CHAPTER – III
THE COLOSSUS AND OTHER POEMS: PHASE OF EFFLORESCENCE

“What I want back is what I was
Before the bed, before the knife
Before the brooch-pin and the salve
Fixed me in this parenthesis”
Sylvia Plath: “The Eye-Mote”

One of the most controversial poets, Sylvia Plath has grown into a cult figure, a dramatic presence whose dramatic absence effected by her suicide at thirty shrouded the woman and her work in conjectural cloak of holes. For some, she became the symbol of a woman oppressed, albeit by cultural forces rather than the physical brutality she sometimes invokes; others saw her as the triumphant victim of ultimate, exciting uncertainty, and death; for still others, she became, in retrospect, the doomed innocent undone by a sensibility too acute for our gross physical world. The list of Plath’s projected vicissitude may go on for pages. Everyone, it seems, has his own version of the Sylvia Plath myth.

Such a mythologizing affects everything about the poet, including criticism of her work. In 1970 Mary Kinzie found Plath criticism divided sharply into two periods, with the poet’s death, on 11 February 1963, marking the turning point. The early criticism, “Reviews of The Colossus and The Bell Jar”, had been brief, reserved and entirely conventional. The next period, through and beyond the book in which Kinzie’s remarks appeared, was devoted to revaluation and canonization.
Plath’s suicide and the publication two years later of Ariel evinced something very like poetic sainthood, recoloring the earlier work and lending the whole the enterprise an austere pallor of immortality. Critics, lacking the evidence of the later poems, had of course not heard all that lay submerged beneath *The Colossus*. Even an acute reader such as Richard Howard, in one of the most perceptive discussions of Plath, found himself beginning with a public confession of his earlier misconception.

The first review lever wrote of a book of poems was of her first book of poems, that breviary of estrangement…, *The Colossus*…, and in my account… of these well-beheaved, shapely poems by a summa cum laude graduate of Smith who had worked as a guest editor of Mademoiselle and won a Fulbright to Newnham, the wife of Ted Hughes and the mother of two children, I missed a lot-I had no premonition of what was coming (253).

Edward Butscher’s gossipy, oversimplifying critical biography *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, is at best cursory in its criticism and nowhere captures the poet. David Holbrook in his reductive psychoanalytic study *Sylvia Plath: Poetry Irees* has so many more pricks than kicks to the extent that we lose track of the kicks almost entirely. Even the most informative scholarly study to appear, Judith Kroll’s *Chapters in a Mythology* has it that:

The Poetry of Sylvia Plath considerably overextends its quite useful research, fitting all of Plath’s poems to a thesis that can
cover only some of them. There is a strong calling, then, for the present collection. Not yet the unified, full, and just evaluation that Plath deserves, it is nevertheless a movement by committee to that end, a diversity of carefully formulated praise and blame, analysis and contextualization, from which serious students and latter evaluators can usefully draw. The book is divided into three parts, Achievement and Value, Process and Influence, Personal and Public Contexts: by no means hermetic, these sections nevertheless represent the broadly differing approaches of aesthetic overview, technical examination, and biographical and historical connection. With a single exception, all of the essays were commissioned for this book. And all of them were able to draw no materials that must earlier commentators lacked: a substantial body of Plath’s poems and prose, a moderately detailed biographical record, and an important selection of the poet’s correspondence (198).

Because the essence of this book lies in the demonstration of its writers’ claims, that are carried out in exceptionally rich and diverse ways Such a summary has its uses: it will serve as a process of abstracting for those readers who are determined to pursue only certain inquiries; it will suggest both the shape and the voices of the book; and it may help the thoroughly involved reader, laboring to assimilate many, sometime unfamiliar examples, to keep the arguments straight.

Calvin Bedient’s admiring demonstration of Plath’s romanticism finds Plath’s sensibility exhaustingly consumed in contradiction and over-vulnerable. He
locates Plath’s importance in intensity----she became our second queen (poor queen mad queen) of subjectivity. His essay is an exceptionally sensitive characterization of the subjective drama of Plath’s poetry.

Though high, J.D. McClatchy’s valuation is somewhat different. For him, Plath is a period poet, one “whose sensibilities uniquely captured rare culture’s tone, values, and issues”( 58). Like Bedient, McClatchy sees little importance in Plath’s subjects. For him, however, her importance resides in the traditionalism from the Colossus poems to the taut new purity of Ariel with its abundance and abandon in its sense of autopsy. Plath, he concludes, “is an innovator as important as Lowell or Roethke in her experiments with voice and the relationships among tone and image and address.” (36)

Hugh Kenner in his review of The Colossus and other Poems (37) puts a damper on the enthusiasm for Plath. Marking the precisions and control of the early poems, he finds that the intricate formalism of The Colossus detained her mind upon the plane of craft, and so long as it was detained there it did not slip towards what beckoned it. Kenner sees great promise that had she developed its ways of working, “It is a plausible that the arc of her development might have easily exceeded Lowell’s “but the finds the “promise betrayed by the bogus spirituality of the Ariel poems”. Made to seem a new and final sincerity, these poems” he argues, “manipulate us as consciously as, and far more dangerously
than, their predecessors”. These death poems”, says he “a third of Ariel—are bad for anyone’s soul” (37).

They give a look of literary respectability to voyeurism, passions, and no gain for poetry or for her. This hatred of men and the unhealthiness of her mental condition continue to ground the figures of *The Colossus*. The speaker’s identity here hinges on a broken idol out of the stream of civilization, one whose "hours are married to shadow." No longer does she "listen for the scrape of a keel / on the blank stones of the landing". (Ibidem, 99) Man, personified by a ship, has no place in her scheme. The marriage to shadow is a marriage to the memory of the poet’s father, and therefore to death itself. The pull toward that condition is the subject of "Lorelei" as well as the central symbol of “A Winter Ship”. She perceived the nature of her own psychic condition is clear not only in the identification with the broken idol of "The Colossus," but also with the broken vase of “The Stones”. Plath makes a metaphor for her reverse misogyny in “The Bull of Bendylaw” where she transmogrifies that traditionally feminine body, the sea into a brute bull as potent symbol for the active masculine principle. The bull, as in all Palaeo-oriental cultures, is a symbol of both destruction and power. Yet, as with many of Plath’s symbols, there is a complexity beyond this.

*The Colossus* is Plath’s admission of defeat and analysis of her own impotence. . . . Plath transfers elements from the myths and rituals of the dying god to the colossus figure and
elaborates them with references to Greek tragedy to make her poem a complicated, often enigmatic, study of her own failure.

. . . (Ibidem,98).

Plath selects the ancient role of the female who mourns the dying god, or the heroine who tends the idol and brings it into her poem as felt experience. In fact, it is so fully felt that its classical and mythical references become entangled in a confusion of meaning. The colossus is a statue, a father, a mythical being; he is a ruined idol, pithy and historical as the Roman Forum, and at the same time a figure whose great lips utter Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles, an echo of Hughes's language. The persona in the poem crawls over him, squats in his ear, eats her lunch there. These are the intimate activities that hardly seem the rites of a priestess. The colossus himself is both a stone idol with "immense skull-plates" and "fluted bones and acanthine hair," and at the same time a natural wilderness covered with "weedy acres" and "a hill of black cypress." Much remains beneath the surface in this poem, and much on the surface appears confusing.

The fact that the statue is addressed at one point as "father" has caused most critics to link this poem with Plath's own father and her poetic treatment of him; but nothing in this poem demands that single interpretation. Perhaps the colossus is not the actual father but the creative father is the suggestion reinforced by the fact that the spirit of the Ouija board from which Plath and Hughes received hints of subjects for poems was family god, Kolossus, who gave them most of their
information. The colossus, therefore, may be Plath's private god of poetry, the muse she would have to make masculine in order to worship and marry. The concentration of mouth imagery to describe the colossus also points to his identification as a speaker or poet. The persona has laboured thirty years ‘To dredge the silt from your throat,’ although, she admits: I am none the wiser.’ She suggests, ‘Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle, / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other”. In the end, she says, “The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue. No messages came from the throat, the mouthpiece, the tongue of this figure”. This god is silent, yet the speaker feels bound to serve him. (69)

The sense of servitude and of the impossible task of such service reflects the creative exhaustion Plath felt during this period. Her statement at the end that ‘My hours are married to shadow” may be an admission that she is married, in fact, to darkness and creative silence, rather than to the god of poetry who could fertilize her. Her fears also center on the catastrophe that produced the crumbling of the idol: It would take more than a lightning-stroke/ To create such a ruin." This admission, enigmatic if the statue is her father or a dying god, recalls Plath's early poetic concerns about creative paralysis and the sense of a collapsing order.

In “Daddy”, she addresses the dead father as: “Ghastly statue with one grey toe / Big as a Frisco seal” and this image recalls “The Colossus” in which the father-daughter relationship is treated through the medium of an archeological
metaphor. As in “The Beekeeper's Daughter”, the meaning of the poem lies not on the surface but through the accumulation of allusions and suggestions. The image of the devotion of great effort to the cleansing and repairing of a massive statue, a task which has already occupied thirty years, seems no nearer completion, and which engrosses and subjugates the persona whose humorous derision is underlain by a total commitment to her task. This is fascinating and powerful in itself. However, it seems impossible to separate meaning and metaphor without doing the poem a serious injustice, for its menace lies in the skillfully maintained balance between the concrete situation with its appropriate visual details and the relation of these details to the underlying emotion. The last three lines of the poem, for instance, contain much more than a particularly striking image:

My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

This final image has considerable pathos and beauty and is imaginatively in unity with the growing despair of the earlier verses, but read in conjunction with the line which immediately precedes it is also a statement of the submission of the restorer to the broken statue and her acceptance, as indicated in the word 'married', that there can be no escape from this memory into a more vital relationship. In such a life everything must be shadowy, blank, lonely, but she accepts her isolation almost with fervour.
“The Colossus” has the direct, conversational tone of the later poems and it is written in the five-line verse which Sylvia Plath was to use most consistently in *Ariel*, in fourteen out of the forty poems, although *The Colossus* volume only six poems have five-lined verses. The earlier tendency to choose the esoteric or archaic words has now disappeared, although the rather unusual “skull-plates” has also been used in “Two Views of a Cadaver Room”. The verses are not rhymed and the line lengths follow no regular pattern. The poem is by no means formless but rather much less strictly and rigidly controlled then the poems she wrote two years earlier. In this greater elasticity can be seen the forerunner of Sylvia Plath's later style which, she admitted, was much closer to the rhythms of spoken English than that of her earlier poetry.

