

**The “Barnacle Dead” and the Work
of Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath**

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要旨

「脳裏から離れない死者」とヴァージニア・ウルフ、アン・セクストン及び シルヴィア・プラスの作品

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今世紀初め、フロイトによって哀悼の意を表すことの難しさが認識されたが、彼によると、我々の精神的葛藤が親しい者との死別に立ち向かうことをひどく困難にすることがある。ヴァージニア・ウルフ、アン・セクストン、そしてシルヴィア・プラスは特にこの問題に悩んだ三人の現代作家達で、それぞれが強烈な作品を残して、結局は自殺している。

ウルフは小説家として、すぐに彼女自身の苦しみとわかるものを登場人物に押しつけないよう苦心した。例えば『ダロウェイ夫人』においてクラリッサ・ダロウェイが味わったであろう深い悲しみ（妹の死）は、セプティマス・ウォレン・スミスに与えられ、彼は戦友の喪に服せず、苦悩している。結局ウルフは『波』の中で、そのような問題にうまく対処することができた。哲学的で、いくぶん人間味のない作品、『波』において死を嘆く必要性は、死を免れない我々の運命にひるまずに立ち向かわねばならないという、より大きな必要性に包括されるのである。

告白的詩人 (confessional poets) としてのセクストンとプラスは意図的に詩の中で、身近な人々を失った苦悶によって感情をたきつけた。よって彼女達の芸術における目標はウルフのそれとは全く異なっていた。二人とも自らの辛さを表現し、正直さをなくすことなく、その辛さに芸術的な形をあたえようと懸命に努力することで勇気を示した。アン・セクストンは『変容』の語り変えられたおとぎ話の中で自らの過去を見事に書き改めることができ、一方シルヴィア・プラスは彼女の治まらない怒りを「ラザロ夫人」といったような有名な詩において抑制することに成功した。

これら三人の作家達は現代人の鈍った感受性に語りかけ、我々にカフカの「書物は、我々の内に在る凍てついた海を斧で裂く働きをするものでなければならない」という要求を思い起こさせる。

Not unexpectedly, the subject of mourning was very much on Freud's mind during the early part of World War I; in such papers as "On Transience" and "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" he mulled over the pain (for us) and puzzle (for psychologists) of our fraught reactions to loss. One explanation which he had already given before the war, in "Totem and Taboo," proved useful: the essential ambivalence in our deepest attachments. "In almost every case where there is an intense emotional attachment to a particular person," he had contended, "we find that behind the tender love there is a concealed hostility in the unconscious" (60). In a key paper completed a few months before "On Transience," he posited that the "loss of the love-object is an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in love-relationships to make itself effective and come into the open" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 250-51).

In the normal course of things, as not only 'the master' but several generations of his disciples have been telling us, we gradually 'work through' our complicated feelings after the death of someone close to us, and emerge from our grief none the worse for it: as Freud himself puts it, "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 245). In other words, we are able to continue with our normal lives. The paradigm, however, sorts uneasily with modern patterns of behaviour, especially in the west. Queen Victoria and her subjects dwelt on their losses at every opportunity, from birthdays and wedding anniversaries, to anniversaries of the day of death; we, on the other hand, lacking even the prompting of religious ritual, "don't talk about it; we try to conceal, deny, and 'bury' it (Lifton and Olson 21). The term 'grief-work' has recently become shorthand for the deliberate reversal of the process. It is a usage which the British novelist Margaret Forster makes some fun of in her latest novel, *The Battle for Christabel* (1992); she does not, however, deny the need for the process itself.

Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath all suffered devastating bereavements in their early lives, and brought something of their difficulty in mourning to their work. To recognize their intense personal anguish, and (in Woolf's case, at least) the therapeutic, healing effect of confronting it through art, helps us to understand their vision as writers, and how it develops within their *oeuvres*. Moreover, to see how they controlled and transmuted their powerful feelings into art, from one draft or novel or poem to the next, must increase our appreciation of their literary skills.

