CHAPTER – IV
CROSSING THE WATER AND WINTER TREES: PHASE OF TRANSITION

“It is more natural to me, lying down. Then the sky and I are in open conversation, And I shall be useful when I lie down finally”. Sylvia Plath: “I am Vertical”

One of the most dynamic and admired poets of the twentieth Century, Sylvia Plath took her life at the age of thirty but by that time she already had a literary community to her credit. In the ensuing years her work attracted the attention of a multitude of readers who saw in her singular verse an attempt to catalogue despair, violent emotion, and obsession with death. In the New York Times Book Review, Joyce Carol Oates described Plath as "one of the most celebrated and controversial of postwar poets writing in English.”(21) Intensely autobiographical, Plath's poems explored her own mental anguish borne by her troubled marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes and her unresolved conflicts with her parents, coupled with her own vision of herself. On the World Socialist Web site, Margaret Rees observed:

Whether Plath wrote about nature or about the social restrictions on individuals, she stripped away the polite veneer. She let her writing express elemental forces and primeval fears. In doing so, she laid bare the contradictions that tore apart appearance and hinted at some of the tensions hovering just beneath the surface of the American way of life in the post war period.

Oates put it in a simple way when she wrote that Plath's best-known poems,
"many of them written during the final, turbulent weeks of her life, read as if they've been chiseled, with a fine surgical instrument, out of arctic ice"(23). And the New York Times Book Review, former American Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky declared:

Thrashing, hyperactive, perpetually accelerated, the poems of Sylvia Plath catch the feeling of a profligate, hurt imagination, throwing off images and phrases with the energy of a runaway horse or a machine with its throttle stuck wide open. All the violence in her work returns to that violence of imagination, a frenzied brilliance and conviction.(53)

Pinsky further stated that Plath "suffered the airless egocentrism of one in love with an ideal self."(Ibidem, 54) Denis Donoghue made a similar observation, also in the New York Times Book Review: "Plath's early poems, many of them, offered themselves for sacrifice, transmuting agony, 'heart's waste,' into gestures and styles."(Ibidem,55) Donoghue added that "she showed what self-absorption makes possible in art, and the price that must be paid for it, in the art as clearly as in the death."(55) Dictionary of Literary Biography essayist Thomas Mc Clanahan wrote,

At her most articulate, meditating on the nature of poetic inspiration, [Plath] is a controlled voice for cynicism, plainly delineating the boundaries of hope and reality. At her brutal best—and Plath is a brutal poet—she taps a source of power that transforms her poetic voice into a raving avenger of
womanhood and innocence. (56)

The poet's Plath's early years were spent near the seashore, but her life changed abruptly when her father died in 1940. Some of her most vivid poems, including the well-known *Daddy*, concern her troubled relationship with her authoritarian father and her feelings of betrayal when he died. Financial circumstances forced the Plath family to move to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where Aurelia Plath taught advanced secretarial studies at Boston University. A gifted student Plath had won numerous awards and had published stories and poetry in national magazines while still in her teens. She attended Smith College on scholarship and continued to excel, winning a *Mademoiselle* Fiction contest one year and garnering a prestigious guest editorship of the magazine the following summer.

It was during her undergraduate years that Plath began to suffer the symptoms of severe depression that would ultimately lead to her death. In one of her journal entries, dated June 20, 1958, she wrote: "It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous, positive, and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it." (58) This is an eloquent description of bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, a very serious illness for which no genuinely effective medications were available during Plath's lifetime. In August of 1953, at the age of nineteen, Plath attempted suicide.
by swallowing sleeping pills. She survived the attempt and was hospitalized, receiving treatment with electro-shock therapy. Her experiences of breakdown and recovery were later turned into fiction for her only published novel, The Bell Jar. Having made a recovery, Plath returned to Smith for her degree. She earned a Fulbright grant to study at Cambridge University in England, and it was there that she met poet Ted Hughes. The two were married in 1956. Plath published two major works during her lifetime, The Bell Jar and a poetry volume titled The Colossus. Both received warm reviews. However, the end of her marriage in 1962 left Plath with two young children to care for and, after an intense burst of creativity that produced the poems in Ariel, she committed suicide by inhaling gas from a kitchen oven.

