Sylvia Plath trained all her life for her art. She read because, like many word people, she loved words and the arrangements of them. But before she was very old, she read to learn how to make those arrangements for herself. Her first small poem was published when she was eight; from that time on, she worked diligently – almost voraciously – to hone in on what made writers writers.

Her family consistently privileged learning in a steadfast European way. Otto Plath, her father, had emigrated to New York City from Germany in his adolescence, and had such facility with languages that he absorbed his English by sitting in the back of elementary classrooms and promoting himself once he had learned enough to go on to the next level. As a result, he spoke English with a clear American pronunciation. He also spoke German, French, and Polish, and he later taught German and High German at university level. He then made his way from his uncle’s home in New York to his grandparents’ home in Watertown, Wisconsin, where he had been offered the chance to attend college so long as he studied for the Lutheran ministry. Otto majored in classical languages at Northwestern. Deciding that he could not become a minister, after his study of Darwin and other nineteenth-century scientific thought, he was drummed out of the family – his name erased from the family Bible, support of any kind withheld.

Otto Plath’s life – and family, if you will – became his intense study. By the time he taught Aurelia Schober in Middle High German at Boston University, he had won the MS and ScD from Harvard, and had secured a teaching position that was divided between languages and science. He had succeeded in academic fields that were based on languages not his own, and his primary characteristic had become his strong, determined will.

He was attracted to Aurelia Schober in part because of her able and tenacious mind. An accomplished teacher of English and German at secondary school level, Aurelia had also trained for a career in business. An avid reader, she too was the child of a German family whose primary language was German. Her imaginative world was filled
with “the novels of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, the Brontës, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Galsworthy, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James”1 and, later, with Continental authors. Once married to Otto Plath, however, after a year and a half courtship and a long drive to Las Vegas to obtain the divorce necessary because of his very early marriage, Aurelia came to occupy the center of her own imaginative world.

In a classic European pattern, her “work” became caring for Otto and the children they would soon parent. Sylvia was born not quite ten months after their January, 1932, wedding; Warren, as planned by his father, almost exactly two and a half years after Sylvia’s birth. Instead of Aurelia’s working at her own teaching, she also became Otto’s research assistant. Otto’s doctoral dissertation was rewritten into a book, Bumblebees and Their Ways, published in 1934 by Macmillan; then he and Aurelia composed a long chapter on “Insect Societies” for an important collection. As Aurelia recalled, “The first year of our married life, all had to be given up for THE BOOK. After Sylvia was born, it was THE CHAPTER.”2 Although she did not continue the analogy, the rest of her married life would be given over to THE ILLNESS. For Otto Plath finally died in 1940 of complications of diabetes mellitus, an illness with which he might well have lived for many years. Because of his own misdiagnosis of the malady as lung cancer, however, the diabetes was so far advanced as to cause the amputation of his leg – and his resulting death from an embolism.

While he lived, however, even during periods of increasing invalidism, the family’s emphasis on reading, learning, and language permeated every segment of Sylvia’s life. Her father’s days were spent reading and studying, preparing for lectures in both his teaching fields. Teaching loads, particularly for a hybrid assignment like his, were heavy; most of the day was spent on campus. In his free time, Professor Plath was expected to write and publish. Aurelia not only prepared her husband’s manuscripts; as time went on, she also did much of the writing of them, just as she found new material for his lectures and graded his papers. Eventually, it was as if both the Plath parents were professors, and the atmosphere of the house was a steady quiet. To be “good” children, to earn their parents’ love and attention, both Sylvia and Warren needed to spend their time in quiet, language-based pastimes.

Aurelia, with characteristic thoroughness, had read Maria Montessori. She believed that children should create their own interests.