Woolf was a novelist, who needed to take particular pains to work out her grief at fictive removes; Sexton and Plath were poets, deliberately fuelling the passion in their verse from the agony of their losses. The aim of this study, therefore, is not to play off one author against another, but to suggest their different artistic strategies, and to indicate not so much the personal cost as the value of each one's achievement.

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The study of such a subject must depend partly on what we know of the writers' lives and personalities. Fortunately, the literary biography is the most accessible form of modern writing about literature, one which, by its very nature, has escaped the dehumanizing trend of modern critical theory. Changes have been largely to the good. Those days have gone when John Cross could write glowingly, in school report style, of Mary Ann Evans's progress in English Composition, while letting slip only the merest hint about the future George Eliot's strained relationship with her mother. Woolf herself was the first to admit that "the days of Victorian biography are over." In certain remarks on Harold Nicolson's *Some People*, she even hints amusingly at the modern development of psychobiography: "He [Nicolson] does not cumber himself with a single fact about them [his subjects]. He waits till they have said or done something characteristic, and then he pounces on it with glee" ("The New Biography" 155, 153). The new breed of biographers do, however, help us to understand the heavy psychological baggage which writers are apt to carry.

Virginia Woolf sustained four major losses early in her life. After suffering from the after-effects of a bad bout of influenza, her mother, Julia, died in 1895 when Virginia was only thirteen; her half-sister, Stella Duckworth, died all too soon afterwards from complications of pregnancy and appendicitis, in 1897; her father, Leslie Stephen, died of cancer in 1904; and her brother Thoby died of typhoid in 1906, after a visit to Greece. The most profoundly disturbing losses were those of her mother, at whose death-bed Virginia had to conceal an inappropriate amusement ("I laughed, for instance, behind the hand which was meant to hide my tears," *Diary 2*: 301), and of her difficult and demanding father, whose passing left her with mixed feelings of relief and morbid guilt.

It is rather easy to understand her confusion on the death of her father, whose "oblivious dominance" had provoked revolt, but whose decline had called forth "remorseful outbursts of devotion." But what of the "strange detachment" about her mother (Gordon 52, 50)? The odd secret laughter might well have sprung from nothing more than embarrassment: the newly bereaved Stephens children were apparently "called upon to feel, not simply their natural grief, but a false, a melodramatic, an impossibly histrionic emotion which they could not encompass." Thus writes Quentin Bell, showing them sitting time and time again "in awkward silence" while their father railed against the loss of a second wife (40-41). Undoubtedly, the future novelist's bewildered feelings at this time helped to precipitate her first breakdown. The process of mourning, says Freud, enables us to detach ourselves from the person whom we have loved and lost; any interference with this process can be harmful ("Mourning and Melancholia" 244). Woolf was to confess later that the mother she had found it so hard to mourn would still frequently materialize in front of her: "beautiful, emphatic, with her familiar phrase and her laugh; closer than any of the living are" (*Moments of Being* 40). However, her first attempt at suicide (half-hearted perhaps: she threw herself out of a low window) followed the death of her father.

The deaths of the novelist's half-sister and brother also demonstrated Woolf's failure

to grieve, though each in its own way was a severe blow to her. Perhaps the most obvious example of the thwarting of natural impulses was the unnecessarily elaborate and prolonged correspondence about Thoby's 'progress' which she kept up with her close friend Violet Dickinson, who was considered too ill with typhoid herself to bear the news of his death. Mark Spilka, in a scholarly monograph devoted entirely to the problem (*Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving*, 1980) nevertheless passes over this case; he points out that the brother and sister were not close. Yet Woolf wrote to her sister in 1931, after finishing *The Waves*, "I had him so much in my mind. I have a dumb rage still at his not being with us always" (*Letters* 4: 390-91). The word 'dumb' is itself an admission of the failure of spontaneous emotional self-expression which dogged the novelist when faced with her loved ones' deaths.