Timothy Materer wrote in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, "The critical reactions to both The Bell Jar and Ariel were inevitably influenced by the manner of Plath's death at thirty."(56) Hardly known outside poetry circles during her lifetime, Plath became in death more than she might have imagined. Donoghue, for one, stated:

I can't recall feeling, in 1963, that Plath's death proved her life authentic or indeed that proof was required. . . . But I recall that 'Ariel' was received as if it were a bracelet of bright hair about the bone, a relic more than a book.(72)

Feminists portrayed Plath as a woman driven to madness by a domineering
father, an unfaithful husband, and the demands that motherhood made on her genius. Some critics lauded her as a confessional poet whose work "spoke the hectic, uncontrolled things our conscience needed, or thought it needed," to quote Donoghue. Largely on the strength of *Ariel*, Plath became one of the best-known female American poets of the twentieth century. The critic A. Alvarez, writing in *The Savage God*, believed that with the poems in *Ariel*, compiled and published by Hughes, commented: "Poetry and death inseparable the one could not exist without the other. And this is right. In a curious way, the poems read as though they were written posthumously" (69).

Robert Penn Warren called *Ariel* "a unique book, it scarcely seems a book at all, rather a keen, cold gust of reality as though somebody had knocked out a window pane on a brilliant night"(98). George Steiner wrote:

> It is fair to say that no group of poems since Dylan Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* has had as vivid and disturbing an impact on English critics and readers as has *Ariel*. . . . Reference to Sylvia Plath is constant where poetry and the conditions of its present existence are discussed(241).

Plath's growing posthumous reputation inspired younger poets to write as she did. But, as Steiner maintained, her desperate integrity cannot be imitated. Or, as Peter Davison put it, "No artifice alone could have conjured up such effects."(80) According to McClanahan, the poems in *Ariel* "are personal
testaments to the loneliness and insecurity that plagued her, and the desolate images suggest her apparent fixation with self-annihilation. . . . In *Ariel*, the everyday incidents of living are transformed into the horrifying psychological experiences of the poet" (92).

In Plath's final poems, wrote Charles Newman in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*,

Death is preeminent but strangely unimpressive. Perhaps it is because there is no longer dialogue, no sense of 'Otherness'—she is speaking from a viewpoint which is total, complete. Love and Death, all rivals, are resolved as one within the irreversibility of experience. To reverse Blake, the Heart knows as much as the Eye sees (210).

As a very young poet Plath experimented with the villanelle and other forms. She had been stimulated by such writers as D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Fyodor Dostoevski, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Theodore Roethke, Emily Dickinson, and later by Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. She has been linked with Lowell and Sexton as a member of the so-called confessional school of poetry. Ted Hughes noted that she shared with them a similar geographical homeland as well as the central experience of a shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again or finding a new one. Alvarez believed:

The very source of [Plath's] creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness. But it was, precisely, a source of *living* energy, of her imaginative, creative power. So, though death itself may have been a side issue, it was also an
unavoidable risk in writing her kind of poem. My own impression of the circumstances surrounding her eventual death is that she gambled, not much caring whether she won or lost; and she lost (102).

At times, Plath was able to overcome the tension between the perceiver and the thing-in-itself by literally becoming the thing-in-itself, wrote Newman. "In many instances, it is nature who personifies her"(105). Similarly, Plath used history to explain herself, writing about the Nazi concentration camps as though she had been imprisoned there. She said:

I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant, to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on (105).

Newman explained that "in absorbing, personalizing the socio-political catastrophes of the century, [Plath] reminds us that they are ultimately metaphors of the terrifying human mind"(53). Alvarez noted that the "anonymity of pain, which makes all dignity impossible, was Sylvia Plath's subject"(89). Her reactions to the smallest desecrations, even in plants, were extremely violent, wrote Hughes:

Auschwitz and the rest were merely the open wounds." In sum, Newman believed, Plath "evolved in poetic voice from the precocious girl, to the disturbed modern woman, to the vengeful magician, to Ariel—God's Lioness.

