

**'I Could Hardly Speak':
Dialogues in the Poetry of
Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes**

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& European Languages*

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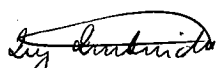
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Abstract

‘I Could Hardly Speak’:

Dialogues in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes

This thesis examines an extraordinary dialogue between the poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. My methodology uses Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* as a limit case when approaching Plath’s *oeuvre*, focussing on intertextual examples that solidify my arguments of a dialogue which began when the poets met and continued after Plath’s death. Often a dialogue is signalled when a poem by each writer shares the same title. On other occasions, a shared biographical event is re-visioned separately by Plath and Hughes. Though I refer to biographical material when relevant, my focus is on the poetry.

Working through a theory of dialogic intertextuality — arrived at through Charles Bakhtin’s dialogic theory, Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality and Gerard Genette’s theories of metatextuality and hypertextuality — I define dialogic intertextuality as a sequential and subjective interchange of ideas between texts and the authors of those texts. The text, part of the author’s created personae, replaces or supplements conversations that refer to a known and shared system of knowledge — biographical events, for example — thus becoming further embedded in a subsequent text.

This thesis questions several of Hughes’s decisions as Plath’s literary executor, uncovering instances of dubious textual borrowing and even theft. I argue that Hughes, when compared with Plath, is far more strident in representing the couple’s power struggles over textual ownership, and gender and national difference. Their work addresses creation and creativity (particularly creation of life versus creation of poetry), birth, death and rebirth. The poets’ preoccupations with parental roles and the suppression and revelation of perceived truths in their poetry are also discussed.

Hughes often inserted biographical elements in his poetry that are all but obscured in Plath’s work. While Hughes’s poetry insists on his version of truth about key events of their lives, Plath’s poetry resists his readings. As a tangible outcome of their dialogue, these insistences and resistances form the foundation of this thesis.

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Abbreviations

Collected Poems – CP

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams – JPBD

Letters Home – LH

Winter Pollen – WP

The Journals of Sylvia Plath – J

The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962 – J2

London Review of Books – LRB

Journal of English Literary History – ELH

Times Literary Supplement – TLS

/ - line break

// - stanza break

List of Illustrations

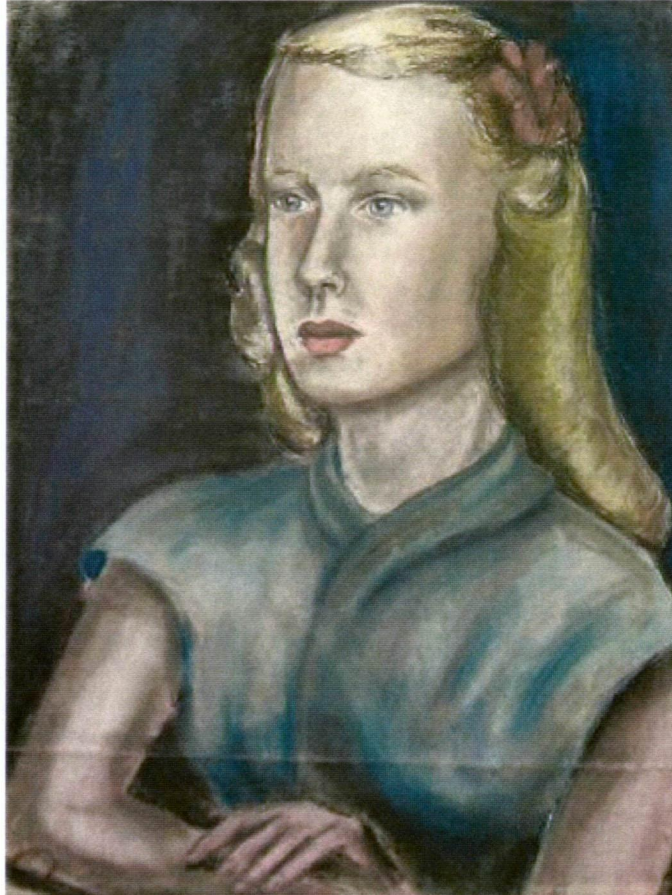
Sylvia Plath, self-portrait

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath (photo by James Coyne)

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath's gravestone, Heptonstall

Sylvia Plath, Devon 1962, with Frieda and Nicholas Hughes



Sylvia Plath, self-portrait, early 1950s

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak

‘Daddy’, Sylvia Plath

I

Approaching the literary couple

In 1897, a medieval folio fragment was discovered, part of a treasure trove found in an attic of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo Genizah (‘hiding place’) and declared by Jewish historians to be of great importance, a ‘gem’ (Raskas n. pag.). On the fragment was a poem written by Dunash Ibn Labrat, a 10th century Sephardi (Spanish-Hebrew) poet, addressed to his wife, Deror Yikra. Described by the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Unit as an ‘exchange of poems between the literary couple’ (T-S NS 143.46), Yikra’s poem on the folio’s reverse makes her work ‘the sole record of a medieval female poet writing in Hebrew’ (Raskas n. pag.) and ‘the first realized personal poem in the post-biblical Hebrew canon’ (Fleisher qtd. in Ibn Gabirol n. pag.). The possibilities of a dialogue between these two texts and any others that might exist from their *oeuvre* are limitless. Investigations into the poet-couple’s work already reveal perplexing entanglements, as seen in the findings of scholar Ezra Fleisher who ‘ascribes a Hebrew poem formerly attributed to Dunash... to Dunash’s wife’ (Tallan 26).

This historical discovery is acutely linked to a contemporary problem that lies in the unexamined phrase 'literary couple'. What are the subtexts behind this appellation? How does this intimate relationship affect the body of work created within this special environment? Through this thesis, I investigate the problem of how one might read the poetry of writing couples and learn about these relationships in their writing. I specifically explore the textual relationship of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, a contemporary literary couple on whom there is, individually, an ever-increasing number of new scholarly works in circulation, attributable to a deepening interest in Plath and Hughes and the release of original material, resulting in an accessibility conducive for research, even in Australia.¹ Their shared medium of poetry also makes it easier to discuss and explicate both their works concurrently. From trends in the critical discussion of Plath's poetry, Claire Brennan predicts a progression from 'restricted biographical readings' to a more 'textualised' literary criticism, which is where I locate my analysis of the Plath-Hughes textual relationship (167-8). Their poetry, like that of Ibn Labrat and Yikra, becomes the locus of a metatextual dialogue, coded as a private correspondence that circulates as public, published documents, open for interpretation.

Little exists of literary textual analysis on the inter-relations within a literary couple, whatever their gender, historical period or country. Potentially, there are textual relationships between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti, Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. More contemporary and international writers, such as Taiwanese poet-couple Lo Men and Jung-tzu, Indian poet-couple Narendra Deb and Rudharani Debi, and American poet-couples Robert Hass and Brenda Hillman, John Thomas and Philomene Long, and Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon, can be the subject of similar close analysis. The textual relationship between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, points to a clear correspondence between their work and their lives.

Critical commentaries on the Brownings rely on textual and biographical connections. Where Lee Erickson notes their marriage 'gave their poetry a sense of lived experience' (1607-8A),

¹ Plath's archival texts are housed in the Sylvia Plath Collection (Smith College Rare Book Room), the Sylvia Plath Manuscript Collection at the Lilly Library in Indiana University and the British Library. Some of Hughes's texts are deposited in the Emory University's Department of Special Collections of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Georgia.

Dorothy Mermin contends that 'each seems to go too far in adopting the other's voice' (357), while Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar emphasise the 'aesthetic as well as emotional engagement with each other' (374). Described as 'a discourse of calling and answering' (Donaldson 552), Loy Martin's observation that each of Barrett Browning's poems 'implicitly challenges[s] the division between the imaginative world of the poet as poet and the real world of the poet as human being' hints at a gap in scholarly study into potential dialogues between the two poets' work (179). The aforementioned critics tend to elevate the biographical over the textual, overlooking metatextual dialogues between the Brownings; still others over-rely on tracing paths of influence between them, yet these seem to be insufficient methods of investigating any two writers' textual relationship.

Influence and other approaches to the literary couple

Literary studies usually approach the literary couple by stating the influences between them, though influence cannot fully explain the literary couple and how the intimacy of such a relationship is connected to their textual production and writing life. Of such intertextual instances within couples, standard critical questions are put forth: which writer provides the strongest influence, who imitates, who leads, who follows and who is the predominant focus; however, these questions overlook what an investigation of communication might uncover within a writing couple's body of work.

Margaret Dickie Uroff's *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* gives an important early assessment of the textual relationship between the poets, explaining that 'the value of reading Plath and Hughes together is to see a unique example of two important poets influencing each other' (8), equating influence with 'poetic collaboration' (vii). Her work included close readings of their poetry, even occasionally adding biographical information, though it did not make a case for contentious appropriations or dialogue between the texts, only noting similarities and influences. In his article 'God's Lioness and the Priest of Sycorax: Plath and Hughes', Anthony Libby notes that 'the more obvious and interesting influence is the great stylistic and philosophical influence each of them exerted on the other'. Yet Libby's approach goes beyond

marking influence, and eventually collapses Plath's identity into Hughes: 'we may hypothetically assume that he speaks for her' (387-401).

By contrast, Lynda K Bundtzen's 'Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's "Burning the Letters"' approaches their work by observing an unreciprocal textual connection, in which poems represented aggressive acts of 'throwing down the gauntlet' (n. pag.). Likewise, Sarah Churchwell's 'Secrets and Lies: Plath, Privacy, Publication and Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*' observes 'Hughes's conversations with Plath and the critics' through the medium of poetry, pointing out Hughes's assertion of a 'right to control the meaning of hers', his 'anxiety of influence' — a clear reversal when critical thinking has perceived the current of influence to run the other way (105-29). In *Ariel's Gift*, Erica Wagner concentrates mainly on Hughes's approach of the poetic task in *Birthday Letters*; while she detects echoes between the poets' work, she leaves unexplored the dialogues between them, despite remarking on *Birthday Letters* as 'a kind of conversation – one-sided, but a conversation nonetheless' (22). The final chapter of Tracy Brain's *The Other Sylvia Plath* cites notable instances of Hughes quoting Plath 'verbatim', duplications Brain views, not as appropriations, but as 'cue[s]' meant to signal importance to the reader (176). Yet there is little exploration of the textual relationship between their works and Brain succumbs to signposting well-worn paths, evident in the section 'The Reciprocity of Influence between Plath and Hughes'.