A similar catalogue of catastrophes, and inhibited responses to them, could be made out for Anne Sexton. It was just after the first hospitalization of her beloved great-aunt, Nana, that the future poet first staged her own death, ghoulishly painting herself with mercururchrome to simulate blood. A few years previously, Nana had filled the void left by Anne's mother, who was then preoccupied with nursing a sick father; across the generations, Nana had reached out affectionately to the troubled child, and been her mainstay during early adolescence. When illness struck the old woman, it took (for her grandniece) a peculiarly frightening form: a dramatic loss of hearing made Nana retreat into herself, and repudiate the girl completely:

Anne, visiting her room, would often find her distracted and un-comprehending: "You're not Anne!" Nana would cry out. Anne remembered Nana calling her "horrible and disgusting" and once attacking her with a nail-file. One night, before Anne's horrified eyes, Nana was carried off to a mental hospital. (Middlebrook 16)

It is hard to imagine anything more damaging to a sensitive girl. Here it is possible to draw evidence directly from the *Complete Poems*. In "The House," the poet would describe "the aunt" as a kind of fairytale witch with an earphone, knitting with needles which work away "like garden shears." This was bad enough; but later, as a young woman, the poet was to lose both her parents within three months of each other, her mother in agony from cancer, and her father, already demoralized by illness and loneliness, from a stroke. In these cases, too, it was difficult to mourn. As "The House" also suggests, both parents had inspired at least as much resentment as love in their daughter (Father's face is "bloated and pink" from drinking; Mother "is made all wrong"). In fact, the revelations in her father's will had so shocked and dismayed Sexton that, we are told, she had hurled his picture onto the ground and crushed it with her foot (Middlebrook 117). "The House" appears in Sexton's second volume of poetry, and savagely undercuts the poignancy in this volume's title: *All My Pretty Ones* (a reference, of course, to Macduff's grief over his slain family in *Macbeth*). "[W]hat of the dead?" she asks bitterly, in a poem written shortly after her parents' deaths, dedicated to both her parents, and placed first in the volume :

They are more like stone
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse

to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

(“The Truth the Dead Know”)

Sylvia Plath’s experience of early bereavement was less bizarre, more pathetic, but equally devastating. Once the apple of her elderly father’s eye, she was shushed and then sent to stay with grandparents when he fell ill. Finally, she was allowed to don a miniature nurse’s uniform and minister to the ailing man’s needs. He died wretchedly after an amputation which should never have been needed, still refusing to put up any struggle with his fate. Next day, Plath’s mother “suppressed her tears” (Stevenson 10) when she went into the seven-old girl’s bedroom to report her husband’s death, and apparently sent the child off to school as usual. She considered it best not take either Sylvia or her younger brother Warren to the funeral. Later, the poet was to visit her father’s grave and be tempted to dig him up “[t]o prove he existed and really was dead” (qtd. in *Collected Poems* 289, n. 23). Unaware of such long-term repercussions, and determined to carry on as normally as possible, Mrs Plath soon found herself a teaching job which entailed leaving their home on the New England coast at five-thirty each day. And this would have been just when the child needed extra reassurance and support. By Sylvia’s tenth birthday, in October 1942, the family had started an entirely new life in Boston, where her mother had found a more congenial post. The family sorrow was to be put firmly behind them. Or was it? “You will be aware of an absence, presently,/ Growing beside you like a tree,” wrote Plath in “For a Fatherless Son.” Her feelings about her father were to be given tormented expression in adulthood, when he dominated her work as just such a cruel absence: then, not even in her fiercest denunciations could she ever fully work out her anger at his ‘betrayal’ of her childhood devotion.

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Whilst all three of these writers use the blank page as territory on which the battle with loss can be fought, their methods are different, and their painful, sometimes savage struggles yield different kinds of triumphs.

Virginia Woolf’s use of certain important characters in her novels to carry the burden of her feelings—especially Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*, and Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*—has often been remarked on. The true reason for Septimus’s mental collapse after the war, for instance, is not generalized shell-shock, but his failure to mourn his affectionate army officer :

when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably.

