Getting Rid of Daddy

The triumphant woman is, of course, also the murderer of the "Daddy" persona, whoever (or how many whoevers) that figure is interpreted to represent. In her creation of her widely based poetic mythology, Plath anthropomorphized the powerful white male who has lied to her, betrayed her, spent her money, and/or abandoned her – all the while expecting her to perform the household tasks, however menial; a variety of sexual services; and the bearing of, and caring for, his children. She did not have to use her imagination to create this persona. As she wrote to her beloved college roommate Marty a month before her suicide,  

I have been so utterly flattened by having to be a businesswoman, farmer – harvesting seventy apple trees, stringing all my onions, digging and scrubbing all my potatoes, extracting and bottling my honey, etc. – mother, writer and all-round desperado that I’d give anything [to be alone]. I feel like a very efficient tool or weapon, used and in demand from moment to moment by the babes … Since he’s [Hughes] never paid a bill or figured income tax or mowed the lawn, etc., he’s no notion of what it takes …¹

Her long years of correspondence with Marcia Brown give credibility to her honesty here. In 1956 when she wrote her former roommate that she had become involved with Hughes, she did not try to romanticize him but rather told her confidante that he lived in a "condemned slum" and had no money. After they were married and living in Cambridge, she complained about England’s "grim" winters ("Nothing ever gets dry or clean" and called herself "a shivering housefrau waging a day to day battle against cold and dirt"). Reminiscing about the luxuries of Smith College, she remarked, "I have lived in the most unlikely dumps and on so little it often stuns me."²

In the January 2, 1963, letter quoted above, Plath told Marty that she had lost twenty pounds, run 103° fevers, and "almost died of the flu this summer."³ The day before, on New Year’s Day, her London
physician Dr Horder had ordered a chest X-ray for her, fearing tuberculosis.

Plath could probably have stood much of the physical work at Court Green, but the fact that she was ill made those tasks seem insurmountable. Her refrain in all her letters – to Ann Davidow, another close college friend, and to a more recent acquaintance, Ruth Fainlight – is that her weariness suffuses her life; it is as if she is trying to find a reason for her illness in her state of utter fatigue.

What she writes to Marty on February 4, 1963, however, not a week before her suicide, expresses the emotional heart of her physical fatigue. “Everything has blown and bubbled and warped and split,” she begins, but her imagery is used less to complain than to explain: “I am in limbo between the old world and the very uncertain and rather grim new.” Part of her unhappiness, she tells Marty, is that she is “cut off from my dearest friends and relatives.”

I long to have somebody really play with and love the babies – it is still a fantastic shock to me that they are so beautiful and dear and will have, in effect, no father. Ted comes once a week like a kind of apocalyptic Santa Claus and when I’m in the country I guess half years and years will go by without him seeing them at all.

This letter, one view of Plath in extremis, is controlled and orderly. Is this the true tone of her acceptance of her new life, one that would lull some observers to contend that Plath could not have killed herself; even during the bleak winter of 1963, even living a lonely and terribly burdened life, some friends said, she was filled with light, with purpose, with plans? We have seen that her metaphoric representation of her emotions, within her late poems, is more extravagant, more highly colored, more distanced in some ways – to use Van Dyne’s word, more “performative.” We know full well that we cannot read the artful poem as simple autobiography, particularly Plath’s late and most artful poems. But the last years of that most significant resource, her journal, in which she wrote until very near the end of her existence, is no longer available. When the severely edited journals from Plath’s earlier years were published in the US (no edition has ever appeared in England), the book was prefaced with comments by Hughes; in that “Foreword” he gave the only explanation known for the disappearance of the journal