CHAPTER – VI

No Fantasy without Protest: The Feminist Self in the Late Poems

Don’t talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff! What a person out of Belsen – physical or psychological – wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just what it is like. It is much more help for me, for example, to know that people are divorced and go through hell, than to hear about happy marriage. Let the *Ladies’ Home Journal* blither about those.

– Sylvia Plath

Revising her life was for Sylvia Plath a recurrent personal and poetic necessity. In her letters and journals as much as in her fiction and poetry, Plath’s methods of self-representation suggest that she regarded her life as if it were a text which she could at will invent and rewrite. In one of her earliest journal entries at seventeen, she already exhibits a sense of identity as a projected persona, “I think I would like to call myself ‘The girl who wanted to be God’ ” (*LH* 40). Repeatedly, at moments of crisis, she
imagines she can erase the inscription of personal history and be born again, unmarked as an infant, inviolate as a virgin. In one of the last poems she wrote, Plath regards her life as if it were a completed oeuvre, an already closed book that she has produced in her writing, “The woman is perfected” (CP 272).

In agreement with her practice, a rupture that occurred during the fall of 1962, a vital turning point in her personal life, demanded a refuguration of her identity in and through poetry. The attempt to this effect, resulted in *Ariel*, the posthumous volume of Plath’s poetry published in 1965. Unlike her first volume *The Colossus*, which is the collection of several years’ writing, the majority of the poems in *Ariel* were written during the four months preceding the poet’s death in February 1963. Her creative spurt, analogous to the last glorious year of Keats’ life was compressed into an even shorter span and inspired by the certain knowledge of death. In October, wrote Hughes, “when she and her husband began to live apart, every detail of the antagonist seemed to come into focus, and she started to writing at top speed, producing twenty-six quite lengthy poems in that month” (162).
The rupture with Ted Hughes was in fact the greatest shock in Plath’s life, though she wrote to her mother in August, announcing her separation from Hughes in the language of a soap opera, “I simply cannot go on living the degraded and agonized life I have been living, which has stopped my wiring and just about ruined my sleep and my health” (LH 542). Finally when Hughes left Devon in early October for good, Plath, who had absorbed his interest in supernatural powers and black magic, expressed her hatred in a ritualistic exorcism of his heat and presence. Like many abandoned wives, she pretended she was much happier without her husband. She wrote to her mother: “Living apart from Ted is wonderful. I am no longer in his shadow, and it is heaven to be liked for myself alone” (LH 567). However, her pride was shattered and later on she confessed to her mother: “The horror of what you saw and what I saw you see last summer is between us and I cannot face you again until I have a new life” (LH 549).

After Hughes’ departure, Plath, in a turmoil of emotions, was at a turning point. Alone in charge of her fate, she was suddenly able to focus the full force of her expert craft, her huge energies, on the unresolved inner predicament that had brought her to this pass. She could now examine every facet of it and definitively conquer her predicament by writing it out. She could then go forth, unencumbered, to a new world full of possibilities. In
the long hours she spent alone, the poems came in a spate – ripely, almost effortlessly, with a hugely amplified freedom and felicity. As she wrote to her mother in October, “Every morning when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me” (LH 545). When discussing the atmosphere and thematic concerns of the Ariel poems, Hughes observed that, “in her late poems there is a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her ‘hood of bone’, floating over a landscape like that of the Primitive Painters, a burningly luminous vision of Paradise. A Paradise which is at the same time eerily frightening, an unalterably spot-lit vision of death” (1).

Plath had spent most of her life studying and preparing for examinations, suppressing her individuality, acting conventionally to fulfil the expectations of others and writing formulaic, stories and poems. She bitterly resented her father’s death her mother’s sacrifice, her husband’s success. His betrayal hurt her into poetry and suffering finally enabled her to reach and reveal her deepest feelings. Her extremist poetry of the Ariel finally turned out to be more extreme than any of her predecessors’. It forced the confessional mode to the edge of exhibitionism and hysteria. Renouncing her former mode of writing and her mother’s Weltanschauung,
she justified the nature and content of her final poems in unequivocal terms as recorded at the commencement of the chapter.

The primary concern of Plath in drafting these poems was to reconstitute her self; exhibiting a poetic transparence in which a woman writer is assumed to be writing directly and authentically from her lived experience. As Pamela J. Annas comments, “Marked by a conflict between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement, Sylvia Plath’s late poems are largely about what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the ‘the self’ (95). In “Totem” she writes:

There is no terminus, only suitcases
Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit
Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes.
Nations and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors.

(CP 264)

In Sylvia Plath’s early poems, the world is often imaged for the most part in natural terms; it is static, cyclic, nonhuman, and at times immoral. The relation of the self to such a world is in terms of its own possibilities for change and transformation. In the Ariel poems however, Plath increasingly
images the world as a social and contemporary landscape; as an office, a battle field or concentration camp, a kitchen, and a hospital. Though natural images continue to appear in these late poems, they exist within the context of a social and socialized world. In these later poems she creates her own system of mythology based on modern historical images and events, a mythology whose central figure is a protean female protagonist.

As noted previously, coinciding with a period of four months preceding her death, a period of extraordinary brilliant output, there comes a significant change in the manner of her poems. Such a dramatic change is an indication of the utter clarity of her final vision of the forces – both masculine and feminine – which contributed the elements of oppression in her life. Such an identification further offers her also a clear solution as how to liberate her self from the oppressor and achieve transcendence from the pervasive evil forces which exercised a perfect sway over her existence. Hence, the prime burden of the discourse concerned is to identify and analyse those poems from the Ariel collection, which express rather openly and defiantly the brunt of apprehensions experienced by Plath as a writer and a woman; her apprehensions about marriage, her attitude to the chief oppressive forces, both male and female and finally, the decisive and ultimate step she took to liberate her self.
As the *Ariel* poems belong to the most critical and chaotic phase of her life, Plath displays tremendous skill in converting her extremely personal and domestic experiences into the motifs of broader human concern. Jon Rosenblatt writes in this connection, “Plath’s late poems dramatize the transformation of her personal situation into a metaphor for universal struggle” (107). The poems in *Ariel*, no doubt, originate from one or other real event or experience, but ultimately, they involve the basic issues of human existence which provide universality to Plath’s work. She finally finds her own voice which could give expression not only to her vengeful attitude towards her victimizers but also to her tragic vision of the self and its conflict between stasis and movement.