While few critics dispute the power or the substance in Plath's poetry, some have come to feel that its legacy is one of cynicism, ego-absorption, and a prurient
fascination with suicide. Donoghue suggested that the moral claims enforced by these poems now seem exorbitant, adding, The thrill we get from such poems is something we have no good cause to admire in ourselves. McClanahan felt that Plath's legacy "is one of pain, fear, and traumatic depression, born of the need to destroy the imagistic materialization of 'Daddy.” (109) Nevertheless, the critic concluded as:

The horrifying tone of her poetry underscores a depth of feeling that can be attributed to few other poets, and her near-suicidal attempt to communicate a frightening existential vision overshadows the shaky technique of her final poems. Plath writes of the human dread of dying. Her primitive honesty and emotionalism are her strength. (Ibidem,109)

Critics and scholars have continued to write about Plath, and her relationship with Hughes. A reviewer for the National Post reported that in 2000 that there were 104 books in print about Plath. Newman considered The Bell Jar testing ground for Plath’s poems. According to him:

One of the few American novels to treat adolescence from a mature point of view. . . . It chronicles a nervous breakdown and consequent professional therapy in non-clinical language. And finally, it gives us one of the few sympathetic portraits of what happens to one who has genuinely feminist aspirations in our society, of a girl who refuses to be an event in anyone's life. . . . [Plath] remains among the few woman writers in recent memory to link the grand theme of womanhood with
Plath told Alvarez that she published the book under a pseudonym partly because "she didn't consider it a serious work . . . and partly because she thought too many people would be hurt by it"(69). *The Bell Jar* is narrated by nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood. The three-part novel explores Esther's unsatisfactory experiences as a student editor in Manhattan, her subsequent return to her family home, where she suffered a breakdown and attempted suicide, from which she recovered with the aid of an enlightened female doctor. One of the novel's themes, the search for a valid personal identity, is as old as fiction itself. The other, a rebellion against conventional female roles, was slightly ahead of its time. Nancy Duvall Hargrove observed in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*:

As a novel of growing up, of initiation into adulthood, [*The Bell Jar*] is very solidly in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. Technically, *The Bell Jar* is skillfully written and contains many of the haunting images and symbols that dominate Plath's poetry (57).

Materer commented that the book is a finely plotted novel full of vivid characters and written in the astringent but engaging style one expects from a poet as frank and observant as Plath. The atmosphere of hospitals and sickness, of incidents of bleeding and electrocution, set against images of confinement and liberation, unify the novel's imagery. Hargrove maintained that the novel is:

A striking work which has contributed to [Plath's] reputation
as a significant figure in contemporary American literature. It is more than a feminist document, for it presents the enduring human concerns of the search for identity, the pain of disillusionment, and the refusal to accept defeat (Ibidem, 58).

*Letters Home*, a collection of Plath's correspondence between 1950 and 1963, reveals that the source of her inner turmoil was perhaps more accurately linked to her relationship with her mother. The volume, published by Plath's mother in 1975, was intended, at least in part, to counter the angry tone of *The Bell Jar* as well as the unflattering portrait of Plath's mother contained in that narrative.

According to Janet Malcolm in the *New Yorker*:

The publication of *Letters Home* had a different effect from the one Mrs. Plath had intended, however. Instead of showing that Sylvia wasn't 'like that,' the letters caused the reader to consider for the first time the possibility that her sick relationship with her mother was the reason she was like that (85).

Though Hughes exercised final editorial approval, the publication of *Letters Home* also cast a new and unfavorable light on numerous others linked to Plath, including himself. Malcolm wrote, "Before the publication of *Letters Home*, the Plath legend was brief and contained, a taut, austere stage drama set in a few bleak, sparsely furnished rooms" (Ibidem,81). Plath's intimate letters to her family contain unguarded personal commentary on her college years, writing, despair,
friendships, marriage, and children.

After Plath's death, *The It-Doesn't-Matter Suit*, a book for children, was also discovered among her papers published posthumously. The story features Max Nix, a resident of Wickenburg, who happily acquires a modest "woolly, whiskery brand-new mustard-yellow suit"(51). Nicky Garrard wrote in the *Observe*: "There's no disturbance in the world of Wickenburg: even Max's desire for a suit is as shallow and clear as the silver stream that runs like a ribbon through the valley"(65). Despite the lasting impression of Plath's bleak art and early death, Gerrard concluded that "small pieces of happiness like this little book remind us of her life"(Ibidem, 87).