Susan R Van Dyne's "'More Terrible Than She Ever Was": The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems' highlights the physical connections between Plath and Hughes's manuscript-drafts to expose 'a covert text' and Plath's response and re-visioning of Hughes's text as a way of severing 'her identification with Hughes as her alter ego' (5-6). Van Dyne's book *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* is a feminist reading that expands on these observations, includes extensive documentation of Plath's physical re-inscriptions on Hughes's drafts and maintains that Plath's textual dialogue with Hughes is 'always competitive' (40). Grounded on archival evidence, the textual dialogue between the poems is persuasive. The publication of Hughes's *Birthday Letters* and its 'sampling' of Plath's words further underscore the textual communication between the poets (Churchwell 133). Van

Dyne's text-based study of reinscriptions provides the foundation for my investigation into dialogic intertextuality.

A forthcoming book edited by Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson, *Literary Couples and Collaborators* (unpublished at the time of this thesis) adds to the growing investigation of literary couples. In their 1996 call for submissions, Stone and Thompson sought essays on works by writers and their partners that approached the subject intertextually and 'dialogically', instead of biographically (Thompson n. pag.). (Churchwell's essay "'Your Sentence Was Mine Too': Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and *Birthday Letters*" is included.) The book will focus on dynamics of interpersonal and intertextual relationships, the 'dialogical versus monological form', anxieties of authorship and of mutual influence, sexual/textual tensions and finally, textual inflections of pregnancy and parenthood (Thompson n. pag.). Stone and Thompson's book is crucial for its multi-pronged approach to the textual relationship of writers with a shared biography.

My contribution towards current literary-critical studies is a significant investigation into a literary couple that concentrates on the text, incorporates both poetry and biography, and moves beyond the paradigm of influence. Through the work of Plath and Hughes, I present an analysis of their poetry on the theoretical level of dialogic intertextuality, probing the force-field of shifting pressures within the relationship of a literary couple.

II

Dialogic intertextuality

I construct dialogic intertextuality to define the metatextual connection between the 'primary text' and the 'response poem', where the primary text has chronological ascendancy and the response poem answers back to the primary text. Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva and Gerard Genette's theories inform my conception of dialogic intertextuality, in which the dialogue aspect of the theory refers to engagements between the texts, rather than a sequential

response, while intertextuality points to the extractions from a source that manifests in a subsequent text.

The term dialogic (*sic*) is allied to Bakhtin's theory of the novel, where a diversity of languages and speech-styles co-exist in the body of a novel as they 'mutually and ideologically interanimate each other' (47). To differentiate between Bakhtin's 'dialogic' and mine, I spell 'dialoguic' in its Australianised form. Bakhtin's theory includes intonational quotation marks, where a character's speech exists within the system of direct authorial speech (44). Speech becomes an object of representation and the author comes into focus only when his irony penetrates this 'language of another' (Bakhtin 44). Since the author is no longer merely outside the constructed character's language, he both represents and speaks the language, while the character is in an arena of potential conversation with the author, that is, in a 'zone of dialogical contact' (Bakhtin 45).

An important difference between my theory and Bakhtin's is that Bakhtin (and all the theorists I mention) specifically addresses a theory of the novel, not poetry. Bakhtin's definition is concerned with language, speech in the body of the novel and authorial speech. My theory of dialoguic intertextuality addresses the meta-dialogue between the texts of Plath and Hughes's poetry. However, there are intriguing affinities and departures between Bakhtin's dialogic theory and my theory of dialoguic intertextuality.

Although Plath and Hughes write in two different speech-styles and the communication between them may be said to supplement, contradict, address and interanimate each other's work, they do not co-exist in the same body of work as in a novel. The closest they come to sharing the same textual space is when they are placed on two different sides of a piece of paper. (Van Dyne's research, sourced from Plath's archival texts in Smith College and the Lilly Library, Indiana University, emphasises the significance of this practice. Stephen Tabor's research points to further evidence in the British Library. Writings on the obverse are also apparent in Hughes's texts deposited in the Emory University's Department of Special Collections of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Georgia.) However, their work does share a zone of dialogical contact, where one poet's language interpenetrates the other, physically

manifesting in the double-written drafts and textually, where borrowed phrases from one poem appear in another. While my definition agrees with Bakhtin's theory on a communication between two works and a shared zone of contact, there is a crucial difference. Plath did not create Hughes, his words, his 'language', or vice-versa (Bakhtin 44). The author/character relationship does not exist. Bakhtin's theory contains useful terminology but can only partly explain dialogic intertextuality.

Emphasising precession and quotation, Kristeva defines intertextuality as an interdependence of literary texts with their predecessors, making every novel a mosaic of quotations, a 'study of sources' (59-60). Within the Plath-Hughes textual relationship, an infrequent form of sequential dialogue manifests, where Hughes writes a primary text ('The Thought-Fox'), then Plath writes a poem in response ('Burning the Letters') and then Hughes may respond with another poem ('Dreamers' or 'The Inscription'). This sequentially written thread of texts is similar to the interdependence of literary texts Kristeva defines as intertextuality. While one could trace a similarly unlimited sequence of intertextuality between the poets' *oeuvres*, this differs to what emerges in my study of Plath and Hughes.

The most prevalent form of dialogue between the poets is where Plath writes a poem, for example, 'Pursuit' (the primary text), based on a biographical event, which Hughes re-inscribes in his poem 'Trophies' (the response poem), which addresses issues of the primary text on a textual or thematic level, and presents a differing perspective of a shared subject. Other potential dialogues exist in other genres. In some instances, the primary text is a short story, which is what occurs between Plath's 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' and Hughes's 'The 59th Bear'.

Gerard Genette's theories on metatextuality and hypertextuality elaborate on Kristeva's intertextuality and the palimpsestic nature of Plath and Hughes's writing process. Genette defines metatextuality as a 'textual transcendence', where one text provides critical commentary on another text, and hypertextuality (usually termed hypotextuality) as the relationship between a text and a preceding 'hypotext', a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (4-5). In this thesis, I substitute my term

‘primary text’ for Genette’s hypotext, while the ‘response poem’, marked by its explicit/implicit commentary on the primary text, correlates with Genette’s metatext. Characterised as an ‘antecedent poetic representation’, the primary text is chronologically ascendant over the response poem (Churchwell 124).

Using dialogic intertextuality to analyse a personal relationship in poetry, my goal is to reveal systematically the pattern of correspondences, borrowings and appropriations hidden within the work. It is an effective reading practice for text produced within a writing relationship, connecting on the metatextual level in which the texts communicate.

Methodology

Applying textual, biographical and bibliographic analysis to understand the writing relationship of intertextuality between a literary-poetic couple, I investigate the literary production of two writers who also share their lives outside the text. This method can uncover dialogic intertextuality within a range of writing couples, but I choose to specifically uncover the dialogues within the textual relationship of Plath and Hughes.

The process of discovering evidence of dialogic intertextuality involves pinpointing correspondences between Plath and Hughes’s work. Formulating a theory of dialogic intertextuality explains and defines these correspondences. I juxtapose four texts: Plath’s poetry, Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*, Plath’s private writings and Hughes’s editorial commentary. Paired poems, consisting of the primary text and the response poem, undergo close analysis and are triangulated with biographical data to affirm the argument of dialogic intertextuality.

Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* acts as a limit-case when used in conjunction with Plath’s *oeuvre* to uncover an ongoing dialogue, primarily identifiable by both poets’ works sharing a title. The secondary identifier is a shared biographical event envisioned separately by Plath and Hughes. Plath’s biographical evidence and Hughes’s editorial remarks contextualise the poems and provide the chronology to verify their composition and publication. Close

commentaries also discuss antecedents in their work that bear connections with more recent poetry. This methodology concentrates solely on the text, using biography only as an identifier of their dialogue, not as the project's focus. Since the existing critical literature on Plath and Hughes (exemplified by Uroff, Perloff, Libby, Bundtzen and Brain) usually addresses issues of intertextuality within the writer-couple by either disagreeing over influence or over-emphasising the biography to the detriment of the poetry, dialogic intertextuality offers a grounded perspective informed by biography and literary study that clarifies patterns within a textual relationship. This method goes beyond uncovering the biographical foundations of the relationship, converging on the text of poetry itself. As an outcome of my close analysis, appropriations within paired poems emerge and incidences of previous appropriations affirm this practice is common between Plath and Hughes, of which I include in my thesis only the most compelling examples.

Like published letters, poetry is intended for one reader yet the medium is a publicly accessible one. *Birthday Letters* is both public disclosure and private correspondence to a ghost, marking anniversaries. After receiving the Forward Prize (1998), Hughes stated:

My book 'Birthday Letters' is a gathering of the occasions – written with no plan over about 25 years – in which I tried to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife, not thinking to make a poem, thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself and to feel her there listening. ...Except for a handful, I never thought of publishing these pieces until last year, when quite suddenly I realized I had to publish them, no matter what the consequences. (n. pag.)

One is ever mindful of the addressee for whom these missives are intended as well as the anonymous audience. As Brain observes, '...there is something uncanny about writing that is both deeply personal, but also intended for an audience of strangers' (36). Hughes's words might lead the reader to limit the 'you' in the *Birthday Letters* (usually a female addressee) as synonymous with Plath, just as 'I' is limited to a male speaker and synonymous with Hughes. These are risky oversimplifications. Brain adds that '...the "you", the "Plath" so incessantly addressed by Hughes's speaker, is a poetic character who is no more stable or real as "Plath" than the object of any intensely felt love poem — or love letter' (181). Their poems act as written correspondence, a coded form of textual dialogue.

III

Chapter and verse

Working on Hughes's *Birthday Letters* and Plath's poetry within the paradigm of dialogic intertextuality, what interests me most is what Plath's poetry uncovers, that is, the textual and subtextual anomalies within *Birthday Letters*. When a title of Plath's is echoed in Hughes, when the origin of a phrase that appears in both poets' work is disputed, it raises questions of textual ownership within the literary couple. Why does Hughes borrow from Plath's poetry? How prevalent is this practice and how does it affect Plath's status as a writer, if at all? Why does Hughes engage Plath in this manner instead of doing so another way or even avoiding it altogether? These questions indicate the textual territory between writers is unstable, providing the potential for further discoveries.