The quest for self-definition necessitates Plath to focus her attention on every possible manifestation of the self which may impede the way to transcending the false and mundane existence. Hence, on the whole, through her last poems Plath successfully objectifies her relationship to all aspects of reality which victimize and oppress her. Finally she addresses death in direct terms and wishes to achieve deliverance from the unreal and illusory world of her existence. The predominant passion that governs the entire
atmosphere of these late poems is that of aggression and in Plath’s universe life always stands opposed to darkness and loss.

Plath’s *Ariel* poems display an intensity, which only a high-pressure subjective involvement, like that of an entrapped animal trying to break free, can bring about. The victimization and betrayal in married life portrayed in these poems, reached their climatic point, when Ted Hughes finally left her on October 9, 1962. In the final months, husbandless, with two young children to look after, she comes to the full realization of the extent to which she allowed herself to be victimized. She found herself to be recapitulating her mother’s own predicament. Her torment was objectified through the images of the self effacing woman, the jew, and the female prisoner. Some of her best poetry came out immediately prior, to and in the week following Ted Hughes’ departure.

Simultaneous with her taking over from her mother as the image of the victim, the masculine as the source of oppression, shifts from the external social world into her own family life, crystallizing itself in the image of her own husband in the miniature society within the family which provides the ideal location for the exercise of the masculine craving for domination and destruction. The fury that was kept in check since their separation in the
previous summer bursts loose in a flood, in the fiery poems of *Ariel*. In a number of poems of rage written in the summer and fall of 1962, and particularly during the last four months of her life, Plath constructs a highly theatricalized performance of the feminine victim. She recasts marriage as a criminal act, an intimate violation that robbed her of her poetic voice. In each of these poems a betrayed woman – sick, sexually abused, even dead, survives to meet out vengeance to the chief tormentor – her husband.

The first poem which overtly voices Plath’s approach to family is “The Rabbit Catcher,” where marriage becomes a trap with “grose” and “spikes”. Significantly enough, the impersonal forces of the early phase like the wind and the sea play the role of villains in this marital drama. There is a clear hint at the end of the poem of the constricting bondage of personal relationship.

And we, too, had a relationship–

Tight wires between us,

Pegs to deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring

Sliding shut on some quick thing,

The constriction killing me also.

(CP 194)
One of the more bitter poems in *Ariel* is “The Applicant”, a portrait of marriage in contemporary western culture” (Annas 104). The low-pitch protest against the institution of marriage in “The Rabbit Catcher” becomes more apparent in “The Applicant” where the need for marriage is presented as some affliction, a physical absence, like an amputated limb. From this viewpoint, marriage is packaged as a marketable product. It is disposable, but can be recycled instead, if required. The marriage partner is described variously as a coffin, an investment, and a mindlessly servile robot. The eligible bachelor, on the other hand, becomes a sort of psychometric cripple, desperately seeking spare-part surgery to cure his singular sickness – his empty hand, which can only be filled with another, on one condition that he marries ‘it’:

…Here is a hand
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it
Will you marry it?

*(CP 221)*

Here the emphasis is on the impersonal nature of the contract. David John Wood puts it, “The sales pitch reaches its crescendo when the speaker
promises that the merchandise can fill any sense of inadequacy by providing an idealized “image” to satisfy the need of his “eye [I]” for the illusion of self-completion” (120). The applicant for marriage is offered “…. Another quasi-sentient being, not another conscious self” and “is promised a glittery refector of his comforts” (Bundtzan 227). She would also be whatever the husband wants her to be in future:

But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver.

In fifty, gold

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk.

(CP 221).

“The Jailer” is a poem which goes further than “The Applicant” in its negative representation of marriage. Marriage is pictured as a form of imprisonment, identification confirmed in several other works. In this extraordinary dramatization of female victimization and suffering, Plath equates the woman’s entrapment to the victimization of all men by a hostile universe. The poem presents increasingly intense images of physical torture inflicted upon the female speaker by her “Jailer”. This fantasized relation
between the prisoner and the jailer clearly reflects the sado-masochism of a husband-wife relation.

The poem describes the woman’s sleeping with her jailer, his sexual abuse of her, her addition to pills, his dependence once upon her for security and finally his envy of any diversion of her attention from him. The central theme of the poem is, in fact, the male jailer’s need for his victim, whom he rapes, starves, burns, and humiliates. This sado-masochism recalls “Daddy”, where the father-husband figure is a Nazi torturer. But in “The Jailer” the woman cannot liberate herself from her sexual-physical imprisonment, as the daughter in “Daddy” can. Plath ends the poem with a series of cosmic analogies to the sado-masochistic relations, thus implying that the universe is constituted as a mechanism of torture:

What would the dark
Do without fevers to eat?

What would the light
Do without eyes to knive, what would he
Do, do, do without me?

(CP 227).
This tortured wife of “The Jailer” shows her true colour in “Purdah” as she liberates herself by revolting against her husband. Just as the future bride in “The Applicant” is a convenient domestic helper, the wife in “Purdah” is nothing more than a “doll”, a plaything. She is not flesh and blood at all, but a gleaming statue of jade, only unleashed to satisfy the craving of her husband, the supreme “Lord of the mirrors!” She has got no self of her own, she is an extension of her husband as is also affirmed in the beginning of the poem itself where the story of the Genesis is referred to as to how Eve was created out of Adam’s rib. In the harem, she is a dehumanized jade figurine, and one of the several precious stones in her lord’s coffer.

