

## **Sylvia Plath: The Illusion of a Greek Necessity**

A talk given at the Lebury Poetry Festival on the 13th of July, 2013. In the course of it I read aloud in full several of Sylvia Plath's poems that, for reasons of copyright, I am unable to copy into this text. Instead I have given their page numbers in her *Collected Poems (CP)* [London; Faber & Faber] 1981.

It is now over fifty years since Sylvia Plath died at 30 in London, never knowing she was about to become the pivotal, most influential woman poet of the twentieth century. In 'Edge', which was probably her last poem, she sees herself (or a persona like herself) lying dead, like a classical statue, the heroine/victim of "the illusion of a Greek necessity." Twenty-five years ago, when I was completing *Bitter Fame*, my biography of Plath, I tried to play down the element of victimhood in the popular myth that flourished in many quarters after her death. This was because throughout the 1980s and 90s, the official feminist take on Plath's suicide was to see her as the 'victim' of Ted Hughes' adultery and male-privileged desertion. From what I had read and heard from various witnesses of their marriage breakup and its final repercussions in the suicide of Assia Wevill (who gassed her daughter with herself) I found it impossible to believe any explanation so simple as that Ted Hughes, by all accounts a man who valued Sylvia's genius and sacrificed much to it, would wilfully abandon the mother of his children whom he regarded as a major poet simply because he had fallen in love with another woman. Such a scenario, out of True Romances or some cheap novel, couldn't and wouldn't do for any of this tragedy's *dramatis personae*. Since writing my book, however, I have thought a good deal about Sylvia Plath's alleged victimhood, concluding, finally, that I do think she was – as she saw herself in 'Edge' and other late poems – a victim, but certainly not of Ted Hughes nor really of any individual – neither of her mother nor her father. She was not even a victim of her beloved psychotherapist, Ruth Beuscher, whose well-meaning but sadly unprofessional advice she came to depend on. I believe, in short, that Sylvia Plath was a victim of her own brilliantly imaginative brain, which was probably irrevocably damaged when, in the summer of 1953, sleepless and fearful of going mad, she was given, as an outpatient, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) by a careless or incompetent psychiatrist in a run-of-the-mill Massachusetts mental home. In

this, I believe, she was tragically a victim of a time when ECT was considered an efficient and effective psychoanalytical practice.

There is little doubt that Sylvia Plath's treatment by electrolysis led directly to her decision to commit suicide; as she wrote later to a friend, Eddie Cohen, "The only alternative I could see was an eternity of hell for the rest of my life in a mental hospital, and I was going to make use of my last ounce of free choice and choose a quick, clean ending." The story of Plath's attempted suicide and slow recovery at twenty, later supplied her with the plot of her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, and is the spark which set alight many of her most powerful poems.

All Plath's work, at source, is autobiographical, but instead of celebrating epiphanies of visionary experience or invoking moments of profound emotion, like Wordsworth's or Dylan Thomas's, it mostly consists of fragmented stages of symbolic, often frantic, self-exploration. The kind of poetry Plath initiated – and not, I think, the kind she wished to be remembered by – is a poetry that continually balances on the thin line between art and psychotherapy.

Such an approach – especially attractive to her (and my) generation of Americans – has appealed to women as no other form of poetry ever has before. Up to the middle nineteen-fifties, writing poetry was chiefly a male prerogative; apart from Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, maybe Edna St. Vincent Millay, few women poets were considered worthy of inclusion in the college anthologies. Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop were, like Wallace Stevens, acceptable as 'modernists' on the model of T.S. Eliot – which is to say, experimental and deliberately impersonal. Both felt insulted when reviewed as women poets. Elizabeth Bishop famously refused to allow her poems to appear in all-women anthologies.

With the sudden emergence of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and a number of other women poets in the 1960s, all this changed. A whole new category of 'confessional poetry' appeared, as if conjured from the heady atmosphere of rebellion and self-doubt many of us felt who graduated from colleges in the United States to become wives and mothers, having been educated to expect lives very different from those of our mothers and grandmothers. My own contribution to the literature of confession was a long epistolary poem, *Correspondences*, written in the 1970s, ten years after Sylvia Plath's

death, in which I tried to give the movement a background in American social history by inventing a family something like my own (but not my own) in whose names I wrote letters modelled on letters I'd discovered in my family archive. These I augmented by borrowings from 19th century letters I found in the archives of the Schlesinger Library at Harvard. As I look back on the writing of *Correspondences*, I see it partly as an attempt to broaden and deepen the scope of the confessional movement, partly as an attempt to discourage young poets – especially women – from writing exclusively and obsessively about themselves.