I divide my exploration of dialogic intertextuality into three chapters, wherein I reveal appropriations of text, biographical episodes and theme, unlocked by two keys. The first key is the paired poem, which uncovers appropriations of text and biography, addressed in the first and second chapter respectively. The second key is the motif of fire, which points to thematic issues, such as creativity and procreativity, debated in a sequence of poems in the third chapter. The structure of the thesis mirrors a broadening of focus, from the particularity of textual theft, through a wider shift to differing biographical perspectives, to an overview of thematic contention.

Birthday Letters is Hughes's way of commodifying his experience in the textual currency of poetry. It is a currency he shares with Plath yet he is possessive over his experience, his life. Sharing this currency with Plath leaves it open for misinterpretations Hughes cannot control. Churchwell observes, 'Both Plath's and Hughes's poetry "about" each other commodifies their "private" story and sells it to the public' (113). Churchwell adds that Hughes's 'struggle' was over 'his right to control the meaning of [her life] at such points as it overlapped with his' (114). What Hughes objected to were 'interpretations': 'The problem was that Hughes wanted his private experience to be acknowledged, and authorized, by readers...' (Churchwell

116-8). Hughes's book is his insurance that his view remains in the forefront of readers' minds, that he has the final word.

My interest in this literary couple is also personal. As a poet interested in the craft, there is a magnetism and potency in the relationship between *Birthday Letters* and Plath's poetry. I find myself in the heart of language, questioning the ownership and authority of text and biographical experience. What I discover in the poets' relationship deserves more than a mere retelling of their shared biographies or a tracing of influences. Dialogic intertextuality is a way of doing justice to their poetry and their lives.

With my aforementioned methodology, what emerges is an astonishing textual practice that reveals how the intimacy of a poet-couple infringes on the creation of their literary work. In the Plath-Hughes dialogue, appropriations of text, biography and theme are distinct outcomes. Each of these issues is addressed in the following chapters.

'Raiding Words' examines the appropriations and abuses of text, showing the poets' relationship to be one of borrowings by highlighting the differences between the primary and response text. The textual raids occur mainly in Hughes's work, which clearly insists on this unconventional engagement with Plath's text to provoke textual conflict. Hughes is driven to narrate his story, positioning himself in a binary relationship to Plath. The textual appropriations in 'Raiding Words' lay the foundation for other biographical and thematic borrowings.

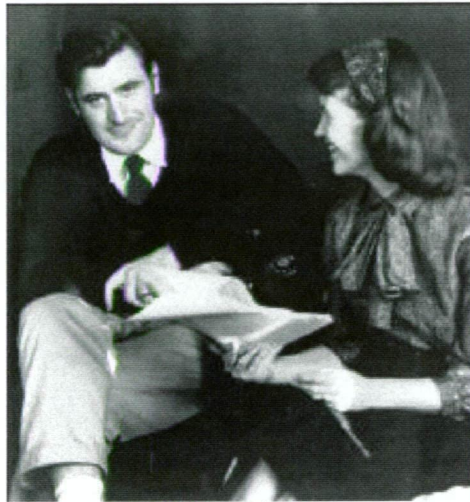
'Raiding Lives' discusses mutual appropriations of biographical detail to augment a biographical reading of both primary and response texts. The poets' conflicting perspectives on biographical events manifest in textual insistence and resistance. To paraphrase Hughes, this chapter documents Plath and Hughes's struggle over owning the 'facts' of their lives (qtd. in Malcolm 8).

'Raiding Prometheus' describes the thematic engagement of issues pivotal in both poets' work, such as creation versus procreation, authorship and authority, and gender power-

struggles leading to the realisation of an ungended self. This chapter uncovers extensive thematic connections and motivations behind selected poems while merging appropriations of text and biography in the final appropriations of themes, specifically poetics.

One would expect a dialogue to occur between living poets and, for the most part, this happens: Plath's dialogue with Hughes took place on his drafts while he was still alive. Hughes, however, responds after Plath dies, collecting and publishing his responses only when he is near death himself. *Birthday Letters*'s correspondence between ghostly presences continues the dialogue after both protagonists have moved on, yet its publication also emphasises the interanimation between them, and that sense of mutual impact manifests in their work, highlighting that where the tracing of influences is almost a clear-cut process, dialogic intertextuality focuses on a living relationship between the texts as well as a living relationship between the couple.

At the heart of every literary couple is a dialogue. Within that dialogue, marking out each writer's textual territory, is a practice of covert borrowings and jealous appropriations, even theft.



Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath

Raiding Words

Raiding Words

Words dry and riderless
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

‘Words’, Sylvia Plath

The textual life of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes is combative. Words incite a belligerent response and each poem is a battlefield on which Plath and Hughes fight over the ownership of their words. Each poem makes its claim for ascendancy over the primary text, steals its trophies and marks out its territories and boundaries. Since it is the place and focus of conflict, the primary text is the site of greatest contention.

From the beginning of their relationship, both Plath and Hughes practiced a form of literary theft. In ‘Pursuit’ and ‘Trophies’, textual raids occur primarily on Hughes’s side (though Plath also ransacks their lives for her poetry, the practice is far more oblique and obscured in her poem than in his). Their poems mark an initiation of a dialogue that emphasises the poets’ engagement with each other, though not solely in the biographical sense. The paired poems also chronicle a gross act of thievery in the textual arena, illustrating the level of obfuscation and theft Hughes accomplished. Further questionable acts emerge when examining Hughes’s editorial practice. Responding to Plath’s ‘The Lady and the Earthenware Head’, Hughes’s revision of the narrative is evident in ‘The Earthenware Head’, while reading Plath’s short story ‘The Fifty-Ninth Bear’ and Hughes’s ‘The 59th Bear’ in

conjunction uncovers Hughes's practice of souveniring and re-visioning Plath's narrative, souvenirs that manifest subsequently in 'The 59th Bear'.

These poems indicate a pattern, a recurring theme of theft, raiding, souveniring and ransacking of text and life, demarcating the conflict Hughes's *Birthday Letters* provokes. Throughout the poets' relationship are similar instances of appropriation, from poems about the beginning of their courtship and marriage, to texts that extend beyond poetry's bounds.

Pairings 1: Plath, 'Pursuit' and Hughes, 'Trophies'

In 'Pursuit', the speaker's acknowledgement of desire is obscured by a concomitant need for self-preservation. Her lust is both deferred to an icon, a panther, and coyly referred to as a 'secret want' (43). By contrast, the panther is an active figure, a 'demon lover' (Uroff 69). It pursues her relentlessly: 'the hunt is on', yet she thrills to be its prey (8). She notes other women who lie 'Charred and ravened' at the wake of the panther's ransacking and feels oddly elated by its mastery (23). These bodies are 'bait' to her, as much as they lure the panther (24).

The speaker does not blame the panther for its hunger since its devastation is wreaked on a land 'condemned by our ancestral fault', implying that the landscape is a punishment on Adam and Eve's children for their Original Sin (14). She justifies the panther's havoc as expiation. Sympathy results in an overlapping of views. She watches it covertly, in slightly shamed identification with it, a hunter herself: 'Behind snarled thickets of my eyes', lingering on its liveness, 'those taut thighs' (29-32). The erotic tension causes her to run again, 'flaring in my skin' (34). The panther follows. To halt its progress, she throws her heart, her blood, but nothing less than a total sacrifice will appease. The all-consuming fire of its lust subdues the wild forest to ash. There is no cover: her final defense is to escape behind doors and bolts. A sense of upward propulsion, alluded by the tread coming up the stairs, suggests a tower-like structure to which the speaker retreats.

The elements of a deep, dark wood, pursuit, capture and a locked tower strengthen the impression of a fairytale and implies a kinship to other fairytale maidens desiring rescue from towers, yet this maiden, despite her fear, is betrayed by her secret want of the panther. It is a lust dangerous to display but hard to hide. In the end, desire unlocks the door to their mutual conflagration.

Plath subverts the romantic fairytale with adult fantasy, unsettling accepted conventions by making the prince a panther and the princess both predator and collusive, willing prey: 'Pursuit' is a 'fantas[y] of erotic violation' (Britzolakis 79). Plath's subverted construct manifests a need to re-present and mythologise her biography, where poetry is allowed to distort her history and Hughes's presence in her life. In her investigation of the two poets, Uroff observes that

How much the real man actually embodied the powers she cast upon him is beside the point; he entered her imagination as a symbol of superhuman force, and her first poetic treatment of him seems to borrow his own favorite predatory animal imagery. (70)

Such borrowing is an element of the poets' dialogic intertextuality.

Plath acknowledges Blake's influence on 'Pursuit' to her mother. To Plath, the panther is 'a symbol of the terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself; death, here, includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love' (*LH* 249). Written after Plath's attempted suicide, it suggests a characteristic tendency to glamourise death, although it is only a recurrent motif and not her sole concern. A likelier interpretation, barely alluded to in the letter, appears in her journal: '...[W]rote a full-page poem about the dark forces of lust: 'Pursuit'. It is not bad. It is dedicated to Ted Hughes' (*J2* 214). The intertwining of death and love appears as a violent fairytale, in which Plath 'conflates Hughes and his poems: she sees an erotic violence in their encounter, which is an exchange, something that passes between them' (Hawker 43).

'Pursuit' defines a clear break from the rigid caution typifying Plath's early work: 'I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying... with an informed and intelligent mind' (qtd. in Orr 169). She uncovers, if only in her journal, what she conceals modestly for her mother — the truth and depth of her desire for Hughes. Pat Macpherson, examining Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, notes that the protagonist Esther,

...defines herself as part of her generation: sexually active outside marriage, rebelliously unromantic about sex, using birth control so pregnancy is no longer the coercive 'big stick' enforcing dependence in marriage.

...But being her 'own woman' within the gender system of the 1950s still rests on her unrevised assumption that femininity is awarded by a man's attention, and that women without men become — or are — horsey, lumpy, stumpy, 'gargoyles'... (87)

For her mother, Plath became Sivvy in her letters, a happy scholarship student and dutiful daughter, even as she juggled boyfriends, academic demands and poetry with an active social life in college. Under such strictures, Plath's confession of desire for Hughes is tantamount to a breakthrough.

Plath first met Hughes at a *St. Botolph's* party to celebrate the Cambridge journal's first and only issue. She wrote 'Pursuit' afterwards, wherein, Uroff suggests, Plath adopts a Hughes totem (the panther) for its attendant elements of violence and raw animal energy (70). Written at the initial stage of Plath's relationship with Hughes, 'Pursuit' presents her perception of Hughes and a refigured biographical event, the latter an identifying element of dialogic intertextuality.