Plath's relationship with Hughes has long been the subject of commentary, not always flattering one for Hughes. Feminist critics, in particular, tended to see in Plath's suicide a repudiation of the expectations placed upon women in the early 1960s. Further, criticism attended Hughes's guardianship of Plath's papers, especially when Hughes admitted that he destroyed some of Plath's journals, including several written just prior to her suicide. Materer felt that Hughes's control over Plath's papers—a right he exercised only because their divorce had not become final----caused difficulties for both critics and biographers. Materer added, "The estate's strict control of copyright and its editing of such writings as Plath's journals and letters have caused the most serious problems for scholars" (89).
After Hughes's death from cancer in 1998, a new edition of Plath's journals. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, (1950-1962) has been published this unabridged version of her journals, from her earliest days at Smith College to the days of her marriage, has been published verbatim even down to her misspellings. Oates has it that "Uncritical admirers of Plath will find here much that is fascinating"(86) whereas "Other readers may find much that is fascinating and repellent in equal measure"(Ibidem, 83):

Like all unedited journals, Plath's may be best read piecemeal, and rapidly, as they were written. The reader is advised to seek out the stronger, more lyric and exhilarating passages, which exist in enough abundance through these many pages to assure that this presumed final posthumous publication of Sylvia Plath's is that rarity, a genuine literary event worthy of the poet's aggressive myth poetic claim in 'Lady Lazarus'—

Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air (Ibidem, 108).

Summarizing Plath's unique personality and talent Hughes said Her poetry escapes ordinary analysis in the way clairvoyance and medium ship do her psychic gifts, at almost any time, were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them. In her poetry, in other words, she had free and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and Holy men (78). And That:

Surveyed as a whole . . . I think the unity of her opus is clear.
Once the unity shows itself, the logic and inevitability of the language, which controls and contains such conflagrations and collisions within itself, becomes more obviously what it is—direct, and even plain, speech. This language, this unique and radiant substance, is the product of alchemy on the noblest scale. Her elements were extreme: a violent, almost demonic spirit in her, opposed a tenderness and capacity to suffer and love things infinitely, which was just as great and far more in evidence. Her stormy, luminous senses assaulted a downright practical intelligence that could probably have dealt with anything. . . . She saw her world in the flame of the ultimate substance and the ultimate depth. And this is the distinction of her language, that every word is Baraka: the flame and the rose folded together. Poets have often spoken about this ideal possibility but where else, outside these poems, has it actually occurred? If we have the discrimination to answer this question, we can set her in her rightful company (Ibidem, 85).

The collections of Crossing the Water and Winter Trees contained most of the poems composed between the two earlier volumes of poems and in 1971 the final collection of Winter Trees was published. The humor never succeeds in disguising the attraction Plath feels in this story for a figure and a content that is absolute. What Sylvia Plath sought to manage as content, she also had to handle it as form. The method of poetic composition attributed to her by people who knew her involved poems written all-of-a-piece. Such poems are evident in the post-Romantic organic verse she frequently succeeded in writing from poems in The
Colossus to late poems in *Ariel* to those now collected in *Crossing the Water and Winter Trees*. If the word organic commonly has been turned into an almost meaningless term expressive of a quasi-mystical ideality present in a particular poem, it can be a critical term of the most descriptive and telling kind for Plath’s poetry.

The best poems in her first book are organic in conception and in their management of matters as basic as stanza and line length as well as image. The poem, “*Man in Black*”, in *Crossing the Water* is unmistakably all of-a-piece:

Where the three magenta
Breakwaters take the shove
And suck of the grey sea
To the left, and the wave
Unfits against the dun
Barb-wired headland of
The Deer Island prison
With its trim piggeries,
Hen huts and cattle green
To the right, and March spit
Bared by each falling tide,
And you, across those white
Stones, strode out in your dead
Black coat, black shoes, and your
Black hair till there you stood.
Fixed vortex on the far
Tip riveting stones, air,
All of it together (314).

In the last stanza of this poem, the poet draws attention to the manner of that lends a persuasive, assertive finality to so many poems she wrote. “Man in Black”, significantly placed in the midst of poems about the process or act of poetry—“Strumpet Song” “Snake charmer”, “The Hermit at Outermost House”, The Disquieting Muse”, “Medallion”—establishes a unity that is almost mathematical, and hence anticipatory of later poems like The Night Dances and Ariel in Ariel.