Surprised to have survived those turbulent years, I now look back to the period spanning the 1960s and 70s as a time of prolonged cultural adolescence when many young women in the West discovered in themselves hormones of unconscious cravings they had never before found a common language to express. Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, when it appeared in 1965, was timed perfectly to galvanize the women's movement into action, encouraging many a bright, ambitious girl on the verge of adulthood to idolise or imitate this uniquely gifted American poet whose self-imprisonment and psychic polarisation forced her to succeed at killing herself at thirty where she had failed at twenty. Today, fifty years after her death, it is time we took seriously what Ted Hughes had to say about the enormous human cost of Plath's poetry.

Ted Hughes and Ted Hughes alone, was witness – hour after hour, day after day, week after week for six years – to "the birth circumstances" of Sylvia Plath's poems, to the astonishing rapidity of her maturation as an artist, and to how, as her style sharpened, she struggled to overcome the demands of the deadly myth – that "great, stark, bloody play" she could not help writing in the ever-narrowing psychological space behind the facade of her, on the whole, privileged daily life. Alone among their peers, Hughes understood the extremes, positive and negative, between which, to use her own word, Plath helplessly "ricocheted". He patiently supported, often at the cost of his own work, the courageous toil that kept at bay the death – that black threatening alternative to brilliant performance – that Plath's poems tell us was always close at hand. It is of a helplessly trapped, fiercely combatant spirit that Hughes wrote, in an essay on her journals,

Sylvia Plath's poetry, like a species on its own, exists in little else but the revelation of its birth and purpose. Though her whole considerable ambition was fixed on becoming the normal flowering and fruiting kind of writer, her work was roots only. Almost as if her entire oeuvre were enclosed within those processes and transformations that happen in other poets before they can even begin... Or as if all poetry were made up of the feats and shows performed by the poetic spirit Ariel. Whereas her poetry is the biology of Ariel, the ontology of Ariel – the story of Ariel's imprisonment in the pine, before Prospero opened it."

(See William Scammell, ed. *Winter Pollen, Occasional Prose of Ted Hughes* [London: Faber & Faber, 1994] p 178.)

Hughes' last collection of poems, *Birthday Letters* (1998), bears witness to the evolution of Plath's poetry from the time of their meeting in February 1956 to her death in February 1963. It is at once a book of poems and a series of investigations into their partnership, supporting, if I may say so, my contention in *Bitter Fame*, that Hughes battled for many years against his wife's destructive polarities but failed at last to free either her or himself from their spell. After her death, despite aggressive attacks on himself and the repeated desecration of Plath's grave in Heptonstall, where she was buried in her married name, Hughes set himself soberly to trace and analyse Plath's growth as a poet in a series of insightful introductions to her work. Now that Plath's original selection for her volume, *Ariel*, has been published, there is all the more reason to listen to Hughes's reasons for making the selection he did for the edition of 1965. I hope that comparisons between the two versions will help to heal, not inflame, the hatred generated after her death – chiefly by people, stunned by the power of her poetry, but who did not know her, or knew her only superficially. In any case, all Plath's poems were made available to the public in the chronological order of their writing in *The Collected Poems*, published by Faber in 1981. Having re-read them for the purposes of this talk, I have been impressed all over again by their beauty, their persuasiveness, their grit and rhythmic invention, yet I am more than ever disturbed by their build-up of concentrated anguish, malice and aggression. As before, I can't help but conclude that the strongest of Plath's poems have to be understood as paradoxical. As a body of work, they tell us how an exceptionally gifted poet fought for her life by again and again dwelling on the lurid particulars of her death; nearly every poem in *Ariel* is a bid for survival by dying, and like Lady Lazarus, doing it "exceptionally well" – well enough, anyway, to deserve being

born again, stepping from "the black car of Lethe/ Pure as a baby." [As in 'Getting There', CP, p.249]