'Pursuit' mythologises the poets' meeting, described saliently in Plath's *Journals*:

...and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth [omission].... And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face. [Omission.] And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you. (*J* 112)

When Plath's *Journals* were first published, these omissions, made by editors Hughes and Frances McCullough upset Plath scholars and critics. Janet Malcolm attributes the cuts to Hughes being 'pathetically modest' due to their personal nature (96):

...and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered the sun and much love, and whose like I shall never again find, and my favorite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked.

...His poem 'I did it, I'. Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunks of words; his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders. (J2 212)

Re-including the excisions underlines the previous passage's importance to Hughes's 'Trophies' and links strongly with the speaker's elation at the panther's mastery over the women who lie 'Charred and ravened' in 'Pursuit' (23).

Hughes's 'Trophies' creates a site of insertion and assertion in the dialogue. Responding to 'Pursuit', it seeks to undermine the validity of her work by supplementing it with his version. It is Hughes's textual assertion: Plath is not the sole documenter of their marriage.

'Trophies' is an amalgam of interview and documentary, a specious technique designed to lend weight to the speaker's words. Beginning with a question: 'The panther?' the reader is placed in the middle of a conversation that reports the panther's movements and its latest victim: 'you', as if the panther were a criminal on whom the speaker gathers evidence, thus reflecting a parallel objectification in 'Pursuit' (1). The violent descriptions emphasise this chase is not a game or romantic fantasy, but real, terrible and with consequences. Compared to Plath's poetry, Hughes's language is immediate, with human relations reductively presented and desire distilled to harsh, pitiless and inexplicable acts of savagery between a predator and its prey.

In 'Pursuit', Plath recasts as a sexualised predator the panther totem she borrows from Hughes, who first created the animist image in 'The Jaguar'. The panther in 'Trophies' is

different yet again, portrayed as more anthropomorphic. These shifting differences mark the panther as one charged symbol among a few that both poets share.

The exchange of looks between speaker and panther in 'Pursuit' parallels a similar moment in 'Trophies'. Significantly, however, 'Trophies' reverses the roles in Plath's poem. Instead, the victim is a brave, smiling, sacrificial male while the panther is a female demon lover with a voracious appetite, known as 'you'. Hughes absolves the victim from guilt and blame, effectively stating that he did not set these events in motion, she did; more positively, though, the reversal grants 'you' the liberating mask of sexual demon, from behind which she admits her desire.

From the start, Hughes constructs his response poem to oppose the source text, Plath's biographical and poetic narrative. 'Pursuit' is clearly important, not only as one of the first occurrences in a succession of borrowings, but also for Hughes's subsequent engagement with it and the biographical event of their first meeting.

In 'Trophies', the speaker admits that the beast's allure is still potent, its threat of destructive passion no less than in Plath's poem: 'The thrill of it', he observes amazedly (17). 'You' and the panther have an undefined relationship: was it brought about through osmosis, symbiosis or parasitism? The speaker is unsuspecting of the panther subsumed in her eyes, visible through her 'amber jewels' (19). Just as he catches 'you', the panther's jaws lock onto his face, another biographical allusion to the missing excerpt from the *Journals*, though the gender of the predator and prey are switched. Their 'chemical' response results in 'combustion' and, echoing Plath's imagery, all their defences turn to ash (24).

Witnessing her beastlike power, the speaker anticipates her arguments that this power and responsibility is not hers and this beast not she, by countering, 'Plainly the blood/Was your own' (27-8). The susurrations and diminution of energy in Hughes's onomatopoeic descriptions — the 'Rorschach/Splashing' with its psychiatric allusions to the journal-writer's mental state, the trachea 'crushed' and the blood 'aired' — emphasise the

insidiousness of violence (8-11). The blood motif induces a visceral response that escalates the presentiment of violence, explaining the speaker's passivity in the face of doom:

Still smiling
As it carried me off I detached
The hairband carefully from between its teeth
And a ring from its ear, for my trophies. (32-5)

His smile exposes his ignorance, complacency and underestimation of the beast's capacities: his bravado is without foundation. Blithely unaware he is just another trophy carried off in the panther's jaws, by comparison, 'you' exacts more from this uneven contest. His sentimental act of souveniring the hairband and the earring is also defiant: he *will* have his trophies.

'Trophies' engages intertextually with other Plath poems through the symbolism of the ring (the earrings in the *Journals*). In Plath's later work, she links the wedding ring to marital disappointment and betrayal. While Plath's poems devalue it, Hughes's poem reinstates its worth.

A trophy represents a prize won in victory, a memento taken in war or hunting. Hughes's trophy image stresses the competitiveness between the poets, suggesting violence in a relationship replete with power struggles. Both use language to gain the upper hand. Outside the poem's parameters, another kind of trophy-scoring becomes apparent. Not only does Hughes extract the hairband and earrings from Plath on their first meeting but, in the literary realm, he takes further textual trophies from her journals. Where Plath's borrowing is limited to Hughes's totem, he appropriates and absorbs her images and her words in a brazen act of textual thievery.

'Pursuit' and 'Trophies' are notable forays into the dialogue between the two poets, charting a discernible pattern of conversation, where 'The Jaguar' generates a response-poem ('Pursuit') that results in a subsequent poem ('Trophies'). This pattern of sustained dialogue recurs with another series of poems thematically linked by fire imagery, discussed in the third chapter. 'Pursuit' and 'Trophies' highlight the shared codes in their biographical and poetic language,

codes characterised by totems, images, themes, phrases and, significantly, events that both poets experienced outside of poetry. In these poems are indications of Plath and Hughes's writing practice of borrowings and appropriations, a practice that becomes more prevalent later on, emphasising that this is not a singular case.

Conspicuously, Plath's poem shares a name with *Pursuit*, a volume of her poetry published posthumously (1973), including the title poem, 'Words Heard, by Accident, Over the Phone', 'Stings', 'A Secret' and 'Burning the Letters'. Bundtzen observes that this volume 'documents the history of their relationship' (437). Notably, these are poems on infidelity and marital crisis. Knowing Hughes's aversion to publicity, the collection is a curious publication. Hughes admits to the likelihood of their exclusion from Plath's *Ariel*: '[*Ariel*] omitted some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962, and might have omitted one or two more if she had not already published them herself in magazines... The collection that appeared was my eventual compromise' (CP 15). Fortunately, the decision to exclude poems was not his to make.

Judging by the titles of limited edition collections published by Hughes: *Crystal Gazer*, *Wreath for a Bridal* and *Lyonnesse*,² he selects particular Plath poems founded on their shared biography, accentuating their emotional significance. 'Crystal Gazer' records a distressing event during Hughes and Plath's honeymoon in France, while 'Wreath for a Bridal' celebrates the physical union between lovers. A poem about Hughes's 'forgetfulness of his family', written on the handwritten pages of Hughes's play 'The Calm', 'Lyonnesse' is part of the group of poems containing Plath's 'most devastating reappraisals of Hughes' (Van Dyne 9-10).

Birthday Letters is described as a volume that shoulders the weight of Hughes's guilt, a therapeutic medium for writing out the ups and downs of their relationship, a testament and memoir. More pertinently, it is also Hughes's unspoken attempt to have the last word over Plath.

² Olwyn Hughes, Hughes's sister, selected poems for the monographs *Crystal Gazer*, *Lyonnesse*, *Pursuit* and *Dialogue over a Ouija Board*. The Rainbow Press was a publishing imprint owned by Hughes and Olwyn, which operated between 1971 and 1979 (Sagar and Tabor 4).

Unravelling the threads of art and life between Plath and Hughes is problematic for scholars, not least for Hughes's multiple roles of literary editor, copyright owner and poet. His book is a textual medium, communicating to readers, critics and Plath his point of view, whereas time is the narrative medium on which their twinned stories are founded. Time is important to verify truths and establish integrity. When dates are ascertained for composition and publication of Plath's poems, these make up compositional time; Hughes's imposed editorial time applies to her posthumous work where it is indeterminable when poems were composed or published, while historical time is what the other constructs weave in and out of. Glen Thomas and Nancy D Hargrove indicate numerous errors in Hughes's dating of Plath's poems, a warning that Hughes may have constructed a literary life for her not strictly true but serving whatever purposes he had in mind. By contrast, there are no dates in *Birthday Letters*.

Bibliographic records of *Birthday Letters* are unenlightening about Hughes's work and its publishing history while *Collected Poems*'s records, though extensively researched, contain irregularities, revealing that Hughes created, perpetuated and endorsed an inaccurate chronology of Plath's work. Critics such as Hargrove have researched Plath's bibliography, but not comprehensively; a chronology of compositions for poems, their subsequent publication in magazines and manuscript publication is crucial. *Letters Home* (published correspondence between Plath and her mother) and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (both the 1982 and the unabridged 2000 editions) aid verification; however, at least two journals are lost. Accurate chronological and bibliographic research of Hughes and Plath's work would be useful in uncovering motivations behind Hughes's roles as editor, executor of Plath's literary estate and poet, and in establishing when his work was written, in relation to hers.

As a poet, Hughes purloins textual trophies from Plath's *oeuvre*. As literary editor, he claims to provide Plath's readership with her best work, unadulterated by second-rate poems, and to protect from Plath's acerbic insights those people still living. Meanwhile, he hoards Plath's texts through sizeable excisions of entries in her *Journals* and withholds permission of poems for literary study, thereby policing critical response. The steady yet gradual publication of Plath's work Hughes ascribes to a need for income:

As I am aware of them, my obligations are not so simple as a scholar's would be. They are, first, towards her family, second, towards her best work. Just like hers, in fact – a point to be considered, since I feel a general first and last obligation to her.

For her family, I follow her principle and try to manage the writing in ways that will earn as much income as possible. (WP 163)

A similar need for self-preservation underpins Hughes's destruction of Plath's last journal:

'The last of these contained entries for several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival' (J xiii).

Such tantalising gaps preclude chronological accuracy, hamper knowledge and prevent the confirmation and clarification of shifting relationships between the poets' *oeuvres*. While the scope of this thesis precludes it, a comprehensive bibliographic documentation of both poets' work is a potential avenue for further study.