By means of a suspended syntax and a sure logic to the left, to the right, yet, and you the main figure of man in Black rises out of the landscape that anticipates him and that he is part of. Sinister, alien, and deathlike, he joins, like the poet, stasis and rest. He stands for the final, lyric image the Romantic poet strove to confront and to which critics like Frank Kermode have addressed themselves in wording about Romantic or post Romantic literature. And the man in the poem serves as an image in the poem. Further, like the Romantic Image, he (it) is both concrete and mysteriously vague (man in black) both in a localized (Deer Island) and non localized (the later stanzas) setting. What Plath accomplishes in Man in Black is nothing less than the achievement wished for, willed, and executed, the kind of organic, post-Romantic poem which she delighted in and which she aspired to write. It is again, in her own words, a poem born all-of-a-piece, written by poets possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing. The last line in
“Man in Black” succeeds impressively in underlining the impression that the poem has been given the illusion of being born all-of-a-piece”. “Man in Black” concludes by becoming something like a completed miniature version of *Kubla Khan*. The poem is there on the page, all of it, together. In part, “Man in Black”, is one more attempt at writing the final Romantic poem in the English language. Later, the same wit and intelligence were joined to concerns closer to her own life and self and art. She would learn, what she had not yet fully learned in the moving but still allusive “Point Shirley” poem, just how far and for how long she could afford to depart from the real, unmistakable center of her work.

Near the end of her life, love became an inordinately complicated and difficult matter, but She never had written simple love poems or regarded love as a feeling or concept she could easily handle. *The Colossus* poems, the Ariel poems, and the poems now collected in *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*, all attest to the wish to turn poetry into loving measures. But, variously, love was for her a gift and a curse, a red presence and a white absence. She could never be very sure what love was and whether it was actual or even wanting. From the very outset, her poetry showed an attraction to the personas of spinsters, widows, and childless women, all figures cut off from love or its realization. In the early poems, these personas often are literary. Still, the attraction to them is evident and important. What happens in the late poems is that these figures are transformed from
potentially romantic trappings into loveless women more tellingly related to the poet herself.

Sylvia Plath never stopped recording in her poetry the wish and need to clear a space for love. Yet, she joined this to an inclination to see love as unreal, to accompanying fears of being unable to give and receive love, and to the eventual distortion and displacement of love in the verse. Loving completely or wholly she considered dangerous, form her earliest verse onwards. Love was so much a part of her world that it often stood in her poetry for that world itself. When the world seemed unreal, love did too. In her early poems, this sometimes approximated a secondhand, Romantic poetics. But the early poems also give evidence of some more profound sense of a loving unreality which the later poems turned into a more desperate, pathetic tableau of “valentine-faces” and candy or enamel-painted hearts.

Plath often wrote on and about with humor and irony. She could be a satirist alert to the sentiments of a Victorian or Edwardian age. She could be a shrewd psychologist of love’s ambiguities. She could be sane and clairvoyant, joining writers as major as Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky in probing the dark-inner recesses of the heart. But in what she wrote just before and at the time of Ariel poems, she began to establish a stance which was problematic and dangerous. A progression is evident in her handling of love and the love poem that calls into
question the loving intentions which some of the first lines of poems announce, but with the tone of the entire poem or the ending of it commonly held belief. Love recurs as a word throughout Ariel. Yet, in fact, love is most often absent in the poems which seek it most. In several poems, love is repeated either as an address or as an apostrophe. Marjorie Perloff has pointed out problems of dating and inaccuracies of editing in a number of the poems included in Crossing the Water and Winter Trees. But her argument does not affect the particular poem’s use to support her own argument about the journey which Plath’s poetry records. If love was never completely renounced by her, neither it was also not constant in her work. And the poems keep recording a journey and a movement as inevitable as death.

The poems written just before or at the time of Ariel poems have been collected and published in Crossing the Water and Winter Trees. They provide better means for charting and confirming larger movements and stages in her work. When Ted Hughes and other critics first wrote of an inevitable, conscious development in the poems of these two volumes and the titles of these posthumous volumes Crossing the Water and Winter Trees were legendary in development and reputation. But the poems themselves and the title of her first volume, The Colossus, helped to dispel such fears. In the same way, interpretations of her art after the fact of her suicide now strikes as less arbitrary and fallacious than they
once did. That, she eventually took her own life is important. It might be dangerous not to consider that fact seriously. Considerations of art as an inheritance fascinated Plath as she wondered whether it would preserve or kill. At times, she saw art as an inheritance of revenge. Some dark biography of the rival woman, the fatherless children, the inheritance after the mother is gone is being intently worked out in the poems. The poems published in *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* makes. It prominent, although the Ariel poems contained the same motifs. But let us leave biography and return to what the poems record. Sylvia Plath wrote two poems on words, one called the “*Last Words*” and the other, “*Words*”, are both of them significant. The major problem addressed in this chapter is to whom and to what do her poems finally belong. The final lines in “*Words*” as record the image of Narcissus staring into the pool and, mistake wordless stasis of fixed stars. “*Last Words*” is a very different kind of poem, closer in style to poems of intense desire like “*Tulip*”, “*A Birthday Present*”, or “*The Arrival of the Bee Box*”. The poet in “*Last Words*” wants by volitionally unloosing herself from domestic things in order to achieve a state of utter mystic peace. It will be dark, And the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of Ishtar. She invokes Ishtar, Babylonian and Assyrian goddess of love and fertility.