The husband is an “I” and the harem wife an object, an “it” – a two-dimensional reflector and spectator to the man’s performance in the bedroom. She hides her “I” like a multifaceted gem. Here what Dinnerstein speaks of the “I”’s stance toward the non-I is very pertinent:

Man’s monopoly of history-making follows from the double sexual standard. As the unpossessed possessor of woman he is free than she is, to come and go – geographically or psychologically – from the place where they are intimate. It is
he, not she, who can leave what belongs to him – to go to war
or a laboratory, to spend all night writing or painting – without
violating the terms of ownership. (208)

Plath asserts to evils of this relationship poetically and struggles against it.
The speaker becomes the angry mother Clytemnestra behind the veil, seeking
revenge on Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia, to the
favour of the gods in the war against Troy. She is the mother versus the
mega machine of history making. At the end of the poem, she screams and
shatters the lord’s mirrors into a million silvers – “a million ignorants”
because they reflect only male blindness to the woman behind the veil:

I shall unloose –
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart –
The lioness
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes

(CP 244)
According to Linda Bundtzan, “In these few lines, Plath captures Clytemnestra’s fury, the mother’s rage at this violation of nature, and asserts in mythic form woman’s right to take back the self she had been denied” (224). The shift from humility and modesty of veil to the final “shriek” is quite slow and subtle:

Gradually, the speaker has gathered up enough energy to turn her limitations into strengths. Where once she might have been the submissive doll, she is now the lioness. Where previously there was docile silence, now there is a shriek. Where there was the customary covering of the face (Purdah), there is nothing but a “cloak of holes”. (Broe 136)

The freedom that the speaker earns in “Purdah” is fully celebrated in “The Couriers”, where she rejects the false promise of marriage: A ring of goldsmith the sun in it?/Lies, Lies and a grief? (CP 247). The poem has the double object of dissociating the poet from the symbols of married life and of projecting a vision of love outside marriage. Though apparently an obscure poem because of its personal symbolism and elliptic expressions, it crystalises Plath’s attitude towards marriage in this aggressive phase. There are two types of symbols in the poem; one representing the placid and dull
married life, and the other fatal attraction of and exposure to, elements. “Snail” symbolizes the sluggishness of married life, “acetic acid in a sealed tin”, its sourness and enclosure, and golden ring its outward glitter. Contrastingly, frosted leaves represent dangerous but desired exposure to elemental forces; and boiling cauldron on Alps suggests magnetic aloofness and exclusiveness of a single life.

The monotonous harmony of married life is replaced at the end by the seething sea. The speaker wants to be loved in the season of wild and she does not wish for the safe spring in marriage. Thus, the speaker responds to the violent emotional life of the crackling cauldron in order to celebrate her independence:

Frost on a leaf, the immaculate

Cauldron, talking and crackling

All to itself on the top of each

Of nine black Alps.

(CP 247)

The poem deals, thus with the polarity of static domesticity and the charged dynamic world of the self that concerns several Ariel poems like “Burning the Letter,” “The Detective” and “The Courage of Shutting Up.”
“Plath’s images of exploitation in these poems are heavily freighted with associations of other experiences of powerlessness, entrapment, and the extinction of articulate selfhood” (Van Dyne 44).

Of the Ariel poems that concentrate on the family, those dealing with her father, provide a clear and powerful example of Plath’s attitude towards those forces of patriarchy he represented for her. After an aggressive attack on husband and the institution of marriage, Plath turns to her greatest tormentor – her father. Father has always been an obsession with her, denoting Electral awe and admiration. Her treatment of this theme is most consistent in her poems. In the earlier poetry, the father appears in an idealized form; by the time of the poems of the last phase of Plath’s creative life, he embodies all the traits of oppressiveness and authoritarianism that Plath dramatizes in the Nazi doctor in “Lady Lazarus”. Jon Rosenblatt remarks:

The development of the patriarchal figure in the poems varies a pattern that characterized the landscapes and seascapes; the later poetry personalizes the concerns of the early work by specifying in detail the poet’s death-and-life drama. The poems about the father demonstrate Plath’s ability to convert
private psychic material – fantasies, memories, family history – into coherent dramatic forms. (119)

Two significant poems “Little Fugue” and “Daddy” which belong to the final phase of Plath’s poetic career, express openly and defiantly her attitude towards the father. In “Little Fugue”, the father is portrayed as black, authoritarian and Germanic. The father is described through the image of a black yew tree. The blackness of the yew image indicates a hidden viciousness in the father, a sadism that becomes obvious in “Daddy”. The daughter is obsessed with images of dismemberment and cutting when she thinks of her father and recounts his awesome memory thus:

I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,
A yew hedge of orders,
Gothic and barbarous, pure German,
Dead men cry from it.

(CP 188).

Plath completely reverses the idealization of the father, thereby profoundly changing the character of her late work in connection with the
father. The vicious, unmerciful father is now equivalent in the family world of the brutal Nazi in the historical world. Blackness is the key imagistic element indicating the presence of the father. He is the Nazi doctor, the composite enemy-god-devil who persecutes women. He is the priest in cassock and black boots in “Berk Plage”, symbolizing death and cruelty, “This black boot”, says the speaker, “has no mercy for anybody” (CP 196). In “The Bee Meeting”, he is the rector, a nefarious man in black, who leads the villagers in frightening bee-rites: “Which is the rector now, it is that man in black?” (CP 211). In “Years”, he is God, with his unresponsive “black void” and in “Daddy”, he is the father-husband who brutalizes the daughter.

“Daddy” is of course, Plath’s most extended treatment of the father symbol. The image of the father as black, Germanic autocrat is the beginning point of this last poem on father, “an emotional, psychological, and historical autopsy, a final report” (Broe 175). It opens with a reference to the father’s black shoe, in which the daughter has “lived like a foot”, suggesting her submissiveness and entrapment. The poem then moves to a derisive commentary on the idealized image of the father and summarizes his background: his life in a German-speaking part of Poland, that was “Scraped flat by roller/Of war” (CP 223). The daughter admits here, for the first time
in poetry that she was afraid of him. In a reading prepared for the BBC, Plath spoke of the poem:

Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part of Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other, she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is force of it. (CP 293)

The plot of the poem is almost completely invented. Plath’s real father was not a Nazi nor her mother a jew, they are metaphors depicting largely a psychic state. The historical references, however, allow her to dramatize her rebellion against the oppressive father and also to equate and elevate her fearful suffering to the universal level. “Her personal dilemma – a potentially Jewish daughter born to a Nazi father – immediately confronts the conscience of a post World-War-II audience, and so expands her private tragedy into a social travesty” (Wood 123).
“Daddy” is obviously an attempt to do away altogether with the idealized father, in part, of course, it also is a reaction to the betrayal by the poet’s husband. When the father dies, she tries to “get back” to him, through successive suicide attempts, but she fails. Then she marries a model of him with “a love of rack and screw”. But ultimately she has to dispense with him, once for all, so she kills not only the dead father but also his living counterpart, her husband:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

(\textit{CP} 224).