At least 19 out of 88 poems in *Birthday Letters* had been previously published. 'You Hated Spain' saw its first incarnation in a limited edition monograph *Poetry Supplement* (1979), then in *Ploughshares* (1980), with subsequent publications in *New Selected Poems* (1982) and *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* (Sagar and Tabor 186). 'The Earthenware Head' shares a similar vintage. First published in *Broadsides* (1979), it is published subsequently in the *London Review of Books* (1980), included in *LRB: Anthology One* (1981) and performed at a reading for Poetry Day at the National Theatre (6 October 1994), finally appearing in *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* (Sagar and Tabor 186).

Furthermore, on 11 January 1993, *The New Yorker* published 'Black Coat' which, along with 'Chaucer', received subsequent publication in *New Selected Poems 1957-1994*. It also published 'Totem' on December 27, 1993 and 'Chaucer' on January 16, 1995, while on August 5, 1996, it included 'The Rag Rug' and 'Black Hair', the latter a poem not included in *Birthday Letters*. On February 2, 1998, it also published 'Fulbright Scholars', 'Fidelity', 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress', 'The Literary Life', 'A Dream', 'The Minotaur', 'Robbing Myself' and 'Freedom of Speech'. The Gehenna Press published 'Error' in *Capriccio* (1990), which

Hughes included in *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* and submitted to *The New Yorker* (1995), titling it 'The Error'.

This bibliographic history emphasises Hughes's penchant for borrowing, reworking and recycling. His attitude towards Plath's poetry is similar: he appropriates and rewrites. In a startling conjunction of chronology and text, Hughes's capacity for textual theft also manifests in 'Daffodils'. In a remarkable discovery, an early variant of 'Daffodils' (one of the few gracious poems in *Birthday Letters*) is published in *LRB* (1984). The earlier version published in *LRB* endows the daffodils with extensive personification and addresses the theme of resurrection; ending on a cheerless note, it differs substantially to the final version which, while using numerous lines from the first, is less effusive in its gestures. This is a substantial shift in perspective between one poem and the other. Remarkable still, the 1984 version is written in first person singular: 'I knew I'd live forever' (13), the 1998 version in first person plural: 'We knew we'd live for ever' (24).

Hughes's change from the solitary 'nomad' in the first version to the addition of another figure in the second version is suspect, the inclusion resulting in an attribution of feelings perceived by the speaker but not necessarily shared by the second figure (11). The 'nomad', portrayed as enjoying guiltily the fruits of nature is, in the second version, reaping the 'treasure trove' of daffodils for self-advantage (an imagined crime that implicates the second figure alluded in 'we') (20). The 'raid' on life and good luck described in both versions carries over to a textual raiding and cannibalising of his poems and his life. While research has not uncovered any other poem in *Birthday Letters* published in variant form, the variant 'Daffodils' signposts future discoveries of other previously published and variant poems in *Birthday Letters* as well as potential insights into Hughes's editorial and poetic conduct.

From first meeting to their marriage of six years, and even after Plath's death, when Hughes took over publishing their poetry, theirs was both a meeting of minds and a struggle for ascendancy. At the start of their marriage, Plath admired Hughes and encouraged his literary career at the expense of her own. To her mother, she writes, 'Yesterday I devoted to typing Ted's first book of poems.... Ted is much more modest than I about his work, so I act as his

agent' (LH 328-43). At Plath's initiative, she sent out his work for a publication competition. The American and British literati vindicate her devotion when Hughes is fêted after his first book is published:

Ted's book of poems - - - The Hawk in the Rain - - - has won the Harper's first publication contest under the 3 judges: W.H.Auden, Stephen Spender & Marianne Moore! I am so glad Ted is first. All my pat theories against marrying a writer dissolve with Ted: his rejections more than double my sorrow & his acceptances rejoice me more than mine... (J2 270-1)

But Plath becomes restrained by Hughes's success, her work suffering even when she writes away from Hughes's scrutiny:

I picked a hard way which was to be all self-mapped out and must not nag (...anything Ted doesn't like: this is nagging); he, of course, can nag me about light meals, straight-necks, writing exercises, from his superior seat. The famed & fatal jealousy of professionals – luckily he is ahead of me so far I never need fear the old superiority heel-grinding – in weak-neck impulse. Perhaps fame will make him insufferable. I will work for its not doing so. Must work & get out of paralysis – write & show him nothing: novel, stories & poems... Must lose paralysis & catapult into small efforts.... Ted fought for publication before his book which was an open sesame – gathering prizes and fame. And so do I now fight... (J2 421)

The exercises set by Hughes were used for working through a period of writer's block.

Wagner-Martin observes that, although a few of the topics are more suited to Hughes, there are some 'Plath did choose to write about because the effective poems that resulted are among her published work, poems such as ... "Lament of the earthen ware head" ... [and] "Rabbit Snares"...', topics notable for Hughes's adoption of them in *Birthday Letters* (91). Hughes is forced to display his creativity not once (in setting up the topics) but twice (in his re-visioning of Plath's work on the chosen subjects). Ironically, Hughes's topic, 'Rabbit Snares', catalysed Plath's acrimonious poem 'The Rabbit Catcher', its apparent subject matter catching him by surprise.

Plath witnessed the fame bestowed on Hughes by an august fraternal lineage of British writers but was able to take part only by association; her rage manifests in discontented journal entries. She writes of her anger towards Hughes, her wasted devotion: 'I feel I did discover him and worked to free him for writing for six years' (Bundtzen 26). The posthumous success of Plath's literary *oeuvre* perhaps motivates Hughes's resentment, which finds its outlet in

destruction. Between them is a violent exchange that targets the textual body of work.

Bundtzen remarks,

Acts of textual violence or abuse... were... habitual in the Plath-Hughes marriage, although Plath was customarily the perpetrator. Plath's biographers describes more than one incident in which Plath destroyed her husband's work, and Plath's 'Burning the Letters' is about one of those times, when she pillaged and burned the contents of Hughes's study. (435)

The burning of poems, letters, at least one journal and the draft of a novel, although extreme, may be said to be another form of editorial choice and control.

It is apparent Plath's writing presented for Hughes editorial difficulties. In 'Notes on Poems 1956-63' and in his essay, 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"', Hughes investigated poems which Plath either returned to and re-wrote ('Sheep in Fog'), or abandoned without resolution ('New Year on Dartmoor', 'Eavesdropper' and 'Fever 103°') with observations that belie his statement that Plath finished everything she wrote:

NEW YEAR ON DARTMOOR. A fragment extracted from a tangle of corrected manuscript, this poem must be regarded as unfinished.

FEVER 103°. ...She had made a somewhat earlier (but undated) attempt to break through to the substance of this poem. After several pages of what looks like feverish exploration of the theme, her earlier controls took over, and reduced the confusion to the following, which she left in manuscript, unfinalized...

EAVESDROPPER. This poem was written in slightly longer form on 15 October 1962, but reduced to its present length, by simple deletions, on 31 December. No final copy was made. (CP 292-4)

In Hughes's essay, he expands on the editorial anomaly of 'Eavesdropper' in a parenthetical aside: 'She shortened this piece, corrected it quite heavily, but left it without any final draft (it is the only poem that to my knowledge she never finished)' (191-2). This admission undermines his statement of Plath's 'artisan-like' attitude, a confidence dependent on perpetuating Plath as a perfect and perfected poet (CP 13). Steven Gould Axelrod observes that 'all of these [actions] may be designed to make his assertion seem truer than it is', a reminder that Hughes, as editor, has much at stake with Plath's work (19). Dianne Middlebrook adds, 'Hughes's continual intervention in Plath's career is very problematic, since he made many interventions' (qtd. in Farnsworth n. pag.).

From editorial notes of Plath's work, Hughes's assumed certitude hints at a need to pose as the all-knowing editor, yet it is conspicuous his difficulties are with poems unfinished, incomplete, lost or destroyed. Hughes's assurance is not the only thing that is suspect. There are at least two poems excluded from the collection: 'Small Hours', published in *Critical Quarterly Supplement No. 5* (1964) and 'The Dream of the Hearse Driver', published in the *London Times Literary Supplement* (31 July 1969) and in *Works in Progress* (edited by Martha Saxton, 1971). Are the omissions deliberate or accidental, and if so, for what reasons? Since Plath sent work to journals and magazine up to the time of her death in 1963, both poems qualify for inclusion yet they are dropped from the collection. Submitted presumably by Hughes on Plath's behalf, these are curious omissions. Hughes avers that

Enthusiasts, like scholars, feel the need to see every word of their poet, but only a ninny imagines that the poor doesn't ultimately confuse the effect of the good. Art's whole purpose is to recognize the good and bring it clear of the not so good, and keep it there. That's what all the work is about. (*WP* 165)

The problem with this statement is that it is Hughes who undertook the publication of at least one of Plath's omitted poems. Poems excluded from *Collected Poems* may fall into Hughes's emotional category of 'personally aggressive'; certainly his omissions recall earlier examples of editorial control, such as his version of *Ariel*, which deviates considerably from Plath's compilation: 'The collection that appeared was my eventual compromise between publishing a large bulk of her work — including much of the post-*Colossus* but pre-*Ariel* verse — and introducing her late work more cautiously...' (*CP* 15). As Hughes states, these may just be the '[t]wo or three I simply lost for a while in the general fog of those days' (167). Of the *Collected Poems*, Hughes writes

The aim of the present complete edition, which contains a numbered sequence of the 224 poems written after 1956 together with a further 50 poems chosen from her pre-1956 work, is to bring Sylvia Plath's poetry together in one volume, including the various uncollected and unpublished pieces, and to set everything in as true a chronological order as is possible, so that the whole progress and achievement of this unusual poet will become accessible to readers. (15)

Though his editorial methods are suspect, for many scholars accepting the resulting text is a necessary evil since Hughes has the upper hand.

Writerly rivalry threads the Plath-Hughes relationship. Even before they married, a spirit of competition tintured their mutual love for literature: 'We... read poems; we quote on and on: he says a line of Thomas or Shakespeare and says: "Finish!"' (LH 266). At the time of the couple's separation, Bundtzen observes Plath's penchant for 'insistently cast[ing] Hughes as jealous of her artistic powers' (27). Hughes denies any rivalry existed between them, frustrated by unfounded critical speculation and 'completely false remarks implying that there was some sort of artistic jealousy between Sylvia and me' (qtd. in Malcolm 125). Plath vented personal dissatisfactions about Hughes, though rarely criticised his writing; conversely, after her death, Hughes maintained 'she never did anything that I held against her' yet is less reserved about critically commenting on her work (qtd. in Malcolm 143).