Even in a poem like “The Colossus,” the poet is exploring a very private, very personal experience, her relationship with her dead father whom she both adores and hates because he died, and yet still influences her life. She needs, at this point in her career, to generalize, even mythicize the experience to control it and therefore to write about it. From later poems on the theme, such as "Daddy," we get a clearer picture of the devastating strength of her emotions. But, in this poem they are modulated by their symbolic form.

The father is seen as a great but broken statue, a ruin from some former time: "O father, all by yourself / You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
The poet is labouring, as she has been for thirty years to get him "put together entirely / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” to bring him back to life or to put him into perspective for freeing herself from his power. Plath’s characteristic irony, a method of distancing is here directed upon herself:

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

This strange scene has been put into its proper context: "A blue sky out of the Oresteia / Arches above us”. There is again the mockery: we are like some characters out of a Greek drama, not real people at all. But there is also the epic dimension that the vision gives to these actors. The poet imagines to be a type of Electra, the daughter who avenged the murder of her father, Agamemnon. They become more than themselves when identified with the devoted daughter/dead father archetype. Finally, the very setting itself helps to supply the story:

Nights, I squat in the cornucopia of your left ear,
Out of the wind,
Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

The scene, being a symbolic construction, is meant to be translated into a
psychological and emotional vocabulary: “I am yoked, dedicated to death, observes the protagonist”. The giant statue is mythic and larger than life, but in being so it is also the past—it is irrevocably dead and cannot be reconstructed. But it has become her only home. She lives in its shadow and views the living world from its perspective. Her own life, as she sees it, is therefore a living death.

“The Colossus” represents a turning point in her poems about the father, about the gods in her mythology, and about what she spoke of as her "death," the failed suicide attempt of 1953. After The Colossus, those themes are objectified, or developed preventatively, with minimal description. “The Colossus” itself exhibits a rather sassy, defiant attitude toward the stone ruins addressed as father, where ‘Ouija’ called forth a god, “The Colossus” portrays another creature entirely: “Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle, /Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.” Most striking are the ironic, mock-heroic effects; antithetical to the damaged stone mass, the speaker performs small, domestic labors: "Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol/I crawl like an ant in mourning/ over the weedy acres of your brow .

“The Colossus” is more successful than “Electra on the Azalea Path” because of its frankly unsentimental view enforced by withheld emotion and by a preposterous and wildly humorous central image. If the massive image here is inaccessible, like the earlier figures, the speaker is irreverent, and is, in fact, weary
of trying to mend the immense stone ruins. Plath is still very far from her outcry of 1962, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." She is, however, at this point, turning from the stone wreckage of another being to the ruins of her own. The movement is vital, for it indicates her wish to leave death--her father's actual death and her own dramatized death--for new life. Plath imagines that the Colossus, which once dominated the harbor at Rhodes, is her father's dead body, now lying broken in pieces on a hillside. The father's "ancient" power and size have been destroyed through time.

The Colossus image embodies both the poet's fear of the stone--like resistant force of the patriarch and her admiration for the colossal power that her father once possessed. The broken statue indicates, as in "Point Shirley", that the dead man cannot be recovered through piecing him, or the poet's memories of him, together again, although the poet continues to gaze in fear and love at him. Plath had used the Colossus image once before, in an apprentice poem called “Letter to a Purist”, without identifying the statue with her father and without imagining that the statue had been broken into pieces:

That grandiose colossus who
Stood astride
The envious assaults of the sea
(Essaying, wave by wave,
Tide by tide,
To undo him perpetually),
Has nothing on you,
O my love,
O my great idiot, who
With one foot
Caught (as it were) in the muck-trap
Of skin and bone,
Dithers with the other way out
In preposterous provinces of the mad cap
Cloud-cuckoo,
Agawp at the impeccable moon.

In the much superior title poem in *The Colossus*, Plath has successfully
used the statue as a symbol for the father's vanished power. Instead of the
awkward and arch language of the earlier poem, she finds a more colloquial,
though still somewhat stilted, language with which to address her father:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard.

While the first lines still imitate a literary source, Dylan Thomas's “Elegy for
Ann Jones” “After the funeral, mule praises, brays”, the poem goes on to discover
its own language of praise and contempt for the father. The central metaphor is
ingeniously varied, as in the comparison of the eyes of the statue to bald white
tumuli or in the conversion of the tongue into a pillar. By sticking to the fantasized
situation, a young daughter's archaeological reconstruction of the father-statue,
Plath gives a surrealistic quality to the metaphor. We seem to be placed at a halfway point between the psychic obsessions of an interior drama and the public concerns of the archaeologist. The poem is still split, though, between two objectives: the expression of a vitriolic contempt for the abandoning father and a rigid pride in his all-powerful, paternal authority. “The Colossus” is halfway to “Daddy” from the earlier “Letter to a Purist”.

In much of her later poetry, Sylvia Plath sought to give birth to a creative or deep self hidden within her—a Wordsworthian imaginative power or Whitman’s a real “Me”. By unpeeling an outer self of dead hands, dead stringencies, she sought to unveil and give voice to an inner queen or “White Godiva”, a spirit of rebellious expressiveness. Although she may at least partially have achieved this goal in such celebrated poems as “Daddy”, “Lady Lazarus”, and “Ariel”, she more characteristically dwelt on her fears that she would fail, would be unable to reveal her deep self, or that she did not in fact possess such a self at all. Plath's figures for these fears were the mirror and the shadow. While a number of critics—for example, Judith Kroll, Jon Rosenblatt, and Susan Van Dyne—have ably analyzed Plath's imagery of rebirth, but none of them focused attention on these images of incapacity.

In theory, the mirror should have provided Plath with access to an abstract Platonic realm of pure imagination, or to the mirror-twin, Muse. But in fact, it
functioned merely as an agent of anxious narcissism. It was an ‘egoistic mirror’ reflecting an ugly outer being but no inner queen—a Baudelairean mirror of despair. Similarly, her shadows represented not an imaginative second world but the insubstantiality of creative nonbeing. At uncreative times, Plath felt that she was living in the "shadow" of others, usually male. If the mirror in her poetry expressed the corruption of matter, mere mindless matter, the shadow expressed the deadness of a being . . . who no longer creates. Although the former emphasizes gross corporality and the latter thin evanescence, both are images of Plath's negative vision of herself and her world. Plath's tropes of mirror and shadow express the imaginative self-doubt that haunted her poetic career. Plath's interest in mirrors and shadows probably originated in her work while preparing for her honor's thesis, during her senior year at Smith College, *The Magic Mirror. A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky’s Novels*. In the course of her study for her thesis, James Frazer's chapter on “The Perils of the Soul” in *The Golden Bough*, Otto Rank's chapter on “The Double as Immortal Self” in *Beyond Psychology*, and Freud's essay on “The Uncanny”. Each of these works had a lasting effect on Plath and helped shape her subsequent poetic expression. All these three works examined the literary and psychological significance of the double, Frazer and Rank paying special attention to the figure's appearance as reflection or shadow.
As a writer, Plath liked to repeat old themes and recapture popular traditions, and she turned instinctively to ancient beliefs in the supernatural as an antidote to an overly socialized, super rationalized civilization. She used these images as an antidote to her personal over socialization and super rationalism and as an outlet for her blocked emotions. But she also powerfully revised such images, no matter how venerable and hardy, to fit them into motifs specifically applicable to herself. She made the shadow evoke what was for her the equivalent of spiritual essence—imaginative identity. In Plath's shadow poems, this most vital part of the self is prevented from coming into being not only by the corporeal, factitious mask we see revealed in the mirror poems but also by external authoritarian figures. If the mirror poems dramatize a struggle that takes place wholly within the self, the shadow poems usually imply a conflict between the self and others. But again the poems vibrate with an inner contradiction: they figure the failure of figuration. Plath's shadow represents precisely what cannot appear in her mirror—the ghost of creativity. Shadow betokens the imaginative self that might have been but was forbidden to be, the defeated deep self.

In “The Colossus”, the textual "I" states that her "hours are married to shadow"—that is, to the soul of the inanimate and oppressive father-husband who lives only in her remembrance. As a result, she herself becomes increasingly shadowlike. Indeed, she is the only shadow-being in the scene, since the "colossus"
stands in the sun, making the shade that she lives in. Plath often equated "sun" with the "saying of poems", and darkness with creative dearth. She complained of living in the "shadow" of the powerful males she felt both tied to and intimidated by. So often in the journals and letters, as in her poems, the "I" fails to make a shadow of her own: "apathetic about my work—distant, bemused, feeling, as I said, a ghost of the world I am working in, casting no shadow". Existence in a shadow in “The Colossus” thus represents the creative half-life that is, rather than the full, life that might have been. The "I" does not possess her own shadow, her own artistic identity, but is possessed by that of another. Frazer tells us that injury done to the shadow is felt by the person or animal as if it were done to his body, and conversely, it may under certain circumstances be as hazardous to be touched by the shadow of another.

The significance of the statue is clear enough as an enormous figure, catastrophically removed from sight and irrecoverable in its original form. It is close to the small child's view of her wondrous parent -- and yet, the dignity of this colossal presence is severely compromised in the poem's first stanza: “the giant sounds like a barnyard”. This is the kind of phrase striker she had in mind with regard to 'reducing the verbal glow'. Furthermore, the tone of the next stanza hovers between the lightly accusing and a wearied impatience: 'Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle...”. It is he, not she, who has set himself up as the
interpreting voice. But she has colluded, spent all these years clearing his throat. It might helps in looking up her story “Among the Bumblebees” in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, which is very plainly an autobiographical account of the loss of a godlike father who takes “Alice” on his back as he swims, and shows her the secrets of bumblebees. The story opens:

In the beginning there was Alice Denway's father. . .the echo of St John's gospel is deliberate: 'In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was God.' The implications for Plath, and for women writers in general, of this linkage of male authority, godlike power and, as it seems, ownership of the language (although, of course, Mary bore the son of God, that is, the Word), is something that feminist critics have illuminatingly explored. Plath tended to link the father-figure with an oracular figure; let me refer you here to the poem 'On the Decline of Oracles', written in 1958 at the same time as 'The Disquieting Muses', both on paintings by de Chirico. The titles suggest a relationship between the disappearance of the male (and his voice) and the ascendancy of the female in her accusing silence (256).