Such a contradiction can only be explained as her doctor, Dr Horder, in great distress, explained it much later. "I believe", he wrote, "that she was liable to large swings of mood, but so excessive that a doctor inevitably thinks in terms of brain chemistry. This does not reduce the concurrent importance of marriage breakup or of exhaustion after a period of unusual artistic activity or from recent infectious illnesses or from the difficulties of being a responsible, practical mother. The full explanation has to take all these factors into account and more. But the irrational compulsion to end it all makes me think that the body was governing the mind." Proof of an insane suicidal logic lay in the care with which she sealed the room where her two small children were sleeping, setting out bread and milk for them, and in the note she left for the nurse due to arrive in the morning, "Please call Dr Horder" with his telephone number. [See *Bitter Fame*, Houghton Mifflin, p. 298]

Sylvia Plath would hardly be the iconic figure that she is today if she had simply written some fine poems and then, in period of sleepless insanity, killed herself. Had her tragedy not been reflective of the time she lived in, she would not be today the most celebrated poet of her generation, which is why for an epigraph to the Epilogue of *Bitter Fame*, I chose this quote from an essay by Joyce Carol Oates called "The Death Throes of Romanticism".

Tragedy is not a woman, however gifted, dragging her shadow around in a circle, or analyzing with dazzling scrupulosity the stale, boring inertia of the circle; tragedy is cultural, mysteriously enlarging the individual so that what he has experienced is both what we have experienced and what we need not experience – because of his, or her, private agony. It is proper to say that Sylvia Plath represents for us a tragic figure involved in a tragic action and that her tragedy is offered to us as a near-perfect work of art in her books.

I think this is true. It is well to consider that the self-conflict and madness that led Sylvia Plath to suicide were not singular to her, not wholly personal in the self-centred self-manufactured sense they appear to be in her poems; they were hall marks of the tragedy that engulfed much of the world in the decades of the twentieth century. Madness lay behind the multiple causes of two World Wars, behind nuclear technologies for

dealing out death to millions, behind refined techniques of torture and mass murder in the Lagers of the Nazis and the Gulags of the Soviet Union. The suffering, the inhumanity and the real craziness of a brutalized Europe found expression in the counter-madness of Modern Art – in Dadaism, Cubism, Vorticism, Futurism, Abstract Expressionism – to which Sylvia Plath, with a poet's sensitivity to atmosphere, responded with the verbal energy and punch she brought to all her writing. In her late poems, she never hesitated to conflate her extreme state of suffering with that of a Jewish victim of the Holocaust. But even in 1956, the tidy stanzas of the love poems she wrote in Cambridge after she met Ted Hughes are slung out in a violent language of exalted persecution. Here are the first lines of 'Pursuit'.

There is a panther stalks me down:  
One day I'll have my death of him;  
His greed has set the woods aflame,  
He prowls more lordly than the sun.  
Most soft, most suavely glides that step,  
Advancing always at my back;  
From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc ...

Already Plath had developed a language of startling cacophony: – hemlock, rooks, croak, havoc, trek, rocks, wakes. Crackling sounds like these were to serve her well in her mature work. It now seems inevitable that in second half of the 20th century Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes between them would do much to change the direction and character of poetry in the English language. In this, of course, they were not alone. They were contemporary with Ginsberg and the Beat Generation in America; and Plath was for a while, with Anne Sexton, a student of Robert Lowell whose openly confessional poetry served them both as a models. For when Ted and Sylvia met in Cambridge early in 1956, fashionable verse, in both their countries, had, as if in retreat from the savage inhumanity of the war, deliberately civilized itself in tone and form. In Britain, poetry took to a kind of neo-Georgian elegance; Robert Conquest's *The Movement* confirmed the conservatism of Philip Larkin's metrical irony and cynical despair. In the United States a measured, plain-spoken approach to natural philosophy (I suppose you could call it) found a model in Robert Frost, whose infectious example inspired the generation that benefitted from the GI (education) Bill, producing in the 1950s the highly polished stanzas of among others,

Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht and (well before feminism) Plath's early arch-rival, Adrienne Cecil Rich.

Before Sylvia met Ted Hughes, she assumed that she would continue to write in the manner of her college models, W.H. Auden and Richard Wilbur. Her background in middle-class Wellesley was suburban – American to the core, for all her German heritage – steeped in the values of individualism and responsibility for personal success. From her early journals we learn how hard Sylvia Plath worked to achieve this all-important success, while all the time she was suppressing – as she came to realise – an 'other' highly conflicted inner self, a debilitating double, a chthonic figure of darkness and desire for extinction which, even in her school days, undermined her, pulling her down into pits of despair as she climbed publicly from triumph to triumph. So it happened that this lively, highly competitive, attractive American girl, so gifted, so ambitious, so happy, went off one summer to New York to be a student editor of a fashion magazine and returned two weeks later to bury herself in a crawl space under her house and swallow sleeping pills until she lost consciousness.