Hughes published *Ariel* after Plath's suicide and, effectively, Plath's poems served as her last word for a long time — resoundingly confirmed by the *Collected Poems* — on everything to do with her art, life and relationship with Hughes. So why *did* Hughes publish these poems after Plath's death? He has stated financial need but his literary success suggests fiscal necessity as moot. Had Hughes decided to bury her work in the attic, very few would have been any the wiser: it is Plath's celebrity that has generated the constant questioning of his actions and motives. He may have saved himself unwanted attention had he not made the poems, journals and short stories available for public scrutiny. And why, to cap their communication, should he publish *Birthday Letters*?

Though it is uncertain when Hughes knew of his terminal illness, he commenced compiling the poems in 1995, publishing the eighty-eight poems in 1998. He died nine months later.

Arguably, *Birthday Letters* may be the last word in the Plath-Hughes saga, though Hughes's publishing *côup* is a Pyrrhic victory. As a final gesture to their unspoken communication and rivalry, Hughes's poems provide an entrée to the dialogues suppressed within the poems.

Pairings 2: Plath, 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head' and Hughes, 'The Earthenware Head'

In 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', Plath addresses the idea of a ghost self, a second self that haunts the original. The speaker is presented with the difficulty of ridding her self of harmful elements — in this case, the outwardly benign terracotta model of her head. 'The Lady' portrays the speaker's anxiety over this haunting and, despite reaching an uneasy truce, her relief at the poem's conclusion.

The omnipresence of the head in the poem attests to its power. The line 'Fired in sanguine clay' points to the speaker's mortality: she is also made from earth and they are more alike than she thinks (1). Descriptions of the head reveal wary misgivings: it is 'spite-set', 'outrageous', 'glowering sullen and pompous' and 'coarse' (4-15). The head frustrates her, it 'fit[s] nowhere' but ambivalently, she is 'loath to junk it' (2-7). An obsession with disencumbering herself from this unwanted possession grips her and she imagines it 'glowering' in an 'ash-heap', or at the bottom of a tarn (11). Neither option appeals, for she can also imagine 'rough boys' maltreating it, or macabrely, the head bobbing from the deep water, haunting her (9). She attaches superstition to this copy of herself: anything that happens to it will 'waken the sly nerve up/That knits to each original', the head acting as a voodoo doll might (13-4). This idea is delineated in a stanza deleted from the original draft:

...fearing some truth
In old wives' tale of a bond
Knitting to each original its coarse copy
(Woe if enemies, in wrath,
Take to sticking pins through wax!) — felt loath
To junk it. (Tabor 41)

Her identification is such that, after considering putting the imitation head underwater, she pales 'as one who drowns' at the thought of its resurfacing: any final resting place may become her sentence (21). To her, the earthenware head is her double and she comes to hate and fear it.

Plath's interest in the double manifests not only in her Honours thesis on Dostoevsky's *The Magic Mirror* and *The Brothers Karamazov* but also in poems such as 'In Plaster' and in her novel *The Bell Jar* (Lameyer 143-4). In 'The Lady', the double is not a positive figure but an 'enemy, an omen of death. She must keep the head safe in order to be safe herself' (Uroff 80). Finally, she settles on placing it in a 'crotched willow', an unhappy decision resulting in 'wring hands', tears and prayers: from wooden 'bookshelf' to willow shelf, the head has not moved far (3-30). She calls it 'evil-starred' because it endures, connected by its unwanted, illogical, destructive 'basilisk-look of love' (31-5).

Attributing powers to the disembodied head is her undoing. The drama is self-generated. All the manifestation of guilt and fear is, literally and figuratively, in her head.

'The Lady' is a useful allegory for considering the intertwinement of Plath's biography with her poetry by literary critics. In the poem, the speaker cannot detach herself from her clay model because it is her double, though an inanimate one. In the critical analysis of Plath's work, there is a similar reluctance to disengage and distinguish between the creator and the construct. A real temptation exists (and one to which a few critics have succumbed) in identifying the speakers in Plath and Hughes's poetry as their actual selves:

'Is it all right if I call the "you" in the poem Plath and the "I" Hughes?' the poet and critic Alicia Ostriker asked at the outset of the discussion [at a recent Academy of American Poets Symposium]. (It was perfectly all right: by the end of the event, everyone was calling them Ted and Sylvia.) (Mead 27)

Characteristically, the first person 'I' is a construct who speaks for Plath and yet, clearly, it is not Plath. Rose points out that

This poem adds a crucial dimension to the difficulty of writing about Plath — or rather, it issues a warning. Often... it is technically impossible to separate Plath's voice from those who speak for her (a large part of her writing was published and, more importantly, edited after her death). Plath's writings and the surrounding voices stand in effigy for her, they speak in her name. (2)

Rose goes on to note that 'the editorial control and intervention have been so visible' that, in terms of Plath's work, Hughes's editorial presence, as one of the 'surrounding voices', is a

compromising one (2-3). What is compromised is the integrity of the work. Allied to this difficulty is ascertaining the boundaries of Hughes's involvement and finding out for which editorial acts he is responsible.

In Tabor's bibliography, there are several citations of Plath's poem as originally titled 'The Earthenware Head', annotated in this fashion: 'The Earthenware Head [=The Lady and The Earthenware Head]' (138). This suggests a later emendation, whether by Plath or some other agent is unknown. Certainly, Plath's poem is titled 'The Earthenware Head' in recordings made during 18 April and 13 June 1958, though it is given its present title in *Pursuit* (1973-4), *Letters Home* (1975) and *Collected Poems* (1981). Notably, these monographs are posthumous works. Is the phrase 'The Lady' an addition made before or after Hughes's editorship of Plath's work? Without it, Plath's poem would share the same title as Hughes's. But on 10 February 1958, Plath must have decided on the longer version when she says, '... "The Earthenware Head" was the right title, the only title. It is derived, organically, from the title & subject of my poem "The Lady & the Earthenware Head" ...' (J2 332). Might the journal entries have been manipulated when Hughes co-edited *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*? Extensive excisions were made and marked out but there is no mention of additions, other than commentary. There is no reason to suspect Hughes of tampering with Plath's work, though the addition is a conspicuous coincidence, hinting at this being another case of textual manipulation.

The relationship of Plath's poem to Hughes's 'The Earthenware Head' is crucial in his poem's opposition to what constitutes as the dominant narrative. It borrows from and reworks ideas and phrases from Plath's poem. Hughes's 'The Earthenware Head', while narrating the same event, differs to Plath's poem in focus, tone and atmosphere. His poem interweaves religious, personal and sexual allusions with classical motifs and sets it in a pastoral landscape. Its tone is both conversational and erudite, as if the speaker is trying to be personable and to impress. In her poem, Plath's syntax prevents a transparent, easy reading, while the difficulty in Hughes's poem lies in his choice of obscure references.

In Hughes's poem, the word 'Herm' is notable. Defined as a bust of Mercury affixed to a pillar that serves as a boundary on street corners, it points to a line excised from the final draft of Plath's 'The Lady': 'No place, it seemed, for the effigy to sit / On its pillared neck in peace' (Tabor 138). The significance of 'pillared' resonates in both this and Hughes's poem, since it resembles the word pilloried, recalling the stalking, terracotta head's persecution (4). In this, Hughes's poem agrees with Plath's own: both speakers dislike the clay head, though his inclusory first person plural form is a transparent attempt to claim Plath's narrative.

Hughes's speaker voices a blunt consensus against this unwanted gift. It is a failed likeness. The head is immediately placed, in a startlingly crude sexual description, in a willow's 'twiggy crotch' (17), sabotaging Plath's 'crotched willow' line (23). Gruesomely, the head is fitted in the 'socket of healed bole-wound', a paradoxical image suggestive of not only nature's ability to heal itself but also of a woman's 'wound' (a vaginal image) and its concomitant relationship to physical violence. The combined elements of salvation and damnation are manifest in the image of the river, where

Your deathless head...
 ...kisses the Father
 Muddled at the bottom of the Cam,
 Beyond recognition or rescue,
 All our fears washed from it, and perfect... (42-6)

...and that of the bees: 'flitting towards their honey / And the stopped clock' (49). Father and bee images, while harkening to Plath's themes, also provoke biographical readings not overt in 'The Lady'.

The idea of doubleness is embodied in the speaker. Acting as memoirist and scribe, he observes that 'You never/Said much more about it' (30-1). He assumes she is blind to the perspective only 'I' can perceive, a reductive, infantilising assumption. His statement suggests a certain hypocritical, ostensible kindness on his part, as if to say he will remember without fault and, if need be, remind 'you' of this, even if it is unpleasant. With the head still lost after a cursory search, he brings his imagination to bear. At first, he presents optimistic images.

The enshrined double faces east to watch the sun rise, which suggests a new beginning; or boys had found and shattered it, freeing her from the curse; or perhaps the tree lowered and knelt, allowing the head to sink into the earth. The multiple meanings of 'representing' are also promising: presenting again, a proxy, bringing to the present, bringing forward. The head is happy in the cold elements; amidst nature, it seems benign but then the speaker's tone changes. He repeats the word 'surely' thrice and 'evil' twice, like a mantra, as if he has caught her anxiety and distress and is trying to comfort himself: 'Surely the river got it. Surely / The river is its chapel. And keeps it. Surely...' (40-1). He continues, saying 'our fears'; previously it was 'you' and 'I' (46). In a religiously toned description, he imagines the head underwater, as if undergoing a baptism in the river. The chapel and rebirth point to sanctity and renewal, darkened by the shadows seeking honey and 'the stopped clock' (50). The latter's allusion to death destroys the hope built up by the previous lines, for the bees are attracted to death — a notable image since both poets were beekeepers, bees are part of Plath's private mythology, with a potent, associative valency to her father.

'The Earthenware Head' incorporates a biographical element that encompasses Plath's poem, a reading that Plath might not have intended. Seeking to diminish the importance of 'The Lady' by trivialising details and arguing for an elevation of status above Plath's, Hughes's poem also affirms that Plath's speaker is paranoid. Notably, Hughes's title omits *The Lady*, suggestive of an intention to erase the female from the narrative altogether.

