there. It is felt in the heart of the man who is afflicted and innocent.

This paradox may occur because affliction, with its trinity of suffering (physical, psychological and social) allows no escape. It corrals the self within itself. This interiority invites the feeling of complicity. One feels attachment, even the attachment of a creator, to the affliction.

“Everything happens,” Weil says, “as though the state of soul appropriate for criminals had been separated from crime and attached to affliction; and it even seems to be in proportion to the innocence of those who are afflicted.” This sounds like Kafka—and it sounds like the lament of the educated twentieth century person, the voice heard buzzing low from a therapist’s office.

We accept as mythically apt Kafka’s contortions, his elaborate guilt and infinitely patient descriptions of impotence and anguish. We see his devilish sensation of complicity in his own suffering as parts of his spiritual quest—and of ours. We understand his affliction, if we give over to him at all, as evidence of spiritual work of the highest sort. He is understood to be a religious writer. He said it himself: “Writing is prayer.”

Why, then, have Sylvia Plath’s contortions not seemed generative in this way? Partly, of course, because of the suicide, an act whose willfulness breaks the bond with affliction. Then too, the early writing about Plath claimed her work and life absolutely in what I’ve called a “sociological” way. The meaning of Plath’s work necessarily remained political for quite some time.

There is another reason, though, for the unwillingness to read Plath for what she most certainly was trying to become: born again. The reason returns us to the original feminist reading of her work, the “sociological”

reading. Our culture is not prepared to see its central myth played out by a female protagonist. Women have never been denied the right to suffer. But death-and-resurrection is a male role. As feminist theologians have been pointing out for two decades, in this world, God is a guy.

Affliction, following Simone Weil's three-part definition sounds like the right word for Sylvia Plath's final months. She had recently given birth to her second child, had been hospitalized for an emergency appendectomy (the flowers in "Tulips" come from this hospitalization), she was suffering from the worst winter London had experienced in decades—that covers physical pain. And certainly the psychological anguish of the breakup of her marriage (that tragically idealized marriage of two poets we read of in her journal) was accompanied by real or feared social humiliation. One need only read her poem "The Rival" to sense this.

Social degradation is such an essential component of affliction because in a curious way it virtually ostracizes the victim while paradoxically casting her into a glaring public light. When the social degradation is caused by sexual humiliation, the pain is heightened. The victim feels terribly isolated, alone—and hideously exposed. "No day is safe from news of you," Plath says to her rival.

Unfortunately, Ted Hughes destroyed Plath's journals from this period—what would have been the *Ariel* journals—and so the personal voice of her affliction is not available to us for this crucial period as it is for her earlier years as a college student and young wife and mother.

Interestingly, martyrs (whose business it is to suffer) are not victims of affliction. "The martyrs who came into the arena singing as they faced the wild beasts," Simone Weil writes, "were not afflicted." Christ, however, like Job, "was afflicted. He did not die like a martyr. He died like a common criminal, in the same class as thieves, only a little more ridiculous. For affliction is ridiculous." Christ, in a sense, was a suicide: he could have saved himself. "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father," he says in the Garden of Gethsemane, rebuking one of his followers who strikes the slave of the high priest and cuts off his ear, "and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" Once again, the law of mythic life, not autobiographical life, is invoked: obedience belongs to necessity, not to a willful search for purpose. And when he asks for the cup to be passed from him in the Garden and yet yields to "thy will," Jesus also accomplishes what

Weil describes as “our function,” our usefulness, on earth: to consent to the existence of all that is.

It is easy to confuse religion with piety—and in doing so, to miss a powerful spiritual current that displays no recognizable “holy” language. There is no piety in the real self, in the soul. Once the post-autobiographical voice is speaking, things have gone well beyond pietisms. There is only the urgency of utterance whose function, like the true human one, is “necessity.” Plath did not define her search as religious, as Simone Weil did. Plath put her faith not in religion, but in language, in the struggle to *say it*. But it is curious how often she mentions God and how persistently she uses religious imagery. Plath speaks with this voice in “Lady Lazarus”:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware

The inflation here feels very different from a lyric autobiographical inflation of the self and its experience. This heroic voice knows it is about to burst, to vaporize—to decreate itself. In “Tulips,” Plath is quite explicit about the destruction of the autobiographical self:

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my tea set, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

The purity here is not the radiance of the “triumphant” self Robert Lowell heralded in his introduction to *Ariel*; it is not a Lawrentian “Look-we-have-come-through” feeling at all. It is death, all right, as the next stanza makes clear:

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free—

*The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.*

The Communion tablet of death—or death *as* Communion. You don't just burn away: you close on the Communion tablet, you become part of a Mystical Body. The point here is not the Christian imagery itself, but that Plath turned to it as the language that was available to her to describe the transformation she sought and intuited.