This he now perceives as coldness, and blames himself bitterly for :

there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was the

worst ... (*Mrs Dalloway* 77—78, 81)

The torment of such helpless self-reproach is keenly evoked, and there is only one way out of it for Septimus. A similar problem besets Lily Briscoe, "always trying to bring up some feeling she had not got" (*To the Lighthouse* 164), after the death of the motherly Mrs Ramsay. But unlike Septimus, she is able to get over the impasse. Lily is clearly her author's surrogate in this novel; it is clear, too, that she progresses towards emotional maturity in its concluding section. But Spilka's belief, that she does so because she is finally able to mourn her mother, is more contentious. Certainly, it would seem too narrow, and even misleading, to readers who like to see in the novel a more general parable of the transcendence of the Mother figure (see Lilienfeld 42).

Yet there is no gainsaying the climactic feeling of release expressed by Lily herself, as her grief, appropriately enough, wells up through her own artistic endeavours. Lily works on her unfinished canvas with rhythmic strokes as she recalls the time she spent with the Ramsays before the war, realizing that by "tunnelling her way into her picture," she is, in effect, "tunnelling her way ... into the past" (188). While she fills the canvas, she is also made sharply, *physically* aware of the void created in the everyday world by Mrs Ramsey's absence. The contrast between the permanence of art, and life in which "nothing stays; all changes," is too sharp to be borne :

She looked at her picture... she was surprised to find that she could not see it. Her eyes were full of a hot liquid (she did not think of tears at first) which, without disturbing the firmness of her lips, made the air thick, rolled down her cheeks. She had perfect control of herself—Oh yes! in every other way. ... "Mrs Ramsay!" she said aloud, "Mrs Ramsey!" The tears ran down her face. (159–96)

Caught off guard by her overwhelming sorrow, she feels foolish and embarrassed. But this break in her emotional defences is exactly what she had needed. Now the "pain of the want, *and the bitter anger*" grow less, leaving "a relief that was balm in itself" (196; italics added). There is even a comforting glimpse of Mrs Ramsay's kindly presence before she vanishes again. In a deep sense, this soothing vision is indeed, as Lily suggests, "some trick of the painter's eye" (197), the insight of the artist who is at last able to understand and fully respond to life.

One of Woolf's diary entries, in a volume published in the same year as Spilka's book, confirms Lily's service to her author here, though it makes it clear that recovery from her father's loss (recorded, for example, in Lily's sudden access of sympathy for the widowed Mr Ramsay—"a figure of infinite pathos" to her now [168]) was equally important to her. On what would have been her father's ninety-sixth birthday, Woolf wrote :

I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act.)

(*Diary* 3 : 208)

However, there is more here than a useful resolution of a profoundly personal

problem. What Spilka himself indirectly shows, through the very tenacity with which he has to dog the novelist's tracks, is that there was a deliberate (and generally successful) effort on Woolf's part to assimilate her emotional conflicts into the very texture of her art. An outstanding example is the careful removal of grief from the central character in *Mrs Dalloway*: in the original opening chapter, Clarissa had been much exercised by the problem of death and mourning; in the final version of the novel, even the death of her sister is dealt with swiftly, and not through her own thoughts about it, either. It is Peter Walsh who briefly recalls the terrible affair. The weight of what might have been her own problem with unexpected, numbing loss is all placed (as Spilka says, "perhaps for safety's sake" [61]) on Septimus, whom she never even meets. Moreover, Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* takes us far beyond either her own or her author's troubles, far beyond problems specific to women, too, in her musings over the relationship of art and life (as well as death). Again, a close reading of Woolf's manuscript version quickly confirms that the distancing which allows the novel its wider reference was very much the author's intention. Particularly relevant to our present topic was her excision of certain scenes which recalled her own distressing experiences with her father, after the death of Julia Stephens (see Lee xxx).

At one point, in talking about the overlap in the constituent letters of the names Virginia Stephen Woolf and Septimus Warren Smith (a clue to her artistic manoeuvres in the earlier novel), Spilka writes, "We pardon such evasions when they result in fictive gains" (53). But such a 'pardon' is uncalled for. Woolf was writing not a confession, but a novel; rather than graciously overlooking an 'evasion,' we should be applauding those very real 'gains.' This is more than a shift of emphasis: it is important not to correlate the life of the novelist and the art of the novel so closely that we look askance at departures of one from the other. These are, in fact, signs of the novelist's struggle for artistic control.