It seems that Sylvia Plath's failure to achieve death, aged twenty, preceded by an outpatient's course of crudely administered electric shock treatments, stunned her at a point of development she never outgrew, just as the process of her lingering 'rebirth' in McLean's Sanatorium, near Boston, confirmed her illusion that dying was a necessary prelude to being born again. Such is the plot of *The Bell Jar*, complete with its heroine's subjection to ECT and the killing off of a threatening female double before she can recover. The novel ends with the heroine returning to college "patched for the road" like a repaired tyre, as if the author (whom we know has been the real heroine all along) realized that in the deep underworld of her psyche her other self, that evil, death-dealing double, had been temporarily satisfied but not vanquished.

Given the shape and structure of this controlling myth, Dr Ruth Beuscher, the young psychotherapist who won Plath's confidence after her suicide attempt, leaped to the conclusion that Sylvia's breakdown had originated with the death of her father when she was eight. Plath eagerly grasped at this Freudian analysis (whether for the first time, we do not know; no sign appears in the journals before the summer of her suicide attempt in 1953 that she excessively missed her father), claiming for herself an Electra Complex,

and making use of it again and again in a sequence of poems that never seemed to lay Otto Plath to rest or to cure her permanently of her yearning to join him.

Part of the reason for Sylvia Plath's inability to abandon her identification with Electra must be laid at the door of the times and the pervasiveness all over America in the latter 20th century of psychoanalysis as an unquestionable faith, almost a religion. With ancient Greek and fertility myths cited as universal archetypes by both Freud and Jung, thousands of sensitive young Americans, fearful of failure (in America, failure is often regarded as a secular sin) took themselves off to psychiatrists for spiritual rehabilitation. Dr Beuscher, fascinated by her brilliant patient, established a hold over her by suggesting that both her husband and her mother might be possible 'enemies'. If we are to believe Plath's journal of 1959, Dr Beuscher on one occasion openly gave Sylvia "permission to hate her mother" – apparently never hesitating to suggest to her vivid imagination the image of a classically martyred queen who turns up years later, triumphantly dead in that late, terrifying poem 'Edge'.

Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity/ Flows in the scroll of her toga...

(Note the word "illusion" in connection with "necessity", as if the poet knew, even on the threshold of her suicide, that she was acting out a myth. And how strange that this double who is previewing her death, is wearing a "toga, the garment of a Roman senator, not the flowing robe of a Greek goddess.)

Evidently, Sylvia Plath never forgot any therapeutic suggestion that related to or magnified her plight. Terrified, even as a child, of not being loved and praised enough, of not succeeding in pleasing her mother in everything she undertook to do, and especially of not realizing in the actual world of experience, the beautiful world of her Apollonian dreams, Sylvia Plath, emerging into adulthood, let her imagination play over images of death in connection with her father while at the same time inventing for herself a number of threatening doubles, rivals, and competitors – all women like her mother, who had to be 'killed' before Sylvia could be born again. There was really no room for anyone in her Freudian Family Romance that was not a manifestation of herself or of the father who had 'deserted' her by dying, or of the mother who poisoned her love by her anxious hovering. Poor Aurelia Plath became for her daughter the archetypal betrayer whose

worrisome devotion Sylvia, in the end, had had to reject as the indictment of a false saint. The vicious poem, 'Medusa', is surely an attempt to rid herself finally of this familial demon who, ten years earlier, had delivered her daughter to the torturer who maimed her permanently by subjecting her to electro-convulsive therapy.