It some of her late poems, Plath was able to employ a coy perspective which still retained irony as a saving grace. This discretion, perhaps the upper limit of the
imagistic concretion she pursued in her work, gives way in too many of her other late poems to an art which has deserted lyric and love. Beginning as an art of gradations, the verse concludes by finding love unbelievable, impossible and finally absent:

Is this love then, this red material? Issuing from the steel needle that flies so blindingly? It will make little dresses and coats, it will cover a dynasty. How her body opens and shuts a Swiss watch, jeweled in the hinges! (245)

The diminutives cannot conceal the fact that the material of love, however punned on, is really an art of elegy, the metaphor of art as coffin wins out and dominates all. If the late poems belong to anyone, they belong not to her father or husband or children or even to poetry (the sense of the poem as unloving love-child she never forgot, but to Death, Death the lover, Death the double:

Writing of the one
I am not his yet.
[And of the second of the pair]
He wants to be loved.
She would rather be dead than fat,
Dead and perfect, like Nefertiti,
Hearing the fierce mask magnify
The silver limbo of each eye
Where the child can never swim.
Where there is only him, and him. (265)

Among other poets who have wooed death before or have considered
themselves to have been wooed by it Emily Dickinson. However, Emily Dickinson never abandoned herself unloving silence but to one more ironic twist in the poem "I died before my death". The speculations of A. Alvarez about Sylvia Plath’s death that it was an accident, that she hoped to be found in time but was not found is not the concern here. What concerns me is the biographical weight which poems included in *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* add to so many Ariel poems, along with the arguments, contradictions, and confusions which themselves never contradict but extend what the Ariel poems were about. The old faults prove to be the same; “love cannot come here,” is the credo.

The moving center of both books, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*, is that of a woman of sorrows. Recurrently Plath imagined herself as Mary and Christ, Ease, love, correspondence, and companionship all were yearned for and did not emerge. She was amazed at her children even more “fatherless,” than she considered them. If some important part of Sylvia Plath in her late poetry refused to accept a world of gogolos as the final version of the world, she never abandoned the doubt that she could recognize or accept love even where she was unable to manage it in her life and art. As a result, tone figures more and more prominently in the interpretation of the poems she left behind. Tone, its readiness and surety, dominate. The posthumous poems expose discrepancies and failures of the most
serious kind. The phoenix figure, prominent in various guises in her work, deserted her outside her poems. “Edge,” folded her back and took out of this life, became painfully distinct from her in death. The two children fathered by Td Hughes. And the Media figure, once little more than a literary trapping in her late poem “Edge,” calls upon a pathetic wish denied to her outside of mythology when she died, so did her long sought-after and invoked gods.

The confusions and delusions of art and life, of fulfillment and reality, became exposed at her death. And they record a sad fact. But, beyond that and more important that the, they reach back to some sense of lovelessness or lack implicit in a major part of her poetry. *The Ariel* poems looked at together with the poems from Crossing the Water and Winter Trees, now strike as less in love’s behalf than she would have liked them to be. Poems like “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” in the end may not be the triumphs which their momentum and inventiveness at times celebrate.

They belong more to elegy and to death, to the woman whose “loving associations” abandoned her as she sought to create images for them. To ask us to see her as “a nude chicken neck,” exposed and begging for love, is one thing. But since she was increasingly unable to write out of tenderness for existence may be the point at which she called into question the loving movement and meanings her poems would announce.
If she tried to use her poetry as a strategy for existence, the tone of the poems keeps belying that fact. Even without her suicide, so many of the late poems show the abandonment of human feeling and saving irony for a ghost like art in the end, her choice of metaphor for the world and art. In the end, her choice of metaphor for the world and for herself forced her to renounce love for a situation in which she was “roped in at the end by the one/Death with its many sticks.” Death proved necessity rather than freedom and love not the season she would have liked to claim as her emblematic own.
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