The tormentor–lover is finally killed by putting a stake through his cruel heart and the daughter heaves a long sigh of relief, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (\textit{CP} 224).

Thus the daughter emerges from being an archetypal victim to an assertive victor, from a historically presented jew to a traditional vampire-
killer, in short “from booted to booter” (Uroff 160). However, at times when Plath pictures herself in the poem as a victim of Nazi gas chamber – “A jew to Dachau, Auschwits, Belsen” – she seemed to enjoy the torture with masochistic delight. In such a sense, the poem seems to describe a peculiar relationship in which there are both the elements of sexual desire and the urge to destroy. The relationship between power and sexuality has been basic feminist thinking. Freud and Lacan based their theories on the asymmetric relationship of male and the female sexuality. Jeremy Hawthorn comments:

> Where concepts of “Masculinity” are corrupted with ideas of power and violence, and where male sexuality is related to patriarchal power, then some conflation of “the paternal” and “violent” will be found in the popular images of male sexual attractiveness. (128)

Plath’s critique of power inherent in male sexuality finds expression in the poem thus:

> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.

(CP 223)
Plath’s late poems progressively undermine the illusion of ideal paternity; a greater consciousness of the sexuality of the daughter’s relation to the father and of the father’s authoritarian ways surface. The poet now identifies herself as the victim of men in general, of the father figure in particular, and sees the whole world in terms of a brutal battle for dominance between life and death. Plath no longer feels protected by the father from the external world, he is as murderous as God or predatory animals. Blackness is what she attributes to him finally. Rosenblatt comments:

Blackness, the fundamental colour of death in the late poems, is the colour shared by the Black Man and all his related symbols – the yew tree, the black telephone, the black boots, the vampire, and the black sky into which all things human and nonhuman vanish. (196)

When Plath uses the Nazi metaphor to identify her personal tragedy with the external horror, it assumes a universal dimension and in doing so “Daddy” becomes the “Guernica” of modern poetry, for here Plath writes “one of the very few poems... in any language to come near the last horror” (Steiner 218).
In all feminist critical endeavours, the starting point is the asymmetric relationship between the male and the female on which the phallo-centric society survives. It provides the framework for the feminist investigations, of the gender-role stereotyping, of the 70s, by theorists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Elizabeth Janeway, as well as for the philosophical and psycho-analytical research associated with French Feminists Helan Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray who examine woman’s position as the other in the binary oppositions produced by the phallocratic culture. It is the division which is at the core of feminist concept like “gender” and “sexual politics”, and the concepts of “Oppressed woman”, all of which suggest the presence of the victim and the victimizer in confrontation.

In this context, when Sylvia Plath poises the problem, she seemed to assume a slightly deviated path from the normal direction of feminist pursuits, in as much as, the problem is projected on to a broader canvas. That is to say, she detects within the binary opposition, two sets of opposing forces, one within the male and the other within the female. Hence, at the final phase of her poetic career, when Plath attempts to liberate her self from the oppressive and dehumanizing forces, she lodges a scathing attack also on those women who threaten her individuality.
Here what Elaine Showalter, in her attempt to define the tradition of women’s literature has stated, sounds pertinent. In her discourse on female literary tradition Showalter considers that when a woman dramatizes in her work, any form of injustice against her, she writes in accordance with the feminist tradition. She pictures the predicament that Plath experiences as a writer thus, “The distress of Sylvia Plath’s mother over the “ingratitude” of The Bell Jar suggests how difficult it has been for woman to transcend social and familial pressures to write only what is pleasant, complimentary and agreeable” (303). Hence, in the course of her exorcism of all forms of oppression, as performed in the late poems, it is almost imperative to explore the poet’s relationship to her mother and women in general.

After doing away with fears, torments, and restraints imposed by married life and after an aggressive attack on husband and father, the poet turns to her mother and a host of other women who are her hell. The poems like “The Rival”, “Medusa”, The Other “and “Lesbos” are all dramatic monologues attacking women who threaten the speaker’s identify. The Rival and the Medusa represent the negative versions of Plath’s own mother. In the earlier poems like “All the Dead Dears,” “The Disquieting Muses,” and
“Poem for a Birthday,” there lurks the fear of the mother. Now the poet comes out aggressively against the mother-figure.

In the “The Rival,” the rival appears as the omnipresent, hostile moon, an image, that is always associated with the mother in Plath’s work. Like the Medusa, she has the ability to turn the world to stone. The mother haunts the poet by constantly observing her. Distance does not prevent the mother from thinking about her. The poet detests the regular and affectionate letters of the mother and treats them as blank white papers, though they are full of admonitions:

Your dissatisfactions, on the other hand,
Arrive through the mail slot with loving regularity,
White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.

(CP 166)

“Medusa” centres on the powerful symbol of the medusa, a jelly fish, a hydra or a sea-monster with a big mouth. Medusa is also a mythological Gorgon with snakes round its head like poisonous darts, and a petrifying gaze. The central metaphor is used to express the speaker’s feeling of oppressive maternal influence which she wants to escape. The reference in
the poem to the umbilical attachment between the poet and Medusa identifies this figure undoubtedly as the mother. The religious imagery – “Blubbery Mary”, “Ghastly Vatican” and the like – suggests, on the spiritual side, that just as the daughter feels it necessary to revere her father in “The Colossus”, so devotion too, is demanded by her mother. As this situation denies the daughter any claim to emotional maturity or self-determination, she now lashes out frantically for freedom.

The navel allusions indicate that the speaker is threatened with being throttled by the psychological birth cord tangled around her throat: “My mind winds to you / Old barnacled umbilicus” (CP 225). The mother figure’s desire to reabsorb her offspring emotionally is revealed in horrifying physical image: “You steamed over the sea, / Fat and red, a placenta” (CP 225). The effect is to make sterile both the daughter’s physical creativity and by inference, Plath’s artistic creativity. The speaker however, more resolved than ever, rejects her blood-sucking grip with firm determination, as the final lines screech to their frantic climax: “Off, off eely tentacle!/There is nothing between us” (CP 225).