She was conscious of what she was trying to achieve. The *Ariel* we read is not the book she knew. The manuscript she put together began, as the published *Ariel* also does, with “Morning Song,” a poem about the birth of her first child which begins with the word “Love.” But the book as she organized it was to have ended with “Wintering” (now in the middle of the collection). The last word of this poem is “spring,” and Plath wrote to her mother of her satisfaction in this clear framework for the book.

After her death, however, Ted Hughes reordered the collection, making various changes. The second to last poem in the book now is “Edge,” probably the last poem Plath wrote, a chillingly suicidal poem that begins with the famous lines

*The woman is perfect.
Her dead*

*Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity*

*Flows in the scrolls in her toga,
Her bare*

*Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.*

The final poem in the book is “Words,” also one of her last poems, whose final lines are

*From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.*

A very different ordering. In a sense, the Hughes organization is more accurate—autobiographically. Plath's ordering of the collection attests to her vision. In fact, according to Judith Kroll's careful piecing together of the writing of the final poems, none of the very last, frightening poems was in Plath's *Ariel* manuscript. She apparently wrote these grim poems (including "Totem," "Paralytic," "Mystic," "Words," "Contusion," and "Edge") after she put together the collection, after she left Devon where she and her husband had lived, and went to make her way in London on her own with her two children.

Plath's intention would be more evident if her *Ariel* had been published, and the other, later poems had been collected separately. But perhaps this might have seemed an even worse travesty of the truth of things, a denial of the fact of her suicide.

Whichever ordering seems more apt or more respectful of Plath's life and intentions, the fact remains that a woman who had written poems of genius, who had "decreated" the autobiographical self for the emergence of the "useful" mythic self, went off anyway and killed herself.

What went wrong? Is transformation a delusion? Or is literature just another lying cheat?

III

I wish to trust poetry. This desire comes from a long habit of assuming that though it is made of nothing but words, that cheap material, poetry represents not only our lived life but our un-lived life, the veiled existence of the soul. Simply: I believe poetry to be capable of religious revelation as religion itself is not.

Religion is typically too constrained by the systems and institutions that claim it; the progress of the soul is muffled as well by communal rites that draw the self into a group circle. The poet, however, travels solo, darting from sacred to profane and back and under and around . . . exactly as the pilgrim soul must in its fundamental vow to "consent to the existence of the universe."

Plath's suicide, like any suicide, can only be read as the deft play of a wild card. There is no *explaining* why a person chooses to end her life. Maybe the elusive power of chance, not our occasional sensations of joy, accounts for the tendency of non-suicides to find life engaging, in spite of everything. But even if I have no faith in the possibility of discovering "why" Plath committed suicide, those final poems may possess an indication of an imperfectly imagined transformation. In reading them again and again, I must acknowledge a lot of wishing on my part—the wish to trust poetry, the wish that spiritual transformation truly exists, and can cleanse and reclaim a life whose "story," whose autobiography, has become a terrible hash.

Poetry's essence is not to show or to tell as we say of fiction, but to reveal. This means the poet is not really in control, great as that illusion may sometimes be, especially in highly formal poetry. The illusion is great in Sylvia Plath's poems. Her sense of form is meticulous, her imagination refined, severe, her vision at the extreme edge of the sayable.

Her early poems are weak exactly because her formal rigor is so absolute. Very little breath in those early poems, some collected in her first book, *The Collossus*, written by a young woman thumbing dutifully through her thesaurus. But in the *Ariel* poems, both the larger group Judith Kroll calls "mythic" and the final suicidal poems Ted Hughes added to the original manuscript, Plath's intentions are well-served by her economy and control. She even says so explicitly in "Stings":

*I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.*

*And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin. . . .*

*It is almost over
I am in control.*

The most startling thing about these poems of affliction that burn the autobiographical self into the mythic figure is not that they are filled with death. The problem seems to be that something is not sufficiently dead:

*By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.*
—“The Hanging Man”

*I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,*

*A yew hedge of orders,
Gothic and barbarous, pure German.
Dead men cry from it.*
—“Little Fugue”

*I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.*
—“Lady Lazarus”

“Lady Lazarus,” in fact, is about dying fruitlessly, again and again. The references are to Plath’s father’s death (in this poem, in service to her mythic ordering, she places his death when she was ten, though he really died when she was eight), then her own suicide attempt at twenty, and the final preoccupation with death at thirty.