The speaker's anxiety in 'The Lady' contrasts with the brazen confidence exhibited by the female personae Plath creates in her later work. The poem remains important not only as another instance of a speaker being stalked by something other (as in 'Pursuit'), but also for revealing how she copes with her haunting. This topical dialogue with ghosts is one which Plath and Hughes explore in their later poetry ('Daddy' and 'A Picture of Otto' respectively), as examined in the second chapter. While it is notable that the tension between the two poems arises mainly from Hughes and his need to dispute Plath's account, both 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head' and 'The Earthenware Head' extend the dialogue by uncovering the connections and tensions over the issue of biographical facts in their poetry.

Pairings 3: Plath, 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' and Hughes, 'The 59th Bear'

This thesis concentrates on the conversation between the poetry of Plath and Hughes but it is useful to explore an anomalous yet indisputable connection, as indicated by the similarity of their titles, between two works situated in different genres. While some of Hughes's poems show a strong engagement with issues in Plath's short stories, his 'The 59th Bear' indicates a more convincing dialogue with Plath's short story 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear'.

Plath's 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' is crucial for introducing a female persona rebelling, if only obliquely, against her husband's subtle tyranny. Plath's fictive reworking of the actual event reveals an implicit need to punish the husband for some omission or misdeed, compared with Hughes's 'The 59th Bear' and its deterministic, even fatalistic viewpoint of the bear's actions, a stance that undercuts the wife's authority and fundamental free will. Hughes's belief in predestination colours most of the poems in *Birthday Letters*. To skirt insalubrious issues of blame and culpability, male speakers in these poems attribute the occurrence of marriages, births, infidelities and deaths as preordained and inevitable. The wife's wish to kill her husband in 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' is not addressed directly in Hughes's poem, evading the unspoken indictment of the husband embedded within Plath's narrative, even as the speaker co-opts his wife's point of view by implying a shared perspective: 'it was as novel-astonishing / To you as to me' and 'we were swept / Into the general exclamatory joy' (7-30).

The notes in *Collected Poems* relate briefly the cross-country trip taken by Plath and Hughes in 1959: 'Setting off in July, she and TH drove around the United States, from Canada to San Francisco to New Orleans and back, camping on the way — a journey of about nine weeks' (288). Documenting this trip are a few oblique poems, a small number of letters to Plath's mother and brother Warren and journal fragments. Only Plath's 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' survives as a comprehensive literary record. Plath's dissatisfaction is obvious from her journal entry: 'Disgust with the 17 page story I just finished: a stiff artificial piece about a man killed by a bear, ostensibly because his wife willed it to happen, but none of the deep emotional undercurrents gone into or developed' (J2 501).

To allay boredom, central characters Sadie and Norton count bears on the way to Yellowstone Park. Their relationship to the animals is crucial: Norton believes himself an animal-charmer, while Sadie is a fearless animal empath. Plath chose the name Sadie for its connotations of sadism and for sharing the same initial as hers, portraying her as petulant and perverse, a woman who took her games seriously. She eventually goads Norton to his death: 'Her voice challenged him' (*JPBD* 110).

In the short story (and in Hughes's poem), a man dies but in actuality, it was a woman. In *Letters Home*, Plath writes, '[A] woman had been killed by a bear Sunday, the night we came. That woman, hearing the bear at her food at night, had gone out with a flashlight to shoo it away, and it turned on her and downed her with one vicious cuff' (404). Foreshadowing Hughes's widower status, Plath contrives for Norton to imagine himself in the role of widower, even as Sadie is portrayed as Norton's lamb on a leash. Norton sees himself as a protecting god, but he underestimates Sadie and her animal empathy. Since the mood is generally of suppressed resentment, the unexpected instant of near-harmony — when the couple sings a British song about waking up alone, broken-hearted — amplifies the sense of menace in the story's final moments.

Their talk of 'rabbitish fears' and skittishness seems totemic of Sadie and Norton's relationship (108). The unspoken conflict between the couple and power shifts within the story provide its momentum. The minutes before the bear kills Norton are pivotal, particularly the ambiguity of Sadie's cry: is it one of anguish or triumph? The point of view at story's close is decidedly female, but whether the will that prevails over Norton's is his wife's or nature's is indeterminate.

Hughes's similarly lengthy 'The 59th Bear' conforms to elements of Plath's short story. The 'vision' of 'you' senses, premonitorily, an oncoming disaster. Hughes presents the event as fated, thus denying her will and draining of its potency her dissatisfaction towards the husband (53). Such a perspective on events is a clear attempt to both excuse and avert the

venom directed towards him, especially when the speaker maintains the bear, an imagined surrogate of the wife, as killing out of self-salvation and need, not from malice. This blurring of identities emphasises the ambiguity of the epithet 'beast' — does he refer to the bear, the wife or a combination of both (156)? Hughes's portrayal anthropomorphises the bear, erasing distinctions. The speaker is 'ego-raked' by both, and mortally so (155). The speaker observes too late the 'One thing I missed', his self-recrimination pointing to a lack of care that he had overlooked clues to answer a crucial question: why would a wife wish, even if vicariously, through 'transform[ing] our dud scenario into a fiction', to kill her husband (78-183)?

In 'The 59th Bear', Hughes observes that 'you', despite her terror over the bears, has 'the mathematics perfect' (171), an observation paralleling his editorial description of Plath's poetry, with 'that sense of deep mathematical inevitability in the sound and texture of her lines' (16). An interest in Plath's text manifests in Hughes's line 'Vast, bristling darkness' (85) which echoes Plath's 'the pines bristled with shadow' (109). The souveniring of the bear's hairs left on the tent canvas and glued subsequently in his copy of Shakespeare point to another memento extant in Hughes's Shakespeare, destroyed in the conflagration indicated in Plath's 'Burning the Letters' — the two Shakespeares are indelibly inscribed.

Plath's 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' is the site of disputation between itself and Hughes's poem, the latter constructed as a reasonable alternative to that posited by Plath's version. 'The 59th Bear' argues against Plath's almost melodramatic style by presenting a calm, methodical approach and achieves credence for its version of events. The tensions between the two works construct a dissonant dialogue highlighting each writer's agenda, which is embedded within their work. The poems emphasise a dialogue of argument and opposition.

Looking at the connections between these paired poems, what emerges is that the poem is both an iconic response and an active engagement with an issue. As a by-product of this engagement, theft, appropriation or raiding ensues. In that response is embedded the shared codes of the poets' common language and ideas, phrases and themes. Perhaps it is a misconception to portray such shared usage as appropriation, but evidence in 'Pursuit' and

'Trophies' belies this. There is a distinct lack of generosity and a meanness of spirit that informs Hughes's poetry, alleviated intermittently in *Birthday Letters* by tender portraits ('Perfect Light', 'Chaucer' and 'Daffodils'), though even these are problematic. The paired poems also highlight the recurrent, obsessive need to redress and provide the opposing point of view. What is evident is that Hughes is driven to show and narrate his story, and to position himself in a binary relationship to Plath.

The occurrence of borrowings between poets indicates tensions over ownership, their writerly and personal jealousies manifesting on the textual body. Textual territoriality becomes apparent when the poet brings attention to the site of conflict by embedding the other's problematic phrase or image in his or her own work. Hughes's textual territoriality is doubly problematic because of his role as editor and literary executor of Plath's work. The boundaries of textual ownership blur easily since, in effect, Hughes owns all their words. Editorial decisions and interventions are questionable in many instances. Such possessiveness might explain why, in Hughes's poetry, the male personae constantly trivialise the fear and paranoia of the female characters. In a sense, the struggle for textual ownership is a struggle for fame. The initial attention on Hughes switched to Plath at the time of her death. With *Birthday Letters*, Hughes attempts to wrest the attention back, asserting his version to outrival Plath's primacy. Allied to their textual conflict over presenting an ascendant version of events is the compulsion to have the last word.

Expanding on the textual theft of Plath and Hughes in this chapter, such behaviour finds its continuance in the second chapter, which focuses on their biographical raids, a steady plundering on the shared experiences of their lives.



Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath

Raiding Lives

Raiding Lives

Our lives were still a raid on our own good luck.

‘Daffodils’, Ted Hughes

Plath and Hughes are locked in a textual contest over the truth of their biographies, staking ownership over the facts of their lives. Emphasising the biographical foundations within the primary poem, Hughes’s work focuses and provokes a biographical reading, one that insists on revealing the scaffolding behind Plath’s work and negating portrayals of their shared lives, even as the biographical facts in the poems expose such scaffolding as illusory constructs. Both poets share the technique of shifting and challenging the perspective depicted in the primary text with a subsequently written poem. ‘Crystal Gazer’ and ‘The Gypsy’ focus on self-deception and the blunt examination of actual events. Plath’s ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ and Hughes’s ‘Rabbit Catcher’ chart variants of emotional and biographical terrain, either addressing or evading issues of infidelity, betrayal, national difference and treachery. Plath’s ‘Wuthering Heights’ and Hughes’s ‘Wuthering Heights’ explore emotional isolation,

commodification of the domestic and writerly ambition. Plath's 'Stings' and Hughes's 'The Bee God', Plath's 'Daddy' and Hughes's 'A Picture of Otto' continue with the reductive stripping away of poetry's façade to the biography that lies underneath. Hughes's assertion of textual ownership corresponds with an anxiety over privileging one version of the shared biographies. Compelled to present his set of facts, his poetry rends the veil of fiction from Plath's work, only to replace it with one fitting his agenda.

In correspondence, Hughes has said, '[E]verything speculative or to do with interpretation & evaluation are anybody's own business, yours as much as mine, finally'; yet, when comparing the poets' works, Hughes ensures the reader privileges his version of biographical events by using *Birthday Letters* to provoke the more problematic, biographically based interpretation, an act which affects both their work (qtd. in Sagar 234). That Plath's poetry provides the impetus for *Birthday Letters* is clear; less clear, however, is whether the book is a poetic response to issues embedded within Plath's work or results from textual thievery. One might view Hughes's poetic version of a biographical event as a rigid form of literary criticism, one that denies fruitful debate. However, Hughes's questionable editorial practice parallels dubious behaviour as a poet and writer: in Hughes's poems instances of biographical borrowings exceed the number of Plath's totemic appropriations.

For a number of years, the scope and quantity of biographical material on Plath favoured her perspective over Hughes. At the time of this thesis, no biography is extant on Hughes and his interviews are few — *Birthday Letters* is a rare comment on the poets' lives. While not focusing on biographical detail, my thesis utilises journals, letters, editorials and interviews to anchor the many points at which the two poets' work would benefit from biographical elucidation. David John Wood observes that while biographical details are useful in contextualising Plath's poetry, 'their employment may not ultimately be necessary to [its] appreciation' and 'as they are available, they should be used, provided that they are not allowed to detract' (ix).