The passionate rage against mother turns against women in general in poems like “The Other” and “Lesbos”. The women in these poems refer to
figures from Plath’s life in England. “The Other” alludes to the mistress of Plath’s husband, Assia Wevill and the poem was written in July 1962, when her marital troubles were clearly surfacing to force. In her *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson relates the incident connected with the writing of the poem:

While Ted was in London, she invaded his attic study, hauled down what papers she could find – mostly letters – and made a bonfire in the vegetable garden. …. As the fire consumed the letters, Sylvia fanned out the ashes…. A name with black edges unfurled at her feet: Assia. Sylvia now had confirmation of the name of her rival, and when Ted returned she confronted him. (250-51)

It has been suggested that on this occasion Plath also burned an entire novel, written early that year, entitled *Falcon Yard*, based on her love for Ted, which she had intended for him as a birthday present. Two other poems “Words Heard, by Accident, Over the Phone” and “Burning the Letters”, written at this time, can be treated as companion poems to “The Other” as they too are full of private images of her nuptial life.
“Lesbos” deals with an incident that occurred at a friend’s house while Plath was living in Devon. The speaker visits her neighbour who is a liberated woman, a femme fatale, a sex-goddess in the mould of Marilyn Monroe. She encourages the speaker to wear fashionable tiger pants and indulge in extra-marital affairs as an antidote to domestic surgery. She does not talk kindly to the speaker’s baby and her kittens. The speaker, in return, resents her domineering and overbearing outlook, and seethes with violent hatred against her arrogance and Lesbian overtures. So, there is a virtual breakdown of communication:

Your voice my ear – ring,

Flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat.

That is that, that is that.

You peer from the door,

Sad hag. ‘Every woman’s a whore.

I can’t communicate.’

(CP 229)

According to Rosenblatt, the poem is an artistic failure in as much as “The intensity of vilification and hate in the poem hardly seems warranted by the incident” (127). Edward Butscher calls “Lesbos” merely “a pretty
revenge gossip, and whinning decked out as art” (323). As far as Linda Bundtzan is concerned, “It is only a satiric exposure of the connubial bliss celebrated in the media” (28). But for Pashupati Jha, it is something more, “It is an expose of the apartment-culture which fails to hide the hypocrisy, the cruelty, and selfishness behind the so called ‘liberation’ ” (85). The poem ends on a note of complete hostility and Plath has expressed her open rage in a quite colloquial but highly wrought style, “Even in your Zen heaven we shan’t meet (CP 229).

The predominant passion that Sylvia Plath as a writer demonstrates through her late poems is that of rage. However, Plath’s rage in her late poems is Vesuvian, to adapt Dickinson’s metaphor of woman poet’s dissembling restraint and her potentially destructive expressive power. Susan R. Van Dayne puts it, “Plath constructs a highly theatricalized performance of the feminine victim in order to justify the retaliatory script of her consuming homicidal rage” (5). What entrapped and enraged Plath was her belated recognition that in attempting to validate her marriage and her husband’s vocation, she had assigned to herself a subordinate role as woman and poet. Hence, Plath’s self blame for not playing an equal role in marriage and her resentment at her role as apprentice poet in their partnership are common place in the journals, “Get over instinct to be dowdy lip-biting little
girl. Get bathrobe and slippers and nightgown and work on femininity…. Must try poems. DO NOT SHOW ANY TO TED. I sometimes feel a paralysis come over me: his opinions is so important to me” (J 295).

American feminist critics, have elaborated several theories that attempt to explain a woman writer’s rage at her position in social and literary history. To see a woman writer as Vesuvian is to mean that a woman writer suffers an alienation within herself that is culturally produced and that is textually reproduced in different but discernible forms. In *A Room of One’s Own* and “Profession for Women” Virginia Woolf articulates the logic that links a woman who would write inevitably to anger. In “Profession for Women” Woolf claims murder as the ritual that initiates her into the profession, a necessary self-defense of her right to write: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of the woman writer”, Woolf asserts; “had I not killed her, she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (286). Hence according to Woolf there exists a true and false self in a female writer and only the authentic self can enact the rebellion.

Many feminists, and virtually all Plath scholars, have posited such combat between true and false self, socialized self as a central tension in
women’s writing. Patricia Spacks, Elaine Showalter, and Adrienne Rich believe that to the extent a woman writer mutilates her rage, she betrays her art and mutilates herself. In her feminist critique “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision,” Adrienne Rich claims that female rage is constitutively feminist, personally therapeutic, and creatively liberating, releasing the woman writer from defensive narrative strategies and granting access to an authentic and unalienated voice. She remarks:

Both the victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society. They must go on being tapped and explored by poets…. They are our birth-pains, and we are bearing ourselves. (98)

Reading Plath, Rich revises Woolf’s performances and praises precisely the qualities Woolf lamented in Charlotte Bronte: “It is finally the woman’s sense of herself – embattled, possessed – that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will and female energy” (91). According to her, anger, once spoken, can make way for a psychic and poetic reintegration, a moment when “the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem become the same person” (197-98).
For Spacks, Showalter, and Rich, and perhaps even more definitively for Jane Marcus and Paula Bennett in the 1980s, anger does not preclude art but becomes its necessary precondition. They read female anger as demonstrating desirable feminist politics, but more significantly as sign of female psychic health. Marcus cites Freud to justify women’s equal right to anger: “It is a result of the ego’s first struggle to maintain itself, to find an identity separate from the mother” (124). Bennett praises the poetry written during the 1970s for the “Catholicity of its rage” and claims “emotional liberation, the release of rage … is psychologically anterior to the integration of the self and makes possible the artist’s song” (242, 258). Since these critics maintain that anger is a primary source of creative power, they rank women whose texts appear to lack it, like Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore, as inferior poets. A poet’s failure of nerve in confronting her rage, according to them, necessarily constrains her imagination.

The feminist readings of this group hold a consistent faith that a wrathful persona in the poem stands for the authentic self in the poet, as in Bennett’s equation, “Medusa, the angry or unangelic underside of the self… became the passionate symbol for the women poet’s liberated self” (245). They disagree with Woolf’s belief that the existence and nature of the self
who seeks to cast off her feminine roles is problematic or undefinable. According to them the true and false selves discovered in a text are unambiguously separable. The false self can be shed, transcended or killed off for the sake of an always more powerful subjectivity that is described as purified, integrated, liberated or autonomous. Marcus puts it as:

Anger is not anathema in art; it is a primary source of creative energy ….out with it. No more burying our wrath, turning it against ourselves….When the fires of our rage have burnt out, think how clear the air will be for our daughters. They will write in joy and freedom only after we have written in anger.