Something of the sculptural quality of “The Colossus” may derive from de Chirico's paintings as much as from the legendary Colossus. His *Enigma of the Oracle* shows on the right a brilliant white head above a dark curtain, much taller than the draped figure on the left, which seems to contemplate a churning sea. Plath wanted to use as epigraph to her earlier poem a quotation from de Chirico—
“Inside a ruined temple the broken statue of a god spoke a mysterious language”. So we can see her working and reworking the notion that the dead father had something to say that she cannot grasp, and in both de Chirico's painting and “On the Decline of Oracles” the message or expectation is related to the sea. A cursory glance at the opening of “On the Decline of Oracles” lets us see how Plath's art developed from this, even in so short a time:

My father kept a vaulted conch
By two bronze bookends of ships in sail,
And as I listened its cold teeth seethed
With voices of that ambiguous sea
Old Bucklin missed, who held a shell
To hear the sea he could not hear.
What the seashell spoke to his inner ear
He knew, but no peasants know.

There is no explicit connection, after all, with de Chirico, and the mention of Böcklin seems entirely arbitrary. The poem seems to have begun with an event and then moved into exercise. In the end, the images become portentous, and lose any sense of personal association. They become pieces of a puzzle jammed into place. The first stanzas, however, arose from information in James Thrall Soby's study of de Chirico, where he discusses Böcklin's influence. A shrouded figure in one of Böcklin's paintings is reproduced in *The Enigma of the Oracle*. The Tuscan peasants, used to Northern painters who reveled in the Italian landscape, were puzzled by Böcklin's behaviour, as Soby recounts:
Toward the end of his life, for example, Böcklin had sat for hours in his garden, paralyzed and near death, but holding to his ears great sea shells so as to hear the roar of an ocean he could no longer visit.’

The landlocked painter’s gesture must have had a peculiar poignancy for Plath, given her association of the loss of seascape with the loss of her father, but in this early poem she does not seem to dare to explore its meaning, so that the second half of the poem is abruptly impersonal.

In ‘The Colossus’, on the other hand, her associations float freely, and the structure of the poem is more fluid, less willed. De Chirico, incidentally, commended Böcklin for exploiting the “tragic aspects of statuary” However, his own use of statues is more disruptive. The legacy of classical civilization for an early twentieth-century Italian painter was problematic in the same way as the legacy of Renaissance literature was for T.S. Eliot. Plath does not have this sense of responsibility to a tradition. It was not until she went to Cambridge that she felt its potentially inhibiting presence, as distinct from an art, nor was she bound by the particularly male aspect of creativity that sculpture represents. In “The Colossus”, it is the particularly female role of housekeeper that she assumes in relation to this colossal, fallen figure. Even the word “gluepot” suggests the inadequacy of resources to the task. The word “tumuli”, so typical of the thesaurus-using Plath,
here in its precise Latinity seems apt to the classical setting. It also reminds of Magritte's surrealist painting *Napoleon's Death Mask*, a blank-eyed blue head with clouds floating across it. She evokes the *Oresteia* here:

A blue sky out of the Oresteia, Arches above us.
O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered
In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia of your left ear, out of the wind,
Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.

There is a pause, for consideration, from this industrious, hopeless, endless work of recovery, as though the speaker could step back from it all, gaze detachedly on the ruins as she once had on the Forum. “Acanthine” hair is both an exact description of sculptured curls which mimic the curved, acanthus-leaf carving above classical columns, and an echo from “Full Fathom Five”, where the sea god's hair extends for miles. The strength of Plath's poem, it seems to me, is that it not only concerns the parent-child relationship rooted in personal circumstance, but also allows us to share the disturbance and pain inherent in the process of apparently unending search. It can be interpreted in a wider sense of a culture's lost direction. Without making grandiose claims for the poem, the sense
of irreparable damage done by the two world wars in this century----“more than a lightning-strike”-- to an ideal of Western civilization based on classical foundations is certainly a presence in the poem. Working against the “stony” imagery, the unyielding coldness of the male colossus, are the involuntarily comic noises it emits, and then its fertility and colour by association. “Cornucopia” gives us an image of the whorled shell of the ear: the horn of plenty in painting spills its fruit, and here we have the surprisingly luscious stars. Is this gesture, sheltering in the remains of something that once sheltered her, a move back into childhood, a terrible admission (“I crawl”) of the need for security? We need to judge this in order to know how to read the close of the poem. What are the long shadows cast by unseen figures, human or of stone, it is impossible to tell. Plath thus described de Chirico: My hours are married to “shadow”. Her days are given over to effort that makes no impression, the work of “an ant in mourning”. It is not possible to see that as a fruitful effort, although one critic has valiantly maintained that the stone figure, while obstructive, is imperfect, and that the last lines should be read as those of a woman who is no longer content to wait. That seems to go against the grain of the poem. The speaker has given up waiting because she no longer hopes for rescue. There is a sense of exhaustion; the woman herself is perhaps only a “shadow” of her former self. The landing stones are “blank” of promise she will not be setting sail.
The years of this phase were crucial to Plath's development as a poet and as an individual, for it was during this period that she took her degree at Cambridge; met and married Ted Hughes, returned to Smith College to teach and subsequently abandoned this career in order to concentrate on writing closed with the stay at Yaddo and discovery of her pregnancy. The poems of *The Colossus* have been noted as being overcorrected in some respects.

The earlier poems have some strength and passion, but also a saving, self-protective primness. Elaborations of the labor of poetry tend to be the rule before 1959. Her obsession with intricate rhyming and metrical schemes is poetry of chosen words, of careful schemes and accumulated effects; its voice is unsteady, made-up. Storr has offered an interpretation on the use of form, as “the part of creativity most firmly associated with consciousness, judgment, control and other ego attributes” (224). By employing various verse forms Plath allowed her ego to dominate; she was not yet in touch with her unconscious in the poem “Tale of a Tub”. Plath noted that it was more abstract than “Winter Landscape, with Rooks”, which she described as “a psychic landscape”. She recognized her ability to use her poetry for exploring her inner experiences. Plath used the plural personal pronoun “we” in the poem, suggesting that she was perceiving the self as more than a single entity, perhaps Wehr's “multiple personalities. For the speaker in this poem, “we” includes “the stranger in the lavatory mirror”. She finds it difficult to recognize
herself, yet knows that this self is part of the same body. She asks: “Can our dreams ever blur the intransigent lines which draw the shape that shuts us in She perceives the body as confining, perhaps as a limitation. As a child, the speaker “saw” beyond the material object:

Twenty years ago, the familiar tub
Bred an ample batch of omens; but now
Water faucets spawn no danger . . .

Now she asks:

Just how guilty are we when the ceiling reveals no cracks that can be decoded? When washbowl maintains it has no more holy calling than physical ablation, and the towel dryly disclaims that fierce troll faces lurk in its explicit folds? Or when the window, blind with steam, will not admit the dark which shrouds our prospects in ambiguous shadow?

She appears to be implying that loss of childhood has also brought loss of imagination. She perceives the lack of ability to observe the material object as anything other than a physical presence as a source of guilt. Can we speculate that the “fault” lies in the progress from childhood to adulthood, and that the speaker has internalized this as a negative movement? “We take the plunge” is a repetition of the phrase in the poem “Family Reunion” quoted; earlier. In this later poem the water distorts the limbs which “waver, faintly green, shuddering away/from the genuine color of skin”. The speaker recognizes the need for masks:

Accuracy must not stalk at large:
Each day demands we create our whole world over,
Disguising the constant horror in a coat
Of many-coloured fictions.

The 'real' world is unacceptable; it must be disguised in half-truths.

In the final lines of the poem, death is seen as the necessary precursor to
rebirth, and surely there are echoes from *The Tempest*:

In faith we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail
among sacred islands of the mad till death shatters the
fabulous stars and makes us real.

At this point, the speaker recognizes the need to die in order to be reborn.
She perceives rebirth as becoming “real”, and we can perhaps understand the
references to casting off an identity, present identity, perceived as “unreal”. The
significance of water in this poem, which was “written from the bathtub”, is that
this fluid lemma, is perceived as the agent of change; it alters that which is within
its depths, in a manner that our dreams cannot, and it is in passage on or through
water that the possibility of rebirth lies. It is interesting that the three great “water”
poems of this period, “Full Fathom Five”, “Lorelei” and “Mussel Hunter at Rock
Harbor” have been placed together in the collection: they were presumably
composed at approximately the same time. Did a specific event in the poet's life
induce such writing? Plath consulted her own oracle at this time:

Pan said I should write on the poem subject "Lorelei"
Because they are my "own kin. . . The subject appealed to me
doubly (or triply), the German legend of the Rhine Sirens, the
sea-childhood symbol, and the death-wish Involved in the song's beauty.

The I-speaker is looking through the water and hence deeping into herself to finds “a world more full and clear/Than can be”, but she is afraid of what she sees, the images trouble “the face/Of quiet” and the sisters, the Lorelei, “lodge/On the pitched reefs of nightmare”. They are nightly visitations, perhaps representatives of that which the dreamer most fears. Yet, it is not the song of the sirens that the I-speaker dreads. It is their silence, when she is left alone with these frightening images, alone with her own thoughts. “Worse/Even than your maddening/Song, your silence”. The I-speaker fears her own unconscious. Plath wrote in the Journals: You fool--you are afraid of being alone with your own mind”. Ted the significance of the final lines of this poem in relation to the image of the stone is akin to the image of water.

O river, I see drifting
Deep in your flux of silver
Those great goddesses of peace.
Stone, stone, ferry me down there .