(See 'Medusa' in *Collected Poems*, p. 184)

Reading this poem against the background of Sylvia's fury at the time – a fury not only with her husband but with her entire life and fate – we can guess that the line "Bottle in which I live" refers as much to the glass womb of her own bell-jar as to the body of her unfortunate mother. And yet, Plath's poems to her baby son, written in the same month, revert to the imagery of her beautiful poem, 'Candles', written in London in 1960, for her new born daughter. Candles and candlelight must have represented salvation to her, or at least the peace and gentleness of what might be a believable Christian religion. In any case, the courageous fight she put up almost daily to escape from her pine tree (or mother's womb or bell jar) to become, in Hughes's words, "a normal flowering and fruiting writer" found hopeful language in 'Candles', written in London, in October, 1960. Let me read it to you. (*Collected Poems*, p. 131)

'Candles' is a rarity among Plath's poems because the confessional mode fits it so beautifully, and yet it opens generously to the universal. Every mother who has ever nursed a tiny baby at midnight can identify with its speaker's calm tone of fulfilment. That "infant still in a birth drowse" is an unforgettable phrase. Yet even here, disturbing Plathian images obtrude: 'the bald moon', the 'nun-souled' candles that 'never marry'. A nightmare fear of what she remembered as near electrocution before her suicide attempt resurfaced during her first pregnancy in the six snapping lines of 'The Hanging Man'.

(*CP*, p. 123)

In October of the same year, 1960, on the day before she wrote 'Candles', Sylvia wrote a strange poem called 'Love Letter', seemingly addressed to Dr Beuscher, replaying the miracle she achieved by bringing Sylvia back to life when, like a stone, she lay "dead and unbothered by it." The word, 'stone', recalls 'The Stones' from 'Poem for a Birthday', written in October, 1959, a calculated, 'mad' account of her transformations in the

underworld of electro-convulsive therapy, followed by her resurrection in the never-never land of McLean hospital.

Here they can doctor heads, or any limb.  
On Fridays the little children come

To trade their hooks for hands.  
Dead men leave eyes for others.  
Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.  
The vase, reconstructed, houses  
The elusive rose...

(CP, p. 136)

Unexpectedly, in the week of her 27th birthday at Yaddo Writers' Colony in New York, Plath's Ariel voice had tried out these first astonishing cadences. Exactly a year later 'Love Letter' appeared, yet another poem which describes a 'dead' speaker's return to life as she "started to bud like a March twig; /An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg," ascending from "stone to cloud like a sort of god". It suggests that neither the brisk stanzas of 'The Hanging Man' nor the soothing cadences of 'Candles' could do away with Plath's conviction that she had to undergo physical death before she could enter a new phase of creative life. A violent quarrel with her husband followed by a miscarriage in February 1961, prompted a poem of deep depression, 'Parliament Hill Fields', followed by a bitter poem on marriage, 'Zoo Keeper's Wife'. Soon after came 'Morning Song', usually taken to be a peon in praise of childbirth. For all the finesse of its imagery and language, I find it chilling. Until the final lines, not a single image from life gives her new born baby human flesh and blood. The child is compared first with a gold watch; then its footsoles (not feet) are slapped and a "bald cry" takes its place among the elements. The baby is a statue in a draughty museum, its parents are walls, and the mother is no more than a cloud distilling a mirror to reflect its own disappearance. If Plath had been a philosophical materialist, such images might have been expected. Here, they surely reflect incipient depression. Even when the baby's cry pulls the mother from bed "cow-heavy and floral" in her Victorian nightgown, the baby remains remote, opening its mouth like a cat before trying its "handful of notes". The only note of joy or hope seems to be that the baby's

"notes" rise like balloons – anticipating that amusing nearly last poem of 1963, "Balloons".

All the poems of 1960, 1961, written in London before the Hughes found a home in rural Devon, are slung out with a characteristic mixture of vulnerability and toughness: Plathian words: bald, stone, bandage, hospital, mirror, pond, echoes, museum, hooks surface again and again – particularly the word 'bald', associated indiscriminately with the moon, with a nurse, with cries, with eyes – its origin probably the image of her father's drowning skull. Best known among these London poems, 'In Plaster' and 'Tulips', were stimulated by an appendectomy Plath underwent in St Pancras Hospital in February 1961. The tough-talking 'In Plaster' offers readers a detached half-amused analysis of a schizoid condition; 'Tulips' expresses Plath's recurring desire for extinction or self-effacement. Between them, these two finely tuned poems were powerful enough to raise their author's state of mind once again from deadening depression and restore it to a state of enthusiasm, energy and self-confidence. Still, both poems forecast what was to come. When she moved with Ted Hughes and their baby to Court Green in North Tawton in late August of 1961, her mind was primed and her craft honed to confront the challenge of her interior mythology as never before.