But none of this dying gets the job done, it seems. There is a terrible living-on of the self, not just in memory, but in the habit of the self to be wounded (afflicted) to no purpose. “I suffer,” Plath says in her journal, “but I do not become Shakespeare.” Or the purpose is the cruel amusement of the crowd (Weil’s social degradation):

*The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see*

*Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.*
—“Lady Lazarus”

What she feels capable of is cheap disclosure, a strip tease; what she requires is the miracle, resurrection.

Plath was “done for,” as she puts it in “Death & Co.,” perhaps because she was unable to conceive of transformation as a gesture, as a movement of the self, achieved as a gift received rather than as an accomplishment performed. In “Daddy,” the poem about her first death, she is patricidal by the second stanza, in part because the father is perceived as a piece of statuary:

*Daddy, I have had to kill you,
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe.*

The gruesome mechanism that passes for living in “The Applicant” is another evidence of this grimly static perception of the self:

*A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.*

The next stanza insists, positively sells, the self as if it were an object:

*It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.*

These images of the old self are supposed to die, in order to effect transformation. It's their not dying that causes the problem. They don't die because Plath keeps retrieving them as pure, controlled images, heavily refined. She frames everything—which *stops* it, true enough, but hardly kills it. In fact, she memorializes what should go dead into the sepulchre and disappear for good.

It is worth remembering that the first evidence of Christ's resurrection in the Gospel is not the discovery of his body, but the absence of his body from the tomb: no icon. In *Matthew*, Mary Magdelene and the “other Mary” go to the sepulchre. An angel appears and says, “Do not be afraid; for I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.”

The women, we are told in *Mark* and *Luke*, have come with spices for the body. But there is no body. The first evidence is not of the transfigured, risen body (that comes later), but of the absence of the bodily self. (In *John* there is mention of the linen burial clothes used to wrap the body; seeing these bandages, John, “the one whom Jesus loved . . . believed.”) And Thomas the Doubter, who needs not only to see but to touch the body, goes down in history as someone who missed the whole point of the resurrection.

It may well be that literature cannot do what Plath went to it for. Her “problem,” or her question, was religious, yet she remained rigorously literary in her strategies and resources.

She seems aware, sometimes desperately so, of the narrow imagistic prison she has written herself into. One of the last poems is aptly titled “Paralytic.” In “Years,” she cries out for action as only the impotent can:

*What I love is
The piston in motion—
My soul dies before it.*

Once again transformation has been *imaged* (as the piston, an object), not imagined as movement. There is a pathetic wistfulness here. “I simply cannot see where there is to get to,” she says pitifully in that beautiful poem, “The Moon and the Yew Tree.”

This frustration over movement and destination is significant. After all, as Ted Hughes arranged *Ariel* (using one of the very last poems Plath wrote), the last words in the book are “fixed stars/Govern a life.” Any sign of movement seems threatening:

*How far is it?
How far is it now? The gigantic gorilla interior
Of the wheels move, they appal me.*
—“Getting There”

This poem, which seems to derive from a dream, is replete with images of broken or bloody or burned figures, “a hospital of dolls,” “legs, arms piled.” The repeated insistent question—“How far is it?”—covers the more burning question of *where* she is going. To death, of course; she is clear in

the final lines when she speaks of stepping from “the black car of Lethe.” But she has already admitted, “I cannot undo myself, and the train is steaming.” The train, the conveyance, not the willing self, is what has gone on this journey. The self is dragged, not carried, along, “and I in agony.”

There is a great deal of exhaustion in the *Ariel* poems:

*And it exhausts me to watch you
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.*
—“Poppies in July”

I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
—“Tulips”

*I am exhausted, I am exhausted—
Pillars of white in a blackout of knives.*
—“The Bee Meeting”

Effort and impotence and exhaustion—the heavy burden of one who feels personal effort is meant to solve things. Much earlier, as an aching ambitious college girl, Plath tried to write her way out of a serious depression, “gathering forces into a tight ball for the artistic leap.”

She admits in the journal entry that it is all “dreams, private dreams. But if I work? And always work to think, and know and practice technique always?” If I practice always to be perfect, especially practice technique, that controllable method of transformation, then won’t everything come out right?