This poem presents a psychic landscape. The I-speaker looks deep into herself, into her innermost thoughts, perhaps into areas she has not previously probed, and while earlier in the poem these thoughts and images were disquieting, water is seen as the unconscious wherein lies peace. The I-speaker has discovered a vital fact that peace, however she may choose to define it, lies within the self, it
cannot be imposed externally. If Plath uses the stone image to indicate the soul, the self, then the I-speaker's desire connects soul and unconscious. It is her soul, her self, she will find if she looks long enough into her own unconscious. This also gives some understanding of the sea as threat and haven to make conscious that which is hidden. It is undoubtedly threatening, but paradoxically it is just this process which brings an inner peace. This juxtaposing of stone and water occurs in the prose: “The silence surged back, smoothing itself as black water smooths to its old surface calm over a dropped stone”.

The passage is part of the description of Esther's suicide attempt, but if we consider stone and water as soul and unconscious respectively, then the unconscious covers the soul, acts as a protection for that innermost essence of the human being. While the I-speaker may seek to uncover her soul, she dreads what she may find: “There was something strange and alien concealed beneath the smooth sand and the calm, unruffled surface of the water”.

It appears that the I-speaker fears the unknown, she is afraid of herself. “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor” is based on an incident in 1957 about to which Plath notes: “An image: weird, of another world, with its own queer habits, of mud, lumped, under peopled with quiet crabs”. Plath is looking into new areas, perhaps considered as the other world of her unknown or unknowable self. The crabs have become representative of human life. They are creatures which hide
from approaching danger, creatures which often live on the margins of land and sea. Perhaps, this was Plath's perception of herself at this time. Lines such as “Mud stench, shell guts, gulls' leavings” and “Grass put forth claws” create a sense of threat reminiscent of “Dream with Clam- Diggers”. It is a “wary otherworld”. Plath's use of battle imagery stresses the conflict between the known world of the shoreline and the otherworld of the crabs:

The crabs
Inched from their pigmy burrows
And from the trench-dug mud, all
Camouflaged in mottled mail
Of browns and greens. Each wore one
Claw swollen to a shield large
As itself . . .

In this poem the sea has been viewed as the background to the conflict between these two worlds, and yet it is the nurturer, the life-force, for the inhabitants of this other world. It is the symbol of generation, for from water comes life. It is significant that the battle of the two worlds takes place on the seashore, a clearly defined “borderline”, with water as the background to a birth. The sea is a “thin and sluggish thread” maintaining the link between the known and unknown; and ultimately, it is a “friendly/Element”. Plath is continually aware of this struggle which takes place within herself and which she translates through the various images into her prose and poetry. She writes out the search for unity
symbolizing the quest now for a battle, and then retreat from one world into another. The reader is made aware through a number of different images and events used about the enormity of the search, of the problems attendant on the search and of the implications for the self which are contained in the search and in the ultimate discovery. It is in these poems concerned particularly with water that the poet explores her own inner consciousness endeavoring to make the unknown available to that consciousness. She appears afraid of what she may find, yet is compelled to continue the search. Plath gives form to this in an earlier poem, “Perseus”. It is “our madness” and “our sanity”, for the I-speaker in so many of the poems the known is the sane, the unknown, the mad.

In connection with the image of water, part of its significance lies in the power of this element to change the physical appearance, as in “Tale of a Tub”. Your form suffers some strange injury . . . As the mist clears, so all is revealed; “so vapors/ Pavel to clearness on the dawn sea”. Perhaps this is a fog of no understanding which will lift at dawn, symbolically the time of rebirth. The final lines illustrate the other significant aspect of this poem in connection with the theme of water: “this thick air is murderous. It would breathe water”. The I-speaker perceives the “atmosphere” as “killing” her. She wishes to “make the fatal plunge” and dive into her own unconscious to “breathe water” in order to find herself. Of “Point Shirley”, Plath wrote that it was oddly powerful and moving to me in spite
of the rigid formal structure. Evocative, not so one-dimension”, it is interesting that
a sea poem is termed “moving” Plath associates the sea with an emotional response
too. When speaking of her childhood awareness of the sea, she said, “I think one
always goes back to something as vivid and colourful as this sort of experience”
(Poets in Partnership). Throughout “Point Shirley” the sea is the background to the
I-speaker's childhood, it is however a sea of threat: “Steadily the sea eats at Point
Shirley” The sea is devouring the land and with it the I-speaker's memories,
perhaps “swallowing” her childhood. According to Fresenius the motif of
devouring belongs to the sun-myth, the sun is devoured by the sea and reborn at
sunrise. This is a link with the theme of rebirth. The grandmother in the poem is
dead, yet the I-speaker is still seeking something: “I would get from these dry-
pepped stones the milk your love instilled in them”. She is seeking to become a
child again, to receive the love that as a child she received. The biographical
equivalent for this is that: The Schobers' was truly a safe house, the place where
Sylvia was petted and coddled, no matter what the circumstances were at her own
home.

The grandmother who kept “house against/What the sluttish, rutted sea could
do” was in opposition to the sea. With her death, the sea can encroach on “this
battered, obstinate spit/Of gravel”. The sea is a threat. Yet the grandmother shares
the maternal aspect with the sea, and it is thus a haven. We see the grandmother as
representing the conscious side of life, the laundry, the cooking, “wheat loaves/And apple cakes”. The sea, the unconscious, is trying to overcome the conscious, a depiction of the conflict between the known and unknown. The I-speaker asks “what is it/Survives, grieves/So . . .?” she is aware of the conflict. She sees herself as: “Bones, bones only, pawed and tossed, A dog-faced sea”. Like the girl in “Dream with Clam-Diggers” in “her shabby travel garb”, the I-speaker has journeyed back to the sea in order to find herself, and recognized the power of the sea, of the unconscious. “Against both bar end tower the black sea runs”. The sea is pitted against the natural and the man-made; the voyage of self-discovery can be hampered by such barriers. “Suicide Off Egg Rock” is an illustration of Plath's ambivalent attitude to the sea as both threat and haven.

The background as the “that landscape/Of imperfections” is both manmade and natural” “the ochreous salt flats, /Gas tanks, factory stacks”. In this landscape, there is a sense of threat contained in the natural sunlight which strikes the “water like a damnation”. Perhaps, the light is being cast on the contents of the unconscious of which the protagonist is afraid. He is “damned” by it. “Everything shrunk in the sun's corrosive/Ray but Egg Rock”. The rock, perhaps as the barrier in the psyche, is unaffected by external events. It is blocking the light, insight, into the unconscious. The sea is a “blue wastage”, implying emptiness and possible threat, yet the speaker walks into the water as into a haven, and hears the “forgetful
surf creaming on those ledges”. The water will wash away the painful reminders of life, the rocky “ledges” that are the barriers to self-understanding. As in “Lorelei”, there is a Juxtaposition of the image of stone and water. Plath wrote about this poem: “I began a poem, “Suicide off Egg Rock”, but set up such a strict verse form that all power was lost: my nose so close I couldn't see what I was doing. An anesthetizing of feeling”.

As with other sea poems, she connected an emotion, with water. The suicide in the poem is that of a male, and the poem is written in the third person, a distancing device Plath employed in describing an emotionally fraught experience as in, “The Detective” and “The Courage of Shutting Up”. Yet, the I-speaker is present in this poem in a manner which startles the reader: 'I am, I am, I am'. This personalizes the poem and the third person is seen for what it is, a distancing device which protects the I-speaker from owning the desire to “die”, and thus to enter the sea of the unconscious. The man-made world is a “landscape/Of imperfections his bowels were part of—”. Both natural and manmade landscapes threaten the man who is “as if stone-deaf, blindfold, /His body beached with the sea's garbage”. He is as if already dead. His body is only a “machine to breathe and beat forever”. Is this the death Plath envisaged when she defined it as “inaccessibility to experience?” The body is sensually dead, the man can neither listen nor see; perhaps he has never possessed these abilities. To be reborn is to
receive the gift of “hearing” and “sight”.

He heard when he walked into the water. The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges, these two final lines indicate that it is indeed those two senses which are apparent. It is not death but rebirth that is the outcome of this “suicide”. To summarize, the I-speaker is seeking an entry into the unconscious, a peaceful journey when the past can be obliterated; and “diving” into the sea has ceased to be an ending. It now contains the possibility of a new beginning. It is significant that in 'Suicide Off Egg Rock' everything “shrank in the sun's corrosive/Ray but Egg Rock”. Only the egg, the seed, is unaffected by the power of the sun. If sunlight is a metaphor for the light which is to be cast on the contents of the unconscious, then this light cannot damage the essential self which remains invulnerable. The speaker has found an element of hope in the process of rebirth.

As in the earlier poem, the third person is used as a distancing device, although in the later poem the protagonist is female, a woman who is dragging her shadow in circle “About a bald /Hospital saucer”. On the Jungian model the shadow is representative of the “other”, the “inferior part of the personality”. The hospital, which has a personal significance for Plath in connection with her own breakdown, is often the setting for poems concerned with rebirth. This “other” has suffered; it is like “a sheet of blank paper”, it has no memories, they have been wiped out; it is flat, one dimensional. The shadow takes on the problems, “a sort of
private blitzkrieg” that the woman has suffered, but she has opted out. She “lives quietly//With no attachments, like a fetus in a bottle”. She is like one dead; she has been born but has 'died' without ever growing to maturity; she is not at peace. “The future is a gray seagull/Tattling in its cat-voice of departure, departure”. The presence of the sea is implied in the image of the seabird, here soaring over grey waters giving its lonely call, “departure”. The woman will be abandoned. While certain strong emotions no longer trouble her; grief and anger have been exorcised and age and terror “like nurses, attend her”. She has to live with the knowledge of growing old, perhaps of dying, and of this she is afraid. Death from old age, the natural process, is perceived as fear-inducing; yet in other poems, “death” sought deliberately is welcomed. We are being offered two different types of death: the natural, the ultimate end for all living creatures, which is a fearful experience, and the metaphorical, which leads to rebirth, and therefore is to be welcomed.

Many critics and poets have commented on Sylvia Plath’s last poems. They have chiefly stressed the impact of her poetry, which galvanizes the reader like “a keen, cold gust of reality, as though somebody had knocked out a window pane on a brilliant night” as Robert Penn Warren put it.