(153-154)

Plath’s poems of rage enact both the feminine predicament and the potentially feminist solution. Her performance of an enraged woman, capable of murder, depends on separating herself from emotional and sexual bondage to an intimate enemy. Since the fiction of her marriage depended on an ecstatic fusion of the self and the other, Plath’s need for revenge always carried with it the risk of self-destruction. As has been already discussed, the pain of poetic silencing and erotic dependency is figured in a series of late poems in which the speaker poses as a pornographic victim,
starved, raped, and murdered by her partner. The end of this series is “Daddy” in which the chasm which divides the wife and husband is clearly constructed. Finally, in the punishingly sexual aggression of “Lady Lazarus”, Plath attempts to annihilate both the persona of the female victim and her oppressors.

Plath’s annihilating rage reaches its culmination in “Lady Lazarus”, another signature poem of the bitch goddess. Here the rage is no more contained within. It is turned against man in general, a multiple forms of male authority like, professor, executiner, priest, torturer, God and Lucifer. What lady Lazarus suffers is not just the male brutality, but the gender asymmetry of her relationship to power in which her role is always defined as dependent and defective: to male professor she is student; to executioner, criminal; to priest, sinner; to doctor, patient.

In the poem, Plath borrows the miracle of Lazarus, the horror of the holocaust and the legend of the phoenix rising from the flame, to construct herself a blazing triumph over her feeling of tawdriness and victimization. Plath’s fascination with the myth of Lazarus was life long. In her “Cambridge Notes” she wrote thus:
I feel like Lazarus: That story has such a fascination. Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the more sensation value of being suicidal, or getting so close, of coming out of the grave, with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek.…

(*JP 204*)

The legend of Lazarus and that of the Phoenix are mixed up and stirred together in the cauldron of suffering and retribution. The speaker, a freak lady, very confident and lethal, begins with an assertive tone, “I have done it again”, relishing her several attempts at suicide. Practice has made the speaker efficient, she flaunts her expertise:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I’ve a call.

(*CP 245*)
She relates her third suicidal attempt to the genocidal killing of the Jews by Nazis; this additional historical suffering proves too much even for her. She “turns and burns” in the gas chamber, only to resurrect, phoenix-like, with more vigour, and then menacingly treatens all her tomentors:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

(CP 246-47)

Thus the poem which begins as a theatrical performance of suicidal act, ends as a straight drama of revenge. Unlike the Biblical Lazarus, the Lady Lazarus of the poem is not revived by a divine grace, she rises herself by her sheer power and desire to wreak revenge, thus she denies the possibility of any controlling power outside her. She peels off the napkin of her fear and bitterly taunts her tormentors. She teases the “peanut-crunching crowd” that has sadistically enjoyed her torment with sensuous relish that she is “The same identical woman” who does not now care even if she has to die “nine
times”. Her aggressive revival is a “miracle” to them because they are used to seeing her fearful, tormented, and alone. But now she is the incarnation of pure energy, of extraordinary will power, and can eat them as easily as breathing air.

Paradoxically enough, “Lady Lazarus” is also a “futuristic indictment” of those critics who fail to see beyond the sensational and confessional aspects of Plath’s poems (Broe 178). These critics are the crowd of the poem, reveling in her suffering with “brute amused shout”, without taking note of the human pain hidden within. Commenting on the imagery of the poem Mary Lynn Broe says:

The imagery is an audacious mixture of incongruities: The Lazarus story from the Bible and the Nazi extermination. Recklessly, Plath mingles the miraculous with the cadaverous, spiritual promise with witness of horror, a striptease act with death, the myth of the phoenix with the parable of Lazarus, the simple superstition of a cat’s nine lives with the holocaust in the Nazi ovens. (176)
There is self-parody, sarcasm, and theatrical chattering – all presented in a gust of colloquial speech. Starting with a self-mocking tone and a slow release of transforming energy, Lady Lazarus assumes the suffering of the whole humanity in the garb of the imaginary Jew, symbolically destroys the society by destroying herself. “From the ash of her oppression and suffering, an aggressive Phoenix rises as menacing as the predatory hawk of Ted Hughes” (Jha 92). Finally she utters her personalized warning: “I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air” (CP 247). The warning of “Lady Lazarus” is one that applies to Plath’s complete posthumous reputation, and one that vindicates the critical position of considering Plath as a writer who wrote in conformity with a feminist line of thinking.

Plath’s preoccupation with death is the predominant factor which persists to the end of her poetic career. The finest poems of Plath’s last period, refine and concentrate the vision of death. However, in these poems which deal with death theme, the idea of rebirth is a major aspect. It is only through rebirth that she can achieve her final transformation. Hence, death linked here with her quest for self-identification and rebirth to true self. As has been already stated in the second chapter, death is her ultimate triumph, an answer to all her existential problems. Moreover, as far as the feminist school of thought is concerned, Plath’s suicide is an inevitability in
accordance with its critical canons. For in a female writer, the expression of extreme rage and the need for revenge always carries with it the risk of self-destruction. In the final enactment of rage, there can occur, both homicide and suicide, the annihilation of both the victim and the victimizer.

It is this vision of death and rebirth as means of the transformation of self, which redeems Plath’s poetry from extinction, which is the common fate of poetry which excites only immediate interest, by their unusual images and shocking rage. For Plath the woman, as well as the poet, perfection has no limit. If there is one, its image for her is nothing less than godhead. Hence, Plath’s sense of acceptance of death in the very last poems attains a tragic dignity. To strike a fitting finale to the discourse, one has to analyse through the last poems of Plath to explore fully her slow but steady grappling with her vision of rebirth and self-transformation consequent upon death.

Written in the last few weeks of her life, “Totem” is an intense statement of the primordial relationship between blood and death. The vision in the poem is a continuous devouring of the universe by death, and it does spare none. The relationship between the killer and the killed is “blood hot and personal”. The pig and hare are slaughtered for their flesh and fur, and the human eater is himself eaten by death. “In a series of associations,
the speaker traces the eating process: The field that fed the pig that fed the butcher that fed man that feed on Christ” (Uroff 154). The poem opens with the image of the train from “Getting There”. Here, “The engine is killing the track”; but the speaker assures that “It will be eaten nevertheless. Its running is useless” (CP 264).