Our most ancient metaphor—that life is a journey—becomes the inevitable figure used to express spiritual transformation. This metaphor is so imbedded in our understanding of spiritual life that it is hardly perceived as a metaphor. Journey, quest, pilgrimage—we use these words as a matter of course, unconsciously.

Yet Sylvia Plath, who was so clearly engaged in the work of spiritual transformation, stumbled over this metaphor, unable to use it, unable to give herself the favor of understanding she was on a trip, that the unexpected would come her way and that this was not her responsibility, but her gift.

Because she could not see herself on a journey, except the forced passage of a refugee crammed into a cattle car, she also could not imagine a destination. “There is no terminus,” she says in “Totem” (a very late poem), “only suitcases.” No journey, just baggage.

When there *is* movement (as in “Getting There”), it is usually grimly mechanized. “The engine is killing the track,” she writes in the first line of this poem. The journey (the track) itself is destroyed by the pilgrim—if an engine can even be called a pilgrim. “I cannot run,” she says in “Bee Meeting,” “I could not run without having to run forever.” Once again, no destination, just eternal effort.

In place of journey with destination, Plath poses exhausted striving and the framed images of memory (the snapshots of autobiography), the horrified stills of the old life:

*My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.*
—“Tulips”

It may be that the central metaphor of the journey is potentially more troubling, even threatening, to a woman than to a man. After all, if it is the central metaphor of our culture, the quest is a male metaphor, primitively related to the hunt. The ancient myth for women, on the other hand, is tied to the icon (the virgin, the mother) and to a rooted place (the home, the hearth).

But to have a history which, being a *story* (an autobiography), is wounded by plot and its fluency of action, the poet cannot remain an icon, a statue, a fixed body. The poet must take the trip—not just take the pictures. Plath hangs on to the attempt to frame the self in a picture, even as she is ripping herself up in a frustrated attempt at spiritual change.

Death and resurrection. She knows someone must die. But what is resurrection? A complete trust in death? Or is it faith? And what is this “new self”? A baby? There are a lot of babies in Plath’s poems, “awful babies,” weird and creepy figures of unachieved freshness. Terrible babies, most terrible when they are presented as statuary. Even in the first *Ariel* poem, “Morning Song,” one of the more radiant poems in the collection, the newborn child is immediately seen as a “new statue / In a drafty

museum . . .” There are many of these frozen baby-statues in the poems, one of the most chilling groupings in “Death & Co.”:

*He tells me how sweet
The babies look in their hospital
Icebox, a simple*

*Frill at the neck,
Then the flutings of their Ionian
Death-gowns.*

Without the saving metaphor of the journey, which does not explain anguish but rather gives it location and renders it potentially useful as metaphor, the road of the pilgrim soul is an exhausting conveyor belt, leading nowhere but back to a repetition of wished-for embarkations. Even that stylistic habit of Plath’s, the triple beat of the verb or of central nouns, seems, in this light, not so much an insistence as an impotent stutter:

It can talk, talk, talk. . . .

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.
—“The Applicant”

*. . . These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.*
—“Elm”

*Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice.
They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear.*
—“The Bee Meeting”

If Sylvia Plath has a muse it is the moon. In “The Moon and the Yew Tree” she even says, “The moon is my mother.” But this moon-mother “is not sweet like Mary.” Like anything Plath is almost willing to trust, there is an edge, an aloof harshness to the image.

“How I would like to believe in tenderness,” she says later in the poem. Probably her most honest, most exhausted line. Unlike the trust expressed

in her early journal for “characters who commit suicide, adultery, or get murdered” because “what they say is True,” evidence of kindness is a signal of weakness.

Plath, who has taken on impossible interior burdens, doesn’t believe in kindness, but in accomplishment: “Why am I obsessed with the idea I can justify myself by getting manuscripts published?” Plath’s ambition, by which she seeks to save or find herself (“But if I work? And always work to think, and know and practice technique always?”), is the outer sign of a relentless willfulness that fills her being.

When spiritual writers speak of the “death of the self,” they mean the death of the will. If Sylvia Plath was loyal to her will, that instrument of control, it is hard to think of a writer who is more faithful to her terror, the radical emotion of vulnerability, than Sylvia Plath was. She retained a remarkable loyalty to her desperation. In no single book of poetry in the past quarter century has private concision voiced the interior urge for transformation as eloquently as *Ariel* does.

And for women certainly there will always be the grave sense of history having been made in the *Ariel* poems: here, finally, the ancient struggle is described in female terms, the beast of living wrestled down to the mat by a woman, fiercely employing her—our—images in terrible, contorted holds until the effort failed, and the light went elsewhere.