A measure of Woolf's success here can be seen in her next major work. For all its elegiac feel, and its recreation of Thoby in the dashing figure of Percival, *The Waves* with its multiple speakers and interwoven narratives is in many ways her most impersonal novel. Significantly, Spilka has little to say about it; Quentin Bell seems rather cool about it, too. Moreover, the author herself seems to have had a particularly tough time composing it. All this confirms a new detachment, which says at least as much about her growth as a writer as about her feelings for her dead brother. Though she may have got over the loss of her parents, the larger problem of grieving has not *gone*. Indeed, it is made explicit in the novel by the articulate Bernard, who cries out in distress, "How shall I break up this numbness which discredits my sympathetic heart?" (112). But each character's personal sense of loss is now subsumed, by virtue of the overall design of the narrative, into the larger question of how to confront our mortality. To find an emptiness at the centre of the novel is to get this point; to complain about that emptiness is to miss it. Happily, one fragment in Woolf's diary foreshadows the general critical verdict on it as her masterpiece: "felt the pressure of the form—the splendour & the greatness—as—perhaps, I have never felt them. ..." (*Diary* 3 : 298).

This gradual freeing of the artist from the toils of the self is hardly an unusual

process. We might compare Woolf's progress here to the new direction taken by Scott Fitzgerald after writing the soul-searching essays of *The Crack-Up*. Sometimes, as with Fitzgerald, who did not live to complete *The Last Tycoon*, the development comes too late for the author to reap the full rewards.

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Of course, the whole question of artistic detachment seems to be begged by the confessional school of poets, to which Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath may both be said to 'belong.' Here, there was a positive revulsion against 'distorting' raw life to meet the demands of traditional poetic disciplines and even accessibility. Sexton certainly worried about writing the kind of verse in which the "I" is "yet another fraud, or con" (Middlebrook 179). Nevertheless, in her best poems there is a degree of objectivity which shapes the private trauma and sets it in the larger human context. This is partly because of her drive to recover the personal identity shattered by the repeated blows it had taken. For instance, she takes up the fairytale reference which she used about Nana in "The House" and enlarges it to form parameters for soul-searching and a shared, universalizing mythology in a whole sequence of poems, the 1971 *Transformations*. Where once she had said, in "A Curse against Elegies," that she was "tired of all the dead./ They refuse to listen," now she copes with them defiantly in her own version of the Hansel and Gretel story :

She who neither dropped pebbles or bread
bided her time.

The witch looked upon her
with new eyes and thought:
Why not this saucy lass
for an hors d'oeuvre?
She explained to Gretel
that she must climb into the oven
to see if she would fit.
Gretel spoke at last:
Ja, Fräulein, show me how it can be done.
The witch thought this fair
and climbed in to show the way.
It was a matter of gymnastics.
Gretel,
seeing her moment in history,
shut fast the oven door,
fast as Houdini,
and turned the oven on to bake.

"Hansel and Gretel"

Like Sylvia Plath, Sexton finds one metaphor for her pain in the persecution of the Jews: earlier in the poem, the children's mother had suggested their abandonment as a "final solution" to the family's poverty; this is followed up here by the entirely natural association of the witch's oven with the Nazi gas-chambers. Into this oven, however, the banished girl is able to trick her foe. Yet for all Gretel's victory over her intended doom, this poem has annoyed some critics, because it shows Hansel and Gretel returning to their father afterwards: the unnatural mother, meanwhile, has conveniently died. Carol Leventeen is one of those who ponders this apparent "alliance with the patriarchy" (142). We have to set aside, for a moment, preoccupations with the social entrapment of women, to see that what Sexton is most concerned with here is coping with the cruel mother figure (Nana who turned against her; her inadequate mother, Mary) and recovering at least some semblance of a normal childhood, of what most people would accept as a normal life. "Wait Mister. Which way is home?" she cries hauntingly in one of her earliest poems ("Music Swims back to Me").