Yet an essential character of Sylvia Plath’s world seems to have been overlooked, gradually came to realize when I attempted to translate poems from Ariel and other late poems. I found that the only way in which I could hope to understand
the more difficult poems was first to collect the themes and images which occurred most frequently, and then to elucidate their meaning, their significance and their interrelation. My attention was attracted by the recurrence of certain images, as well as by the fact that many poems obscure individually, became less so when read in conjunction with others containing similar themes and images. My method was to isolate various sequences where images were relatively easy to interpret within the context. I could then attempt to attribute these newly discovered meanings to the same images in more obscure texts, the justification of this process being the resulting intelligibility of such texts. An attempt to account for these poems intellectually does not of course replace an aesthetic assessment; it rather leads to it and facilitated it: for it becomes far easier afterwards to distinguish between the poems in which the various images coalesce harmoniously and those which could be better described as repertoires of themes. But it must be stated that even in the latter case Sylvia Plath’s poetry stands on its remarkable formal merits alone; some poems may not ‘make any sense at first, but they always, and immediately, make poetic sense. I also believed such an attempt possible because I felt that however hermetic this poetry might be (sometimes because of biographical references), it contained nothing gratuitous. But such an approach could not perhaps have been adopted, had not the last poems formed a remarkable homogeneous corpus. This is explained by the circumstances of composition of the later poems. Sylvia Plath herself has described in an interview how many of these last poems were
written at short intervals, sometimes several on the same day, many in the same surroundings and in similar circumstances (235).

An unexpected truth is then reached for all the freshness of perception the poems, are essentially emblematic, reveal. They derive their meaning, both profound and sometimes literal, from an underlying code, in which objects and their qualities are endowed with stable significations and hierarchies. It is indeed only because such a pre-ordained scheme (probably unconscious to a great extent) existed so that such a large output, of such quality, was made possible. We cannot but perceive such a system, however dimly, and have to adopt it while we reads. For without such a feat of identification, sometimes difficult because of the highly personal interpretation Sylvia Plath put on certain objects already accepted, with other meanings of current symbols –many poems remain impenetrable, or at least lose most of their harmonics.

This code is extremely rigid, inasmuch as an object, which once charged with a given signification never forfeits it. The moon, the snow, the color black, always serve the same function. But the attitude of the poem can vary, and thus introduce some ambiguity. The color red and blue that can play differences are minimal, and we can only admire the inexhaustible freshness of inspiration which allowed infinite variations on such fixed themes. Recognition of this fact also sheds light on what Sylvia Plath was attempting to do in her poetry. She was not
trying to render each experience by means uniquely suited to it, but rather to dominate such experiences by making them fit, sometimes with difficulty, within a previously adopted framework which automatically resulted in their being integrated in a scale of values. Indeed, there is evidence that from the poems which seem more directly biographical in inspiration. The same could be said about her approach to her life itself. Many events have undoubtedly been experienced on the symbolical and mythical plane as well as on the personal at the time of their occurrence.

This reduces considerably the relevance of whether some allusions are personal or not, and here the poet showed us the way in her analyses of her own poems “Daddy” or “Fever 103”. And furthermore, as we shall see, subject and object, torturer and victim, are in her poetry finally indistinguishable, merely lending the depth of their existence to all-powerful entities and symbols. This is not to say that biographical details are of no importance. However, it should be realized that Sylvia Plath was, consciously or unconsciously, constantly trying to establish the distanciation without which there can be no art.

Thus, the obscurity of some poems never springs from the fact that we do not know what personal experiences were their immediate cause, even when it is plain that there were such experiences, that grasped the central structure according to which the clusters of images are arranged. Had the poets’ private mythology
been more flexible, definitive impossibility to understand would follow; fortunately, this is not the case, and even poems like “The Jailor”, or “The Other”, which are written in a kind of symbolical short-hand, can eventually be made to yield their wealth of overtones.

Sylvia Plath’s effort to achieve a necessary distanciation in the life and her art is also revealed in a fund of cultural imagery: classical reminiscences, references to historical events, contemporary allusions, numerous Christian anecdotes and symbols, philosophical concepts, legends (such as that of the vampire) and superstitions (such as that of the cracker glass as a portent of death). But the subject of the poems is never anything but an individual experience. The starting point can be a sensation (“Cut”, “Contusion”), an action (going to the cellar in “Nick and the Candlestick”), an abstraction brought to mind by a given circumstance (“Kindness”), or, very often and in a way which affords us a glimpse into the working of her poetic self, an object which is used as a peg for a fluid symbolism (“Balloons”, or the whole sequence of the “bee poems”). The primary object of experience is then explored at leisure, and all its symbolic potentialities reviewed, only to organize themselves finally according to familiar categories, with man firmly in the centre. Nature, reality, the world, are only in appearance interrogated as potential sources of meaning; for this meaning has been chosen once and for all, and henceforth they will only be used for their expressive
possibilities. The mood is never collective; although the poet projects her private experience on a wide background, the speaking voice remains individual. Nor does this distanciating generalization ever imply that the subject of the poems is intellectual; indeed, this refusal to acknowledge the intellect as a ‘positive’ value will be seen to have far-reaching and tragic consequences (238-39).

Within such limits, however, Sylvia Plath’s particular way of experiencing life has been shown to have been interplay between the particular and the general, and that finds expression in the vast range of her vocabulary and images. The juxtaposition of the sublime and the homely, the ‘poetic’ and the scientific (words like carbon monoxide, acetylene, ticker-tape, adding machine), is no accident. It reveals a constant and vivifying exchange between depth and surface. “A Birthday Present”, and “Stings” are, a reflexion on the ambiguous nature of the Poet, the most common and the most unusual of beings, nearest to Nature and farthest from it.

There is indeed, in the world of Sylvia Plath, an intuition of a kinship between poetry and death; and this is what radically separates her from the great Romantic prototypes. This intimacy with death, never gives rise to positive, fundamentally religious, feelings. In spite of a certain masochistic complacency, death always appears as a terrifying conclusion. At the most, it has a kind of saving nobility which favorably contrasts with a prosaic life.
However, it requires to be aware of the danger of romanticizing a poet who would have been outstanding in any circumstances; and besides it is inevitable that to start reconsidering of themes and images with the major theme of vulnerability, for the impression derived from even a cursory reading of her poetry is that of an overall threat. The mood is virtually always negative. Some of the optimistic poems call for a significant reservation and range from being mere foreboding to hopeless revolt and utter despair. In such an atmosphere, clichés assume a new significance, as in the beginning of “Totem”:

The engine is killing the track, the track is silver,
It stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless.
Its running is useless.
At nightfall there is the beauty of drowned fields.

The living flesh is felt as essentially vulnerable, a prey to axes, doctors’, needles, butchers’, and surgeons, knaves, poison, snakes and tentacles, acids, vampires, leeches, bats and bees, jails and brutal boots. Small animals are butchered and eaten, man’s flesh can undergo the final indignity of being cut to pieces and used as an object. The poet feels her kinship with the aged and the meek, “The weak/ Hothouse baby in its crib” (Fever 103⁰), all those whom the super-people, “with torsos of steel/ Winged elbows and eyeholes/ awaiting masses / Of cloud to give them expression would condemn” in “Brasilia”, and whose present “terrible faults” she feels her ‘heart too small to bandage’ (“Berck –
Plage”). Subjects and metaphors include a cut, a contusion, the tragedy of thalidomide, fever, an accident, a wound, paralysis, a burial, animal and human sacrifice, the burning of heretics, lands devastated by wars, extermination camps. Her poetry is a “garden of tortures” in which mutilation and annihilation take nightmarishly protean forms in “The Jailor”:

- Indeterminate criminal,
- I die with variety-
- Hung, starved, burned hooked!

On the realistic plane, there is a feeling of an almost unbelievable:

- Spidery, unsafe.
- What glove
- What leahrendess
- Has protected
- Me from that shadow.

But on the psychological plane, the mind cannot but be a sign of its own fragility in this very multiplicity of symbols. Disintegration threatens, all the more because of a past history of breakdown: “They pulled me out of the sack, And they stuck me together with glue”.

Although hidden, the break is still there, and the images which express man’s effort to build up his life and happiness:

- All night, I carpenter
- A space for the thing I am given,
- A love
- Of two wet eyes and a screech.
Love, Love
I have hung our cave with roses,
With soft rugs—
The last of Victoriana.

“Nick and the Candlestick” and “The Jailor” correspond much more numerous images of anarchic forces and centrifugal destruction in “The Arrival of the Bee Box”, “Elm”, “A Birthday Present”, “Thalidomide”, and in a slightly different context, in “Fever IO3°” and “Ariel”, for instance. This obsession with catastrophe is in itself the most potent force of disintegration. It sometimes takes the form of revolt and despair and, at other times, of almost an infatuation with death. It finally vitiates and destroys every foundation for hope. In some poems, she seems to show an awareness of herself as primarily self-condemned, “the slap and the cheek, the wound and the knife” as Baudelaire put it. In a “A Birthday Present”, in which the speaker is seen to impose on a mysterious event the meaning which he expects and fears, as often happens in the case of night mares.

In this respect, two of the numerous dangers which threaten in her poems occur with a symbolic frequency. The first is the threat of stifling or strangulation in which an obstacle stands between life and the person, finally destroying the latter.Scarves, fumes, veils, placenta and umbilical cords, tentacles are found in “Fever IO3°” or “Medusa”, for instance. The second is the threat of destruction by small enemies, outside or inside the body: bats and piranhas, bees complicating the
features ("Stings"), “the isolate, slow faults/ That kill, that kill, that kill”, the “spider-men”, “Winding and twining their petty fetters”, ‘the million/ Probable motes that tick the years off my life’, “the mercuric atoms that cripple”, “the worms on the corpse” in “The Moon and the Yew Tree”, “Nick and the Candlestick”, “Gulliver”, “Lady Lazarus”, “Elm”, “A Birthday Present”, etc. Death by fumes or carbon monoxide shows how the first threat is reducible to the second, since chemical death is due to changes in the small units of the body. Typically, blood is almost always presented in a plural form, as the ‘blood berries’, the “blood bells of the fuchsia” or a “bowl of red blooms” in “Tulips”, and “Years”, as if the individual was made up of smaller units endowed with a spontaneity not necessarily in agreement with the conscious self. Thus the ambiguity found in “A Birthday Present” is echoed in “Cut”, where the thumb is called a “saboteur” “a kamikaze man”, and the blood is an army of a million soldiers interrogated. Whose side are they on? The threat being interiorized means that one touch of decay can start a systematic degeneration:

The size of a fly,
The doom mark
Crawls down the wall.
The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted.