Not only non-human, but all living creatures are caught up in the merciless claw of death. In its portrayal of a cosmic voraciousness, the poem provides the clearest rendering of Plath’s agony in the face of cannibalistic universe. “Human symbols of spiritual achievement and love, Plato and Christ, are derisively regarded as impotent heads on sticks; they, too, will be eaten” (Rosenblatt 135). The metaphor of the train ride suggests that no redeeming self-transformation occurs to the speaker as the self is unable to be reborn. The poem reflects the mood of Plath’s final months, a mood of despondency and hopelessness.

Another poem on the horror of death, “Getting There” incorporates the train ride of “Totem”, but the unrelieved gloom of the latter is partially relieved in the former by a possibility of rebirth. In the poem the speaker actually participates in the violence of history, identifying with all the victims of war. Plath’s personal situation feeds into the poem as she pictures
herself as the victim. This in fact lends weight to the feminist reading that “Getting There” is a kind of statement of woman’s physical and social suffering. However, Uroff sees the subject of the poem purely in terms of historical violence:

We are not instructed by history: rather, the train that drags itself through the battle fields of history ultimately becomes “the black car of Lethe,” a symbol of the forgetfulness of the past. It becomes a cradle, nurturing a new generation of killers; the pure baby who steps from it will perpetuate murder because she has forgotten the world’s past history of murderousness. (154)

The train journey through a war-torn European landscape becomes, in effect, a literary vehicle used to express the self’s relentless path through life and the intense, almost maddening expressive urge that it seeks for fulfilment. The details of past carnage represent the oppressive forces which each individual has to contend with. Yet stronger than the sense of pain is the desire to get to the “minute at the end of it / A minute, a dewdrop” (CP 249). According to David John Wood, “Getting There” in some ways resembles a passage from “Revelations”, the last part of the New Testament
– it prophesies a new life through the insight of the artistic instant, transmuting a host of apocalyptic images into the hope for poetic birth” (152). Hence, the poem ends on a conviction that out of the wreckage of life, the speaker will transform herself into creative renewal and that bloodshed may be a ritualistic sacrifice for rebirth and the rocking carriages of the train may be just rocking cradles:

I shall bury the wounded like pupas,
I shall count and bury the dead

And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces
Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby.

(CP 249)

“A Birthday Present” is a dramatic monologue in which terror and hysterical panic predominate. The drama of the poem is frightening in its transformation of a domestic, and usually a happy occasion – the visit of a friend carrying a birthday gift – into a celebration of suicide. It captures the movement of the speaker’s mind as she throws herself into the sequence of
steps that might lead her to kill her. However, the confrontation with death generates the hope for rebirth. The poem can also be interpreted as expressing Plath’s yearning for a voice and vision that would last enduringly. In the conclusion to the poem, the speaker demands as her birthday present, not just the symbols of death which are mentioned in the poem, or the figure representing death, but death itself. For she knows, full well that, it is only through death that she can attain the desired self-transformation:

If it [the birthday present] were death
I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
I would know you were serious.
There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
And the knife not carve, but enter
Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
And the universe slide from my side.

(CP 208)

The tension between the stasis of death and the motion of life is a common feature of Plath’s last poems. But in this contest it is ultimately the former which wins, which means absolute perfection. “Fever 103” is one of the first dramatic monologues of Plath, where she discusses the notion of
purity as related to rebirth, both depending on the ultimate reality of death. Outwardly “Fever 103” reads like an incoherent and unrelated talk under fever and delirium. In her reading prepared for the BBC, Plath illuminates the world of “Fever 103”: “It is about two kinds of fire – the fires of hell, which merely agonises, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second” (CP 293).

At the commencement of the poem, the speaker appears to be answering her own internal question about self-purification through suffering – “pure? what does it mean?” (CP 231). In the middle of the poem, she turns to her husband and resolves her doubts – “I am too pure for you or any one.” At the end, she transforms herself into a “pure acetylene/Virgin”, who can reject all attachment to others. She becomes an unblemished beam of angelic light, and her skin becomes. “gold beaten” and “Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive”, beyond the lecher’s kiss and lover’s body. Rosenblatt comments, “At once immersed in the nightmare of radiation poisoning and in a fantasy of religious salvation, the poem gives the most balanced version of Plath’s striving toward a purification of self in the midst of the world of death” (131).
“Ariel”, written on Plath’s thirtieth birthday, was chosen as the title piece for the volume of poetry that firmly established Plath’s reputation. It can also be chosen as a central representative of her poetic concerns. It employs the act of insemination as a vehicle for expressing the creative urge – the same urge which stimulated all of Plath’s best work. The name, Ariel, has several possible meanings. It is as Hughes points out, the “name of horse which she rode, at a riding school at Dartmoor, in Devonshire” (CP 294). This experience provides the surface structure of the poem, a horseback ride, – accounting for the reference to Lady Govida – although the underlying proceeding of the poem transcends its literal origins.

According to Judith Kroll it is primarily a biblical allusion as it is a Hebrew name signifying “Lion of God” (Plath uses the phrase “God’s lioness”) that is applied to the city of Jerusalem (Isaiah 29: 1-7). In literature Ariel is the name of a sprit occurring in Milton’s Paradise Lost (VI, 371) and in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, where it is the symbol of Prospero’s power. Plath’s development during the last stage of her work was very much a process of coming to terms with bitter experience and this approximates very generally to Shakespeare’s own reconciliatory development as expressed through the character of Prospero and the symbol of his benevolent spirit Ariel.
“Ariel” is the only poem of Plath which traces the process of transformation of the woman to her ideal, the woman poet and further. The transforming ritual of purging and fusing leading to a new birth, conceived in other poems as a ritual leading to death, is presented here as a journey from stasis in darkness through a nightmarish landscape. The rider and the horse, feminine and masculine principles as separate entities, melt into one another as they moved forward – “How one we grow.” The rider absorbs kenesis from the horse and moves from submission to assertion to become “God’s Lioness.” The journey itself is a heroic struggle to overcome the snares of the world: “Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks” (CP 239).

There are “black sweet blood mouthfuls,” indicating the inherent force in the male dominated social scene, and “Shadows” symbolizing the nonbeing, sterility, and despair which are the encrustations on the feminine psyche. Even the sexual fascination of the woman by which she confers extra power on man, is suggested vaguely in the lines “Something else / Hauls me through air – / thighs, hair.” But they are all shed off as Ariel moves forward: “I unpeel – / dead hands, dead stringencies.” And there is a new birth:
And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas

The child’s cry

Melts in the wall.