It is possible to see more progress in this direction in later poems. In "Madonna," part of "The Death Baby," for example, the bitterness towards the mother which she shows in "Hansel and Gretel" gradually gives way to regret for her inability to comfort her during her final days :

My mother died
unrocked.

.....

I could not soothe.

This is as close to mourning as the poet can get—an admission of failure, if not the kind of releasing tears shed by Woolf's surrogate Lily in *To the Lighthouse*. There is also a feeling that this failure was the fulfilment of the fraught relationship, a sense in which "[t]hat was the end of her [mother's] paying." In other words, the poet's mother had now been punished enough for her inadequacies as a parent—either by her disease and death, or by her daughter's inability to comfort her. Sexton's constant reworking of the past seems to yield fruit here, and it would be nice to be able to say that such insights ultimately reconcile her to the pain she herself has undergone, and produce compassion for human suffering in general. But there is nothing tamely 'nice' about her later poems. She continues to be tortured by terrible memories, never reaching that stage described by Freud, when "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again": in *The Awful Rowing Towards God* (1975), she is still reliving the experience of "the sun turning into poison" as she was growing up, still promising herself that "there will be a door/ and I will open it" ("Rowing"), but deeply afraid that all that is happening is that she herself is turning into the witch of her past. "Maybe my skull is too crowded/ and it has no opening...." she wonders poignantly in "The Witch's Life." One is reminded of Lowell's admission in "Skunk Hour": "My mind's not right." It seems that her art has proved an inadequate, or at any rate temporary, defence against chaos after all, and that she has remained largely self-enclosed, with only one way, finally, to get release from her torments.

Sexton's shaping into poetry of such 'unmentionable' bodily experiences as child-

hood enemas, menstruation, masturbation and so forth was courageous. For women writers especially, this has given a whole new meaning to Wordsworth's claim that no subject should be considered unsuitable for the poet's art. But the honesty of her responses to death, her family members' and her own, was equally courageous. Despite the appearance of spontaneity, it is clear that she was technically skilled, and in command of her material, even if she is not, as Alicia Ostriker has reluctantly admitted, "a *fine* artist" (253). That she did not allow herself any fictional resolutions, either in her individual poems or in her work as a whole, is something to be admired rather than criticized. We can admire her for this in much the same way as we admire Camus's Meursault, at the end of *The Outsider*, who remains obdurate in his own 'refusal to mourn' up to the very moment of death. However, even if its emotional truth is to be valued, Sexton's poetry is often limited by the obsessional nature of her subject matter. The fact is that she does not, cannot move forward, even after repeated reachings back into the past, to mental health and the extra authority which that would have given her.

Perhaps the same might be said for Sylvia Plath. But somehow one is more reluctant to say it. This may be because, although she too committed suicide (both the fact, and Sexton's elegy for her, well known), Plath was often more successful in defying her ghosts—not laying them to rest—in individual poems. "How they grip us through thin and thick,/ These barnacle dead!" she wrote in an early poem, after visiting the Archeological Museum at Cambridge ("All the Dead Dears"). The pre-eminent ghost, of course, is that of her father. The claim that she was able to mourn him at last as a result of Ruth Beuscher's therapy in the late '50s (Wagner-Martin 155) seems quite untenable. Two well-known poems, "The Colossus," in which she entirely gives up trying to patch him together again, and "Daddy," in which she gives up praying to recover him, were both written later, "The Colossus" at the very end of the decade, and "Daddy" in 1962. There is no feeling in either of these poems of forgiveness, either of the dead person or of the bereaved self: as one commentator has said, "What comes through most powerfully, I think, is the terrible *unforgiveness* of her verse, the continual sense... of violent resentment that this should have been done to *her*" (Alvarez 66). Of course, there are some lines which are kinder than others. Plath does claim in the penultimate stanza of her long "Poem for a Birthday," completed in November 1959, that "Love is the bone and sinew of my curse"; but earlier in the same poem she says quite unequivocally, "He lives in an old well,/ A stony hole. *He's to blame*" (italics added).