This is why sinful passion is represented by spotted animals or flowers: the
leopard, The Tiger, The Calla, the orchid; here the stain is more than the common emblem of impurity; it goes deeper, “like Hiroshima ash and eating in”, where as in the “child” “the blood blooms clean”. Broadly speaking, we can say that the dialectic of life and death is the sole subject of the poems. The poet’s existence is presented as a cosmic drama in which these two great principles are confronted, and their struggle is expressed in patterns whose structure is accordingly antithetic. The life-principle is color, pulsating rhythm, noise, heat, radiance, expansion, motion and communication. Death is the other pole: darkness, stasis, silence, frost, well-defined edges, and the hardness of rocks, jewels, and skulls, dryness, anything self-contained and separate or which derives its positive attributes from some other source, instead of generating them freely---- for death is absence, nothingness. Such is the frame-work on which the poems base their innumerable variations.

The natural symbol of life is “the beautiful red” in “Letter in November”. It is the color of blood, the life-fluid, which expresses emotion by its pulsating centre, the heart, in its turn comparable to wound which reveals life, or to the mouth which kisses and screams. Color comes as a gift, a long gift in “Poppies in October”, the heart “opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me” in “Tulips”, with essential exuberance and generosity. In several poems, flowers like tulips and poppies evoke this centre of energy: Their redness talks to
my wound, it corresponds in “Tulips”. But the poet’s reaction to the violent affirmation, of life against a neutral background of white varies according to her degree of vitality: hummable thankfulness when life manifests itself in the desert of depression and daily chores its bite and burn any more in “Poppies in October”, or despair at not being able to experience its bite and burn any more in “Poppies in July”.

The consequent wish for sensations is to be finally dulled. The “poppies” here are a conveniently dual symbol, evoking life when vitality is at a low ebb; for it cannot but be responded to the individual feeling unable to cope with the demands from life; the latter in turn threatens with disintegration and appears as malevolence. Even through the gift paper Plath could hear it breathe lightly, through its white swaddling, like an awful baby.

The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat…

Here, as in the previous poem, whiteness, the anonymous life in hospital and needle-brought unconsciousness are preferred as a refuge. Classically, death is black and so is foreboding which heralds it: “Death opened, like a black tree, blackly.” and “All morning the Morning has been blackening”.

It can be the darkness of caves, of cellars, of winter in “Nick and the Candlestick”, and “Wintering”, or monstrous lack of consciousness in
“Thalidomide”:

    Negro, masked like a white,
    Your dark
    Amputations crawl and appeal.

But white is also an absence of color, and is indeed the symbol of death in certain civilizations. This, coupled with the other attributes of death, makes the moon the perfect symbol for it. It shines in the night, its light is borrowed, its shape regular, well-defined and self-contained, and its bald light turns everything into stone----such are the aspects which are repeatedly stressed in poems like “Medusa”, “Elm”, “The Moon and the Yew Tree”, “Childless Woman”, “The Rival”, “The Munich Mannequins”, “Paralytic”, “Edge”. They form a constellation transcending any personal applications; although certain poems do seem to have been written with someone definite in mind, their relevance for an understanding of the poet herself is unquestionable and is, in fact stated, in “The Moon and the Yew Tree”: “The moon is my mother And I live here”, Which has obviously a double meaning, and in “Elm”, where pursuer and pursued are as confused as they are in “A Birthday Present”, and the word “caught” can be understood in two different and complementary ways:

    The moon also is merciless: she would drag me
    Cruelly, being barren
    Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.
    I let her go, I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

“Flat” is often used, as in “Tulips”, to express a superficial contact with life, when shapes seem two-dimensional as they do in the moon-light. As the last quotation shows, it also points to childlessness rather as an elected state rather than due to sterility- a state both ridiculous and guilty in “The Rival”, since it makes passion its own end in

The blood flood is the flood of love,
The absolute sacrifice.
It means: no more idols but me,
Me and you (“The Munich Mannequins”).

The moon is also a suitable symbol for sterility because of its circular shape, the most perfect of all, and because it rules the flux of menstrual blood. In the latter, death is in the midst of life, which is cut from its rightful end, according to Sylvia Plath:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb
Where the yew trees blow like hydras
The tree of life and the tree of life.
Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
in “The Munich Mannequins”

Or in “Childless Woman”:

The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.
Uttering nothing but blood.
The significance of this cycle of poems devoted to what Baudelaire called “the cold majesty of sterile womanhood” clearly appears in “Berck-Plage”, where a hearse is described with a startlingly evocative simile:

… a beautiful woman,
A crest of breasts, eyelids and lips
Storming the hilltop.

Death is essentially the beautiful, bad mother of fairy-tales; it has tentacles, “it petrifies the will” in “Elm”. The feeling of guilt for a self-seeking life is so strong that it sometimes involves the notion of children. Thus in “The Night Dances”, the subject of which seems to be an attempt to oppose something to the dissolving power of infinite space and of eternity in order to establish and vindicate the power of life, the beauty of the sleeping child, all pinkness and light, is cited, but immediately this is shown as valueless, for children are a worthless extension of the self:

Their flesh bears no relation.
Cold folds of ego, the calla,
And the tiger, embellishing itself-
Spots and a spread of hot petals.”
And in ‘Edge’ the dead woman has claimed them back:
She has folded
Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden
Stiffens…..
This very important theme, with its cluster of associations, allows us better than any other, to get an insight into the working of the poet’s mind and methods. She uses what the child-psychologist Piaget has called transductive thought, a symmetric approach in which qualities are associated, not substances or concepts. Thus, once we have realized what the moon symbolizes, we can easily recognize the same connotation every time. Some attribute of the moon is used to qualify some object or event. This leads to underlying associations and derived meanings which can be extremely cryptic, if one is not aware of their derivation. Here is an example:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as a snow breath, it tamps the womb
Where the yew trees blow like hydoras….
Others will be seen later.

Words like “pearl”, “silver” or “ivory”, which can be used to describe moonlight, always announce some untoward event or indicate a condemnatory judgment, in “A Birthday Present”, “The Munich Mannequins”, “Childless Woman”, “Totem”, Contusion, thus revealing its kinship with absence, death, as in “Night Dances” or “Wintering”. In this light, an antithesis which was startling at first seems perfectly normal: the Munich Mannequins are:

Intolerable, without mind
The snow drops its pieces of darkness
Nobody’s about.
Frost is a touch of death, and the dew reminds one of snow-flakes; the silver track left by a snail reminds one of the frost: thus in a poem on untoward portents:

“The word of as nail on the plate of a leaf ……Frost on a leaf”

And more explicitly in “Death & Co”:

The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell,
Somebody’s done for.

The moon is also “bald and wild”, and an another word laden with negative connotations as in “The Munich Mannequins” and the “bald and shiny suit” of the self in “The Hanging Man”, the coldness of science, and the proximity of death. The candle, as in “Nick and the Candlestick” and “Berck-Plage”, symbolizes the warmth and fragility of personal life. In “Medusa”, where the victim feels “overexposed, like an X-ray”, we find the telling phrase “cobra light”, and “cobra” is again found (because, of course, of another link with the image of tentacles in “Totem”). The image of the snake is pregnant with yet a third association: the sibilant sounds which are another, and remarkable, part of the same vast constellation, especially when associated with the vowel “I”. These are truly, for the poet, “the sounds of poison”, as said in “Elm”. For instance:

There is no mercy in the glitter of cleavers,
The butcher’s guillotine that whispers: ‘How’s this, how’s this?’ ‘Totem’ Acetic acid in a scaled tin.
… Your wishes
Hiss at my sins
‘Medusa’
Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
This is rain now, this big hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic, and
Its snaky acids kiss.

And in “The Swarm”:
And the snow, marshalling its brilliant cutlery
Mass after amass, saying Shh!
Shh! These are chess people you play with,
Still figures of ivory

Moonlight turns everything into stone and death, as in a phrase of Malraux’s which Sylvia Plath almost re-invents and turns life into destiny. She writes in “Berck-Plage” about a dead man:

This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible.
How far he is now, his actions
Around him like living room furhlture, like a décor,
And in “Edge”:
The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment.

Events seem necessary once they have occurred, although this may be only a fatal illusion, and this is of tragic import when it concerns someone who found fascination in death. Thus, about the dead woman in “Edge”: “The illusion of a Greek necessity Flows in the scrolls of the toga.” (165)
And in “Death & Co.”, where the repose of death assumes the same deceptive character:

He tells me how sweet
The babies look in their hospital
Icebox, a simple
Frill at eh neck,
Then the flutings of their Ionian
Death-gowns,
Then two little feet.

This also happens about the past, into which the present continually turns itself: “Spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history”. “A Birthday Present” In a poem built on the contrast between life kindled by love and the things which endure but are dead, and the sharp and well-defined holly leaves evoke the latter:

This is my property.
Two times a day
I pace it, sniffing
The barbarous holly with its viridian
Scallops, pure iron,
And the well of old corpses.
I love them.
I love them like history.

And by a typical condensation similar to “cobra light”, the holly leaves are in another a later, poem, used by themselves to signify the same petrifying quality of passing time:

They enter as animals from the outer
Space of holly where spikes
Are not the thoughts I turn on, like a Yogi,
But greenness, darkness so pure
They freeze and are.

Religion, especially as it appears in tender images of mother and child, seems to offer a refuge against the bald and wild moon, as in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” or “Mary’s Song” but the poet belongs outside, in the latter. And besides, the symbols of possible intimations of a transcendent reality behind the world, clouds, are always depicted as far and high, and indifferent:

Clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars,
Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.

The stiffness has a special meaning here, and so has the blue colors having a very ambiguous value in this code. Its negative aspect is obvious when it is associated with the cobra, as in “Totem”:

Shall the hood of the cobra apple me-
The loneliness of its eye, the eye of the mountains
Through which the sky eternally threads itself?