March 21, California, the Santa Cruz mountains washing into each other in hillocky mounts and slides, the spring green dotted black here and there by grazing cattle. Above, the pure arc of the sky, the fog of the last several days finally burned away. Off in the far distance, making the end of the world a silver glint, the Pacific is pooled. The light out there is latched by the horizon’s delicate hinge linking sky and sea.

No eye is as credulous of landscape as a Midwesterner’s: the habit of flatness and soft surfaces creates a childish eagerness to believe all this improbable mountain-sea-sky melodrama. The dirty rusks of the neighborhood snowbanks back home in St. Paul are there behind me somewhere, but I’ve been here a week now, and carry a wildflower book on walks, diligently labeling the facts of spring: Scotch broom, trillium, meadow-foam. . . .

I cannot imagine killing myself. Like everyone, I’ve sometimes wished I were dead, but have never inflicted a wound: a habit of being interested in

the next thing saves us non-suicides, I suppose, at dangerous moments. Last week the filthy snowbanks of St. Paul, this week the sea: good things sometimes turn up. That is enough for some of us. I found myself saying, as I took a hike in this glory of a landscape yesterday, “Great God, great God.” Not simply an exclamation. It was a prayer, and rose of its own volition. Maybe the only real prayers *are* exclamations, brief, unbidden, hardly belonging to the speaker.

Then at night, almost finished with this, typing at the furious pace I learned years ago when I worked as a temp for Kelly Girl, I was halted abruptly by a power failure. The typewriter stopped like a stone. The study lamp went dark, returned with a brief wheeze of sepia light, and then closed down entirely. Everything went black, and stayed black.

This morning we found out what had happened. A man, crazy and jealous, shot his girlfriend from his car while she was driving along one of these narrow mountain roads in her car. She crashed into a power pole—dead. Then the man went streaking off in his car, sheered off a ridge—dead too, probably a suicide, though it’s hard to say for sure.

The bizarre sensation of connection, person to person: tapping away here at top speed, my current cut off by a woman’s death, the knowledge now that my inconvenience was her end. That casual link, the faint flicker of odd light from the study lamp before everything went pure black. The weight of chance in a life, the relative destinies we bear and occasionally touch across the great, vibrating vacancy.

Now the power is back, the typewriter is humming, and out the window the colossal miracle of this landscape slants to the endless sea.

I said I wished to trust poetry. I wished also, like many women of my generation, to trust ambition, the power of personal accomplishment, rather than the old roles of dependence and service. And, reading Plath again, I have even wished for her sake that it might have been so—that she *could* have felt justified by getting manuscripts published, by working hard and practicing technique always.

But it’s way past time to quit wishing. Or to mistake wishing with prayer. “Writing is prayer,” Kafka, that most afflicted one, said. And writing, certainly, isn’t wishing; it is witnessing. But to what do you testify? To your own desperation? Plath did that. To your desires? But isn’t that back to wishes again?

There is a way, and Sylvia Plath knew it as a girl writing out of the genius of her loneliness at Swampscott, facing the other ocean, locating herself by its immensity:

A consuming love . . . of the clean unbroken sense that the rocks which are nameless, the waves which are nameless, the ragged grass which is nameless, are all defined momentarily through the consciousness of the being who observes them.

This is the transforming self, the useful being who “with the sun burning into rock, and flesh, and wind ruffling grass and hair” experiences “an awareness that the blind immense unconscious impersonal and neutral forces will endure.” She recognizes herself as “the fragile, miraculously knit organism which interprets” all of this and “endows [it] with meaning.” That miraculously knit organism which interprets was, in Sylvia Plath’s case, too relentless to safeguard that very fragility.

But on the washed rocks of Swampscott she expressed with serenity her function, which was to “move about for a little, then falter, fail, and decompose at last into the anonymous soil, voiceless, faceless, without identity.” A statement that is sister to Simone Weil’s understanding that “It is our function in this world to consent to the existence of the universe.”

Whether the peace of that acquiescence, that anonymity, was Sylvia Plath’s on this earth is unknown to us. Still, she imagined it once, which is to say she lived it once. That counts.

And if wishes refuse to be denied voice, it should be possible to advance a small wish on her behalf, something merely ceremonial, but in the spirit of valediction: that something might end with what she intended as her final word in the book she understood was her claim to genius, the book which would place her among the poets after her death.

For in the distance, the sun is cutting the Pacific clean silver, and it is the first day of spring.