(\textit{CP 239})

It is no more Ariel but “I”, a single entity “And I am an arrow”, a symbol of self-assertion, speed, effectiveness and sharpness and definiteness of direction. This involves a powerful sense of transcendence and marks the victory over suffering and death; yet the destination is death and rebirth.

There are also other equally important poems of her final phase, where Plath confronts death more directly, such as “Death & Co.,” “Contusion”, “Edge”, and “Words”. Like “A Birthday Present”, “Death & Co.”, converts an ordinary human encounter into a metaphor for death. Visited in her hospital bed by two acquaintances, the speaker envisions them as two faces of death as Plath herself said:
This poem is about the double or schizophrenic nature of death – the marmoreal coldness of Blake’s death mark, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water, and other katabolists. I imagine these two aspects of death as two men, two business friends, who have come to call. (CP 294)

The two human figures destroy life in different ways. The first figure is literally voracious and icy; he eats people: “I am red meat. His beak / Claps side wise…” (CP 254). The second is seductive and fatal, a “Dickinsonian kindly chauffer turned seedy exhibitionist” (Blessing 63). He is a pure narcissist: “Bastard / Masturbating a glitter…”(CP 254). But the speaker is not attracted to either of these faces of death and simply notes their existence as if it were “perfectly natural”. The poem ends, however, with a brilliant vision that death is as common and daily an occurrence as the dew on the grass or the frost on the window pane. It is as beautiful as the dew and as icy as the frost. Hence, the poem is one of Plath’s extended metaphors for the reality of death which is the only passage to rebirth. It is not as A. Alvarez would have it, a poem of suicide (31).

The poet’s mood of indifference and weariness with life reaches its culmination in “Words”; one of Plath’s most brilliant but also one of her
most despairing statements. The relationship between death and art forms the essential subject of the poem. Poems are “words” that ride off, away from the original act of thought that gave birth to them. The poet’s self and her language are separated from each other and after several years, a piece of writing may no longer be recognizable to its author. Rather than preserving the self, language may thus make us aware of our distance from ourselves:

Years later I
Encounter them on the road –
Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.

(CP 270)

The final image suggests that an objective factor operates within the self and controls it: “From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars/Govern a life” (CP 270). The poem, thus defines Plath’s fundamental sense of doom and fatality. The hand of the dead rules the living, and language cannot overcome the primordial disturbance created in the self by the consciousness of the dead and death. Rosenblatt puts it, “By presenting these personal conceptions of language and death in highly elliptical image sequence, Plath creates a stark but beautiful image of her fate” (139). Plath’s calm
acceptance of her fate becomes obvious in “Contusion”, written just a week earlier than her suicide. The blow to the body causing an injury in the form of a contusion symbolizes the painful experience of life itself. The speaker internalizes the entire hurt feelings, though bleeds below the surface and accepts death with a sense of resignation as it is the only act which brings purgation:

The heart shuts,
The sea slides back,
The mirror sheeted.

(\textit{CP} 271).

“Edge”, the very last poem of the \textit{Ariel} provides a ritual setting for a suicidal drama, where Plath specifies the symbolic setting for her death. “Edge” presents the view of a dead mother and her children locked in a final embrace. The real end comes when the woman, torn throughout life by too many fears, is “perfected” in death and her body “wears the smile of accomplishment” (\textit{CP} 272). Though the title suggests a point of no return, the woman crosses over to the dangerous edge of life into the eternal calm of death, the final act of salvation for which she has purified herself in “Fever
Purged of all the fury of fearful existence, the woman welcomes death in a touching but impassive tone:

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over.

(CP 272)

Completion and perfection are frequently negative aspects in Plath’s oeuvre, expressed explicitly in poems like “Berck Plage” and “The Munich Mannequins. In “Edge” for the first time, there is no sense of dismissal. She accepts perfection in death, as it is futile to think of escaping from it, or attacking it and thus the poem ends on a note of finality. However, as perfection means sterility to Plath, so the speaker has “folded” her children back into her body as smoothly and protectively as petals of rose close at sunset. The death presented as a ritual in the poem occurs under the eye of an internalized object, a cold mother, who is “used to this sort of thing.” Plath has thus envisioned her death in the same landscape and setting that characterized her poems as far back as The Colossus.
“Edge” finally serves as “the concluding tableau”, the last scene of the tragic drama (Kroll 144). The tranquil composure of death in the woman’s body is tell-tale eventually of the resolve in the poet’s mind – a resolve that would be translated into real death all too soon. The woman who had suffered throughout her life now attains an invaluable status unmarred by any oppressive force. It is such a resigned and detached attitude to that distinguishes Plath from others. In Charles Newman’s apt formulation: “The only difference between the artists and people like me, is that the artists watch themselves die, while we are dead before we know it” (53).

*Ariel* must be read as several chapters of a creative autobiography, written by a woman whose purpose in the last years of her life was to come to terms with the various female roles and identities into which she was split. It is full of wrong leads, frustrated efforts, obscure and private battles that attest to the difficulties she had to face and to the energy she expended on them. Her final poetic accomplishment was not to transcend these hardships, but to face them directly and to leave a record of that confrontation.

The sense of menace that looms large in the entire Plath oeuvre acquires a new significance in the poems of this period. Horror and hysteria which were till then a part of the exterior landscape, is internalized and these
converge on the drama within, with herself as their victim. The dark undercurrent of her experience becomes a fierce passion and a terrible beauty is born. There is no aesthetic distancing anymore, no distinction between poetry and life. The suppressions of *The Colossus* give way to the fiery revelations of the *Ariel*. In her early poems Plath stood outside, drawing caricatures not only of madness, but also of hysterical sanity. But now her characters speak for themselves, in caricatures, parody, and hyperbole, not as vehicles of judgement, but as inevitable methods of performances. The poet not only imagines herself to be, but becomes Lady Lazarus and the Virgin of “Mary’s Song”, bearing her Christ into this “heart / this holocaust I walk in” (*CP* 257). In the image of the rising lioness, the Virgin, the red comet, she identifies a female figure, violent enough to triumph in a world where the woman is reduced to a jade statue.