Here the infinity of space and time reveals its participation in the nature of death, and is felt as an enemy. In this sense, one can say about these poems what Rimbaud wrote in “A Season in Hell”, that during his mystical attempt he “rejected from the sky azure, which is blackness”. The wastes of space are usually dark and
starry; they seem at first impressive, but they are no different from the cellar of “Wintering”, full of appalling objects- black asininity.

In this cellar the bees have to feed, during the winter, on Tate and Lyle, the ersatz of flowers, the refined snow, and are indeed surrounded by snow, in which they can only bury their dead. The dark reveals itself as mindlessness, dead boredom" (“Nick and the Candlestick”) “black amnesias” (“Night Dances”), whose triumph over transient life is all the more unbearable. Against this, the poet reacts with revolt and a refusal to submit in “Years”:

O God, I am not like you
In your vacuous black,
Stars struck all over, bright stupid confetti.
Eternity bores me,
I never wanted it ……….
And you, great Stasis
What is so great in that.

Whereas the world is blood-hot and personal, death, although multiplied by the terror of the many individuals it catches, is anonymity, the one death with its catches, is anonymity, the “one death with its many sticks” (“Totem”). Hence the revolt against the deity, which is shown, in “Totem” as a bloodthirsty pagan idol, grimacing like a skull, and at the same time mobile like a scarecrow, and ridiculous and counterfeit, like it.

Revolt is also against the priest who represents it; and the images used in
“Daddy” which form a link between those of “Totem” and those of “Berck-Plage”, show that there is probably also a Freudian element of revolt against the father. In “Berck-Plage”, these lines

This black boot has no mercy for anybody.
Why should it, it is the hearse of a dead foot,
The high, dead, toeless foot of this priest
Who plumbs the well of his book?

Recall the beginning and the Roth stanza of “Daddy”, and in the later poem the father is described as.

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.

This image is found again, more diffuse and mobile, in the black spider whose arms sweep the infinite which is therefore a net, a trap, and which evokes both death and the divine totem, as is shown by the word stick:

I am mad, calls the spider, waving its may arms.
And in truth it is terrible,
They buzz like blue children
In nets of the infinite,
Roped in at the end by the one death with its many sticks,
Totem.

All this, of course, can apply not only to Christianity, but to all idealistic and spiritualistic philosophies, and produces all the more anxiety because a definite attraction is felt for them. And, moreover, this attraction agrees with the fundamentally symbolical nature of Sylvia Plath’s poetry. In “Three Women”, the Secretary comments on God’s male world;
The faceless faces of important men,
It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of anything that is not flat
They are jealous gods
That would have the whole world flat because they are
I see the Father conversing with the Son.
Such flatness cannot but be holy.
‘let us make heaven,’ they say.
‘Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these soul.

The idea of sacrifice as the central notion of religion has deeply impressed
the poet; sacrifice either of the heretics, or of the most precious and most innocent;
the golden child in the poem above, the tortured Christ in “Elm” or his suicidal
“awful God-bit” in “Years”. Because of an identification in which the sadism
attributed to the deity is fused with a masochistic drive, the idea of redemption
actually has death as a consequence, as it appears in “Brasilia”:

O you who eat
People like light-rays, leave
This one
Mirror safe, unredeemed
By the dove’s annihilation,
The glory
The power, the glory.

The fat had to sacrifice its opacity because matte, in this dualistic universe,
is the inferior partner. In the incarnation, Ideas become individualized sullied
beings. The poet reacts to this basic notion with a fluctuating attitude, now
existentialist, when she stresses her anguished preference for the “blood-hot and personal” world, now essentialist, as in “Berck-Plage”. In a still place, the groom is red and forgetful, he is featureless. But, if actual existence can be considered superiority, individualized existence means separateness expressed in an open or latent manner in many poems, for a transfiguration which will dissolve the limits of the self” this same old suit bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes” in (“Totem”). This can be achieved in orgiastic ecstasy, and in the horse’s gallop we find a double symbol, for the utmost experience and the pulsating rhythm of life, and for the dispersion of the individual into the “substanceless blue” in “Ariel”, “years” “Words”, and “Elm”.

But “Fever 103°” indicates that guilt feelings and a desire for expiation and purification may have determined this choice of a metaphysical framework. Their origin was probably multiple and ancient. This appears when “Daddy” and “Little Fugue”, are compared:

I am guilty of nothing
I was seven, I knew nothing.
The world occurred.

With the end of “Getting There” “jailor” and “Three Women”. “In Fever 103°” the identification of the individual, who repudiates the multiple and deceptive embodiments of the Unique in her life, with a God whom the world hurts is achieved through a transfiguration. And gold, a symbol for whatever is most
precious, often associated with the child or with love, as in “Letter in November, also evokes images of sacrifices as in “Mary’s Song”:

... On the high Precipice That emptied one man into space, The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent. It is a heart, This holocaust I walk in.

It is remarkable that in this universe ideas are never felt to be life giving; intellect is therefore no help.

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary. The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.

This anti-intellectualism can only cause depression, since every enduring reality is thereby interpreted as participating in the nature of death. Knowledge is therefore condemned in “Three Women” for the male Woman is flatness from which ideas, destruction Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed, endlessly proceed The surgeon lives among cut-up bodies in “Berck-Plage”. He is “one mirror eye” and surrounded by glittering things. We find in these similes, as in the bald and shiny suit and the folding mirror of the self in “Totem” another clue. Shine, glitter, mirrors, which cause reflections like the moon are always used in a derogatory manner. And this, in turn, has a bearing on the status of another symbol, that of the smile.
It has been sometimes used to signify tenderness, a gentle and unalloyed positive feeling; but it soon becomes a negative sign, because it is commonly used without sincerity in order to reassure oneself or the others that everything is all right, as in “Lady Lazarus”: Soon (……) the flesh (………) will be at home on me, And I a smiling woman, “or in” Berck-Plage”: “Why is it so quiet, what are they hiding? I have two legs, and I move smilingly”.

Henceforth, coupled with glitter, it symbolizes deceit, the illusion to which all the comforting manifestation of life are shown to belong in the end. Thus it can be seen as the link between images such as the following ones, all expressing distrust:

A ring of gold with the sun in it?
Lies. Lies and a grief.
The Couriers
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water, up leaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful.

Touching and sucking, and above all in ‘Death & Co.” the subject of which is the terrible awakening whereby what seemed the supreme embodiment of animation and life, reveal profound kinship with death:

Two, of course there are two.
It seems perfectly natural now
The one who never looks up and who
Does not smile or smoke.
On the contrary
The other does that
His hair long and applaudive,
Masturbating a glitter,
He wants to be loved.
Or again, in ‘The Jailor’
What have I eaten?
Lies and smiles.

It is only normal, and highly significant, if in spite of all this the ever-changing face of the mirror is still used as a symbol for life which is preferred to fixity; the shattered mirror is then a metaphor for death. The “Couriers”, is a poem on all the sinister portents:

A disturbance in mirrors,
The sea shattering its grey one or in ‘Brasilia” O you … leave.

This one mirror is safe in “Contusion”. The mirrors are sheeted, or in “Thalidomide”
The glass cracks across,
The image
Flees and aborts like dropped mercury.

And above all in “Words”, this being one of the two constellations of images on which the poem is built:

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock
That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.

But this effort is doomed to failure for “from the bottom of the pool, fixed stars govern a life”. Evil and nothingness are ubiquitous in Sylvia Plath’s poetry. Her positive themes are therefore presented against a negative background, with an undertone of frightened defiance, as being capable of holding death and failure at bay. We shall see that even in the poems which at first sight appear untouched by menace or the obsession of death, the choice of details and adjectives betrays an underlying defensiveness and implicit contrast. And this can be said even with regard to the few poems on the subject of children, for all other positive themes contain possibilities of degeneration and disillusion. The child is, in principle, the fountainhead of all life and hope. His self is not yet bald and shiny, he is vague as fog, and “Trawling (his) dark as owls do in “You are”. Vagueness is imbued with infinite possibilities before which the parents are humbled in “Morning Song”: “your nakedness/ Shadows our safety. He is akin to the elements, the sea, the wind, the clouds with no strings attached and no reflections, as in “Gulliver”. The poet acknowledges the freedom of her own child:

I’m no more your mother
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow Effacement at the
wind’s hand.

In the child, innocence, which for the adult can only be obtained in forgetfulness and annihilation, as in “Getting There” “Tulips” and “Fever 103º”, is miraculously combined with individuality: “A clean slate with your own face on”, “You’re”. In the face of disintegration and universal dissolution in a deceptive glitter, here is a plenum, the fixed point on which the envious spaces lean in “Nick and the Candlestick”, heavy and precious as gold, a divine redeemer. This is expressed in “Morning Song” and “You’re” by an accumulation of metaphors----a poem in “The Colossus”, about pregnancy, is actually called “Metaphors” with rippling consonants which seek to convey this close texture, this compactness, fullness and rightness; a well-done sum, a creel of eels, all ripples. He is like the tremendously compact and potent germ of a future universe, the absolute beginning of some ancient mythologists.

This is not to say that the image of the child never appears in poems whose general tone is one of foreboding and even despair. Even in a poem like “Balloons”, where the image already encountered in “Morning Song” recalls oval animal souls, the “balloons are opposed to dead furniture”. In Nick and the Candlestick”, the child is like a faltering candle in a frozen cave full of murderous fishes. Furthermore, the obvious justification of one’s existence which the child brings is not always potent enough to appease the guilt of the egotist, as appears in
the poems on the childless woman or those which show the dead children as appendages to the dead woman.

In “Fever 103°”, guilt actually evokes the image of a spotted, dying child, whereas in “Nick and Candlestick”, the blood bloomed clean in him. We might say, to summarize, that as a subject the child is positive, but thematically, it is often combined with others which greatly diminish this positive value, and can even make it completely negative; the child-theme has been then used to reinforce guilt, fear and despair.

Much the same could be said about another theme, that of the lulling comfort of everyday life. “Kindness” supplies another necessary fluid, a poultice, and busies itself sweetly picking up pieces. “Love”, in its beginnings, “evoked a green in the air” which “cushioned lovingly” the poet. And so does daily life. In his parody of the marriage ceremony which is found in “The Applicant”, the doll-like wife is in the same way guaranteed to supply whatever environment is wished for:

You have a hole, it’s a poultice.
You have an eye, it’s an image.