At first, after moving to Devon, Sylvia wrote nothing but enthusiastic letters to her mother and English friends, describing her beautiful house and garden and their plans for living and writing there, free of the dirt and noise of London. In view of her happy letters and cheerful neighbourhood notes in her journal, it comes as a shock to realise that one of the first and best poems Sylvia wrote at that time was 'The Moon and Yew Tree' (CP, p.153) at the suggestion of Ted, who, one morning, gave her as a subject the view from their bedroom window to break her writing block. He wrote later of being deeply depressed by the 'exercise' she wrote on this subject, which invoked yet again the father (yew tree) and mother (moon), phantoms of her interior mythology. As you read it, notice the colour-imagery in this poem – black tree, white moon, and the rest, blue: it's as much a surrealistic word-painting as it is a poem, depicting as hauntingly as anything by de Chirico the interior of a mind that sees death wherever it looks.

'The Moon and Yew Tree' is dated 22 October, 1961. Her 29th birthday was on the 27th, five days later. So Sylvia Plath by this time had explored her death theme and its

counter theme, painful rebirth in the seven parts of 'Poem for a Birthday' in October 1959, again in 'Love Letter' in October, 1960, and more negatively in 'The Moon and Yew Tree' in October 1961. She returned to it fortissimo in October 1962 with 'Lady Lazarus', when, stunned and infuriated by her husband's adultery, after banishing him from their Devon home, she began to write the poems that made her name, rising at four or five every morning before her babies woke, perfecting her unique voice, her Ariel voice, as she rehearsed yet again, this time triumphantly, her ineradicable interior drama. In 'Lady Lazarus', each bladed stanza is honed with the skill Sylvia Plath had perfected over many years of practice. Nothing like it, or like any of the Ariel poems had ever been written by a woman – or a man – before. (See 'Lady Lazarus', CP, p. 198)

'Lady Lazarus' is a marvellous poem, not because of the triumphant resurrection it expresses, implying that victory is possible for the poet even after she has died in circumstances likened to the holocaust, but because of its piston-like rhythm. Its plot is Gothic, melodramatic, a woman's revenge story, but the rhythm that ties the lines together, with its almost jokey rhymes, is joyous; the poem is obviously enjoying its own performance, rushing along like a train on a track. Curiously, in good poetry, in the very best poetry, content and form can effectively argue with or contradict each other. What Sylvia Plath had learned and was putting into practice in her Ariel voice was that writing a splendid poem about dying aborted her need to die. Even mournful lyrics, such as 'Mary's Song' and 'The Couriers', written during this wonderfully creative period (October through November of 1962) raised her spirits. Her poem to her baby son, 'Nick and the Candlestick' begins with "cold homicides" in a cave of piranha fish, but it ends with an upbeat. And here again candles, as before, are signs of blessing, of a rare, loving reconciliation with the hostile world.

Had the exultation of writing so many extraordinary poems in the space of two months lasted, Plath might well have overcome her death urge by allowing her writing persona complete creative freedom to die when it would, thus saving her actual life. But the move she made with her children in December from Devon to London interrupted the flow of her poems, and when she began to write again in January 1963, the triumphant note had disappeared. The coldest winter on record crippled England that January –

February, bringing snowstorms and frozen plumbing. As Plath's spirits plummeted with the temperature, her poems, too, began abandon the struggle. Her last poems, written shortly before her suicide, such as 'Totem' and 'Edge', tell us that the airless death chamber of the bell jar had finally become lethal. If – she argued with the pseudo-rational logic of the insane – *if* she had "died" at twenty and Ruth Beuscher had resurrected her and given her a new life, mightn't she die again at thirty, with something like the same result? Dr Horder had found her a nurse (that 'bald' ambiguous symbol of hope); wouldn't he find a way to resurrect and return her to life, patched for the road?

Apart from her last, terrifying poem, 'Edge', I believe the poems that best describe Sylvia Plath's state of mind before she took her life on February 11th, 1963, are 'Totem', written on January 28th, and 'Words', written on February 1st. I'd like to finish by reading them to you. (CP, pp. 215 and 221) As poems they are perfect, but as truth, they are sadly consistent with the plot of her personal drama. Her death, like her life, was a performance she couldn't escape. After her death, Ted Hughes found the perfect epigraph in the Bhagavad Gita to engrave on Sylvia Plath's tombstone "Even among fierce flames, the golden lotus can be planted."