On the whole, Plath seems driven to choose for herself the role of victim, not mourner. As victim, what she then tries to do is to take a violent short-cut to freedom from the old attachment by burying the father whom she could not 'dig up' more deeply, and even dancing (or at least having others dance) on his grave. If we accept the Freudian premise that mourning is a therapeutic process, we can see in this very defiance the reason for her recurring breakdowns.

One of her saddest poems is "Colossus," because it shows so clearly the earlier effort at reconstruction, the total inadequacy of her equipment for such a gargantuan task, and hence its inevitable failure:

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol.
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

.....
I open my lunch on hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine are littered

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
.....
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

The vision of herself as an ant, armed ludicrously with gluepots as she confronts the enormous, blank, crumbling ruin of her father, is extraordinarily effective in eliciting our sympathy. The wry humour works to highlight rather than distract us from the pathos of her situation, but it is still helpful in balancing self-pity. This is exactly the kind of control which critics from Lowell onwards have praised, and which enabled her to conjure finished poems out of her various dynamic qualities as a poet—her brilliant visual appeal, her inspired choice of words and images, the emotional momentum of her lines.

If "The Colossus" is effective in expressing her hopelessness, "Lady Lazarus" is furiously positive. She can "manage it." That is, she may not be able to restore or recover the past, but at least has power to turn on her tormentors (by now she had an unhappy marriage to deal with as well) and demolish them. This time, her pain is exposed in such a way as to make us feel shock and guilt, rather than pity. References to Nazi atrocities, the unwinding of bandages on Egyptian mummies, and sensational stage performances, all put the onus on the spectator. The last of her theatrical comebacks, she warns, will be the most spectacular of all, and it will be her final revenge :

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

The pent-up rising hysteria of these lines suggests that a large part of the cost must still be met by the speaker herself. Beneath the destructive energies lies the clear threat of self-destruction, too. Again, getting rid of the self which cannot be disburdened is the only solution in the end.

The hope is, of course, that such an action will indeed bring freedom and rebirth. If

Virginia Woolf's eventual suicide was sparked more by the external trauma of her times (Spilka suggests that we see her as a "civilian casualty" of the war [123]), Sexton's and Plath's deaths were clearly the result of their own inability to cope with early trauma, and their intense longing for (as the final words of Plath's "Ariel" indicate) a new beginning :

And I
Am the arrow,
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

Plath was, perhaps, better able than Sexton to resolve her thwarted grief in her art, or, at least, to subsume it into rage. This rage she refused to be carried away by, but bent to her own strong will. Did it then become, in any sense, an instrument of salvation? Reading their work "from a country far away as health" (the last words of Plath's "Tulips"), we must be disturbed by the violence of both these poets' needs, and their final attempts to fulfil them. But since we are not in a position to make any final judgments on their spiritual struggles, we are left only to be troubled the expression of these struggles in their verse.

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Only? One claim which Mark Spilka makes for Virginia Woolf is that her concern with death might help her readers, bringing to the surface their own failures to grieve, and making them see, however belatedly, the need to do so now. The same might be said for Sexton and Plath. And perhaps the need for such help has never been more urgent than it is in our own times, when, as W. H. Auden says, "the seas of pity lie/ Locked and frozen in each eye" ("In Memory of W. B. Yeats"). This would seem to have nothing to do with literary merit. Yet if we cannot connect art with life, what is it all about? Even Oscar Wilde, who tried to write according to the principle of 'Art for Art's Sake,' found himself ineluctably drawn to expressing criticisms of society, insights into human nature. The old humanitarian tradition of English letters is under siege now. Our discipline is disintegrating into communication skills (devoid of literary content) and cultural studies (in which even product labels are texts worthy of study). But before we learn to communicate, or to understand whole cultures, we need to understand ourselves—even if (or *especially* if) this means being disturbed by what we find. This is where the creative writer, as Freud himself was quick to acknowledge, can help us. Anne Sexton quotes, as the second epigraph of *All My Pretty Ones*, a favourite passage from one of Kafka's letters, which concludes: "a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us." Auden would have approved.

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