A task like honey-making can supply many such symbols for a poet who is capable of reading life on two levels at once; thus about the hive:

With excessive love I enameled it
Thinking ‘Sweetness, sweetness.

But what happens when interest wanes and the endless stream of life-
symbols dries up? The environment of daily-life, when evoked like an incantation in such circumstances, is no more than dead furniture, fragmented and powerless:

I survive the while,
Arranging my morning,
These are my fingers, my baby.

And in “Tulips”, the mood of which is the lowered vitality which makes the individual unable to cope with life:

They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
I watched my teased, my bureaus of line, and my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

The mood is characteristically ambiguous, and the nun-like purity which follows this abandonment of everyday associations is far from totally disagreeable. For the dullness and monotony of this life can offset its utility, especially when it is contrasted with a more vital experience. “Kindness” and its “cup of tea wreathed in steam” is strangely out of key with “blood jet”, of poetry. And cooking, often the symbol of this daily life, supplied a delightful metaphor for the child successfully brought into the world, and presented as a degrading drudgery which can make one unworthy of a revelation. The mysterious envoy in “A Birthday Present” is made to wonder:

Is this the one I am to appear for?
Is this the elect one?
Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,
Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.
Is this the one for the annunciation?
My god, what a laugh?.

In the cycle of the bee-poems, the hive often appears as a symbol of the hierarchy within the individual, the ancient queen poor and bare and unsurely and even shameful, “her long body rubbed of its plush” and the workers, “unmiraculous women, honey-drudger” felt to be malevolent, dangerous in “Stings” their vast numbers. The poet expresses her kinship with the queen who has the lost self to recover in terms which recall poems of relegation such as “A Birthday Present”, and of “The Hanging Man”:

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,
Will they hate me?
Those women who only scurry (………)?

The poem ends with an image of fierce redness (recalling “Lady Lazarus” and the “scar” in “A Birthday Present”), in its final, defensive, desperate assertion of omnipotence” in “Stings”:

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her
The mausoleum, the wax house.
The honey-machine, has been used by another of her own selves to the maimed self, and therefore daily life cannot give back wholeness, but only crutches, a frequent symbol in “Berck-Plage”, and “The Applicant”). And death can actually be welcome, since it frees one from this useless lumber, useless, yet irreversibly acquired, for man is the prey of an adding-machine. The self, in “Totem”, is described as made of notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors, and as exclaimed in “Lady Lazarus” exclaims:

What a trash
To annihilate each decade,
What a million filaments.

Images which recall Baudelaire’s famous poems entitled “Spleen” in which the self “I” is similarly encumbered with things which no longer have meaning. This reification which alienates the living self (a frequent theme in Existentialist literature) fits in the neo-platonic schema, whereby degeneration into matter is the sign of an irreversible degradation. The proliferation of “things” in (“Berck-Plage”) is used to play the same purpose. The tired person can surrender to the Welfare State-like atmosphere of hospital, which divests him from individuality and responsibility, and the style of “The Applicant” achieves a kind of Kafkaesque bureaucratic lyricism. And “things” are another aspect of death in “Berck-Plage”, in which the dead furniture turns into nothing, like the corpse; the visible is an illusion and the invisible alone matters.
The that purification can be achieved in death in which the scattered personality is seen as gradually withdrawing toward its vital centre and abandoning its tainted externals as in “Fever 103°”, in “Tulips” and “Paralytic”:

I smile, a Buddha, all
Wants, desire
Falling from me like rings
Hugging their lights.

Echoes are often used as a symbol of these externals, since they are a degradation of sound, a repetition traveling away from the original event. Thus in “Words”, in which emotion, animation, and life are contrasted with the unchangeably bare skull and the fixed stars, a second constellation of images confirms the meaning of the first: the words are “Axes/After whose stroke the wood rings”, while echoes “travel off from the centre”. But the words by themselves are powerless once the central intention which informed them has gone and the horse-symbol makes us think that the poet is here thinking of love in particular:

Years later I
Encounter dry and rider less,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.

If poetry and death can denounce the ill usage of a comfortable life, cannot love bring about the same realization? This does seem to be the meaning of a line in a poem whose subject is the resurrection due to the eruption of love in a frozen
life in “Letter in November”: O love, O celibate. Here the solitude elsewhere
brought about by ebbing life is savored for its own sake because, like the dying
person, he who is in love and is momentarily free from all “loving association” and
“little smiling hooks”.

Yet, and as might be expected, love is the supremely ambiguous theme.
Poems, like “Daddy” or “Medusa”, whatever their actual personal associations,
present love as something to be achieved in the teeth of opposition, in spite of the
past, or of terrific obstacles, as in “Getting There”. The ten-yearly rhythm of death
offsets the pulsation of life. It is true that “Lady Lazarus” ends on a note of
defiance, and ‘Daddy’ on the successful nailing down of the vampire. The undead,
followed by compassion and a purified feeling for this other man, badly know, who
was the vampire’s victim.

We therefore understand the ambiguity of a revelation such as that in “A
Birthday Present”, where love is hoped for, but the parcel is suspected to contain
death instead. Yet, love is still wished for passionately, as in “Elm”, and can alone
metamorphose a frozen world as in “Letter in November”:

Love, the world
Suddenly turns, turns color….

It fills the Arctic with images of spring a green in the air, soft, delectable.
But this applies only to love in its beginnings, for it rapidly turns into red passion
which can prove too much to bear and, in addition, being a world to it, brings guilt.
Even more tellingly, however, the ecstasy of love suggested by the gallop of a horse is always evoked in a strangely passionless manner. It leads to suggest that a blue and transparent transfiguration is preferred to a more personal feeling as being psychologically safer. In “Ariel” the horse is indeed pulsation conquered on “stasis in darkness” However, it leads not to a fever of blood but to a pearly ecstasy: “I foam to wheat, a glitter of seas” and a happily suicidal wish. It deals with sublimation, the idea of love rather than actual love.

The “substanceless blue” is that of the mystical clouds with no strings attached, the light of the prophets and of the superhuman “Brazilians” who eat people like light-rays. Love is therefore subject to their forms of degradation and disappearance. The metrification of daily life and meaningless forms, the dissolution into glitter, the transfiguration which depersonalizes both object and subject. There is in fact no place here for adult relationship. In “Three Women” the girl is unmarried, the secretary has a bloodless relationship with her husband, although she finds at the end that she has become a wife; but the wife herself never says anything at all about the father of her child, this male baby is her only lover. Nor does the awareness of her difference and of the gifts seem to have given the poet much reassurance certainly nothing comparable to the notion of giving birth to a child. The lack of any trace of a feeling of achievement seems, on the evidence of the poems alone to be explained by the fact that although the poetic urge flows
irrepressibly, this generosity is suicidal, it is in the nature of a wound:

    The blood jet is poetry
    There is no stopping it.

So, although a divine visitation is wished for in the midst of everyday life, and although the poet cannot help feeling some pride and some nobility in her calling, she always conceives it as another of those numerous disintegrating factors which threaten her and incomparably are the most potent and terrifying. In fact, it is in this connection only that we can detect a genuine feeling of the divine, a religious attitude which is on the contrary conspicuously absent in all motions of a conventional deity. This seems, at least to be one of the possible interpretations of “The Hanging Man”. This, in itself, is an evidence of great purity in poetic feeling. But, if we turn to the part in which the poet can feel herself to be, to some extent, responsible for her art dominating poetry as a craft instead of being dominated by it, there is merely disenchantment. In “The Night Dances” we can see the uniqueness of the living flesh placed, in her scale of values, a priori above the cold, impersonal mathematics of the poem. The child is elemental like the clouds and the poem is an artifact whose beauty and regularity remind us of snowflakes, that will melt to nothing. We are given have the rare in sight of an exceptionally gifted poet who did not believe enough in poetry.

There seems to have been, in Plath’s particular case, another disturbing factor: a profound uncertainty about the possibility of reconvening womanhood
and intellect, whether the origin of this is to be sought in long-standing sociological or psychological causes, or in the special circumstances which preceded the writing of the last poems. The birth of her son, in the latter was followed by a great burst of creativity. This may have been the sign of a release from guilt associated with her vocation. The childless Woman in “Three Women” utters nothing but bold revealing use of words which clearly show the alternative between dead words and living beings. This particular factor supplies the meaning of the monologue for three voices in “Three Women”. It provides a repertoire of all the images and themes outlined. The story of three women recalls the discovery of their pregnancy, their confinements at resumption of their interrupted life, and the familiar metaphorical structure buttressed by a narrative which confirms its meaning. The fate of the three women characters is in poetic conformity with their outlook. The wife is slow as the world, very patient, ready and smiling. She feels at one with the life-giving earth, and her pregnancy is a kind of knowledge. The secretary suddenly feels her life in a male world as a death in the bare trees, a deprivation; she is afraid of having caught the male disease of flatness, and feels guilty of being found wanting. The girl is not ready. She resents her pregnancy, accuses the men of it, and wishes to have been aborted. The wife has a son and marveling at him prepares to cushion him from all threats:

I shall meditate upon normality
I do not will him to be exceptional.

It is the exception that interests the devil

I will him to be common.

The secretary has a still-born baby whose sex is not known to us. This however agrees with the atmosphere of sterility which surrounded her pregnancy for a future child. But the college girl feels a child as a threat to her individuality. She ja[[en sot have a daughter, born whom she abandons. First, she-feels like a wound walking out of the hospital, then forgets and enjoys her death-like intellectual existence anew:

My black gown is a little funeral:
It shows that I am serious.
The books I carry wedge into my side.

She rejoices in having no attachments but, her old wound being now a dream, she still wonders:
What is it I miss?
Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?

She is, therefore, farther from nature than the less intellectual secretary who could voice her torment:
I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman,
Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man
Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack.

I feel a lack.

That the wife’s symbiotic relationship with her son may not be very healthy is nowhere suggested (the only fear is that this state cannot endure very long); and even less than that, life and mind are not, for most people, irreconcilable enemies. Even individuality resented in Sylvia Plath’s universe has been associated by the Secretary with the lipstick she puts on again when she regretfully leaves the elemental world of lying-in the hospital.
Works Cited