Critics of Plath and Hughes note the difficulty, when discussing their poetry, of separating their work from their life. Wood adds, 'Perhaps the hardest task in any reading of Sylvia Plath

is to establish a balanced relationship between the writing and the life. Although it has long been a critical preoccupation, not enough is known about either to relate them with absolute certainty' (1). Nathalie Anderson warns against simplistic moralising:

...Plath's death, though tragedy, was clearly no murder.... many readers (and non-readers) of Hughes's work seem unable to extricate his poetry from his private life... [T]he actual relations that lie behind the poems make ... scholarly conclusions rather more personal than is usual, and offer the potential – a rather perilous one – for insight into the man as well as his work. (91-92)

Such critical difficulty is attributable to an overlap between poetry and biography. Wood describes Plath's work as

...both auto-biographical and non-autobiographical at one and the same time. ...Once offered to the reader, however, her work becomes something quite different, something that a knowledge of her life, no matter how comprehensive, can never account for. (8)

The influence of life over art is most evident in poems referring to shared biographical events, yet it is striking that, where Plath's poetry tends to obscure the biography so that only hints of it remain, Hughes's poetry insists, in an uncompromising fashion, on uncovering private details of their lives.

Pairings 4: Hughes, 'The Gypsy' and Plath, 'The Crystal Gazer'

Plath's 'Crystal Gazer', unlike most of her work, cannot be cross-referenced to any incident in her life. Remarkably, it is Hughes's 'The Gypsy' that reveals the portentous moment 'Crystal Gazer' records, providing the biographical grounding for comparison between the poems.

Hughes's poem describes an outing from Paris, to see the Cathedral at Rheims. As the speaker and 'you' sit in the square, a 'dark stub gypsy woman' holds out a religious pendant, presumably to sell: 'Almost before she spoke you had refused her, / A practised reflex, sprung like a trap, hard / Your vehemence met her vehemence' (29-31). It is a standoff. The gypsy retaliates, curses the woman. She disappears; the speaker and 'you' stay in the square, as if nothing had happened: 'you went on writing postcards' (51-2).

'The Gypsy' is structured in three parts, the idyll, the actual event and the event's repercussions. It evokes a whimsical state: 'I was weaving / Ahead of us' but the speaker's vision is fragile (10-1). Looking back, he sees 'The Cathedral was there, / Impotent', unable to prevent or assuage the blow with which the figure of 'you' is dealt, trying ineffectually to avert the gypsy's venom through chants and mantras (1-2). He attempts to carry the weight of religion and superstition, to shoulder the burden of the curse, wanting to believe that she is unaffected by the gypsy's 'lightning stroke' act of malice (8). He believes he almost succeeds in this: 'you never mentioned it. / Never recorded it / In your diary' but the poem alludes she is already doomed 'In a solidier crypt' (57-62).

Mimicking Plath's technique in 'The Crystal Gazer', Hughes attempts to distance the speaker and 'you' from the gypsy's potent clairvoyance by using the gypsy's French and Gallic looks and background to explain her strangeness and ward off the malignancy of her prediction. As in 'The Rabbit Catcher', the 'I' in 'The Gypsy' is the peacekeeper, the coin-giver who wishes he can bribe the gypsy into 'calling back her projectile', the rhymor of 'talismans of power' who tries to purge the spell of death she casts over the day and the years to come (53-7). But the projectile is aimed uncompromisingly at 'you': '*Vous / Crèverez bientôt*'.³ (38) He hopes she 'hadn't even heard it' but his wish is a vain one. The parallels between the portent and biographical fact are eerily close — Plath is dead seven years after her honeymoon, the setting of the couple's encounter.

No biographical material has surfaced for 'Crystal Gazer', nothing to contextualise it in Plath's journal entries or correspondence. However, its correlation with Hughes's 'The Gypsy' is evident. Plath revises the actual event to tame its significance in 'Crystal Gazer'. Simply told, a groom and his bride see Gerd, a fortune-teller. The groom insists on knowing of any future 'hardship', and 'His bride echoes his word' (19-21). After Gerd forecasts their relationship will emerge stronger after adversity, the couple pay her a 'small price' and go into the 'sun-moneyed air'. The focus ends with Gerd who, after the newlyweds leave, reveals to the reader their blighted fate:

³ My translation: 'You will die soon'.

What Gerd saw then engraved her mind
Plague-pitted as the moon: each bud
Shriveling to cinders at its source,
Each love blazing blind to its gutted end —
And, fixed in the crystal center, grinning fierce:
Earth's ever-green death's head. (43-8)

For all the ornamentation with which Plath embroiders the tale, it does not hide its ominous undertones — the weighty prophecy of death is hard to mask. That Plath wants to neutralise the event is obvious, yet the poem's very existence undermines her ability to suppress the prophecy's effect, significance and power.

Another of Plath's distancing devices is seen in her depiction of the fortune-teller, which parodies Gerd, a caricature created out of a self-protective blend of awe and bravado. Plath's fusion of fairytale and nightmare elements reveals the speaker's fear of Gerd, which regresses her to a state of childlike fears and insecurities. She describes her as 'spindle-shanked', all skin and bones, 'squatting mummy-wise' at her task (1-28). As if to humanise her, the speaker elaborates a story of how Gerd came to possess her second sight: she had 'braved / Church curse' to see whether her lover was faithful to her and to know what their future might bring (34-6). Projecting her suspicion and malice on to Gerd, a solitary figure who no longer has her lover, is both an attempt to construct Gerd's past and explain away the unhappy omen, for if, or so the speaker believes, Gerd reacts with a bad prediction out of jealousy, then the spiteful portent might not be real or true.

The formal qualities of 'Crystal Gazer' draw attention to Plath's control over her technique, while working to mask a twofold compulsion: to master the act of writing, and to contain Gerd, the subject of the poem. Plath's command of language, structure and style coupled with transfiguring the event is her talisman against Gerd. Within the poem, Plath saves the innocent 'wedded ones' from the blight of Gerd's curse (25). The telling of their real fortune — of the 'two stalwart apple trees' symbolising the couple, with 'each bud / Shriveling to cinders at its source' ending in the portentous 'green death's head' — occurs out of their

hearing and beyond their knowledge (13-48). The couple are able to live out their lives, mercifully ignorant of their fate.

Hughes shares Plath's need to defuse that moment's malevolence. The speaker in 'The Gypsy' describes her as

The dark stub gypsy woman
...Busy, business-like
As a weasel...

Her dark face
A knot of oiled leather, a quipu
...Bitter eyes
Of grappa-dreg revenge, Old Gallic malice,
Raisins of bile. (21-41)

Hughes's potent description evokes the qualities of someone not quite human. With a mixture of practical calculation, animal cunning and ancestral spite, she aims herself at 'you': her finger is a pistol, the curse is both 'venom' and a 'projectile' (54-6).

Both Plath and Hughes's poems have couples at the start of their newly married lives, who encounter a figure predicting dire consequences. However, the poems are in conflict at one crucial point. In 'The Gypsy', the venomous curse is directed solely at the figure of 'you' while 'I' sought to alleviate the damage; in 'Crystal Gazer', the curse encompasses both figures.

Yet all the malice in the poem does not center on the gypsy. The speaker, though frantic at the curse, also seems impatient with 'you', who acts wilfully ignorant of the event's significance. Her choice to forget the incident and go on 'writing postcards' is unacceptable to him and this poem serves to remind and never forget. Its effects and repercussions recur in several incarnations: in Plath's poem, which Hughes includes as a title-poem to a limited edition book; in three collections; in the *Collected Poems*; and in his poem 'The Gypsy'. For the two poets, the event has a potent charge, its detonations felt years after.

Pairings 5: Plath and Hughes, 'Wuthering Heights'

The paired poems 'Wuthering Heights' illustrate a further overlap of life and poetry. Though more overtly with Hughes than with Plath, there is a strong sense of both poets raiding the biographical archive for their poetry. In their individual poems, both titled 'Wuthering Heights', they evince conflicting perspectives of the same event.

Plath and Hughes's decision to incorporate the setting of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* reveals a sense of their relationship to its fated characters, Catherine and Heathcliff. The Yorkshire moors and the theme of physical and spiritual love also figure prominently in the poets' lives. In a neat parallel, the lives of both Plath and Hughes, and Catherine and Heathcliff embody the idea of a dark, romantic love. The complex theme of naming and identity is another Brontë influence. In her novel, Catherine is known as Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff, Catherine Linton, Miss Catherine and Cathy, a list of names connoting instability in defining identity, something that Jacqueline Rose observes in Plath (112). Plath's gravestone incorporates all her names: Sylvia Plath Hughes. Her adoption of several pseudonyms (Sandra Peters, Alison Arnold, Marcia Moore, Sylvan Hughes and, for *The Bell Jar*, Victoria Lucas) is strongly linked with the conflict between marital identity (Sylvia Hughes) and authorial identity (Sylvia Plath).

Brontë's novel defines wuthering as 'being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station [Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff's dwelling] is exposed in stormy weather' (8). The tumult evident in the novel is picked up in both poems, providing its emotional atmosphere so that a notable dynamic is at work, one that rests on the title itself. The reader's focus shifts from the lines following the title to Brontë's novel and its reflections on dualities, such as spiritual versus physical love, then returning to its counterparts in the two poems, with dualities more subtly contemplated in Plath's work than in Hughes's. The issue and presentation of distorted narratives and testimony in *Wuthering Heights* through diaries, letters, first person accounts, oral accounts and biographies echoes a similar difficulty in Plath scholarship.

Plath does not specifically refer to Brönte, responding instead to the text itself with an emotional scope that registers the pain of both real and imagined people (real Plath and Hughes, idealised Plath and Hughes, ghost of Cathy). By contrast, Hughes mentions not only Brönte but Plath as well, situating her alongside Brönte, as if he, patriarchally, installs her in the female pantheon of writers. Such comparisons conspicuously highlight the fact that Brönte only lived for 30 years (Schorer v). That Plath committed suicide when she was also 30 years old further cements Brönte's connection to her.

Between Plath and Hughes, there exists another shared event that is the subject of their reinscriptions. The actual event to which their poems refer takes place not long after their honeymoon. Plath writes to her mother from a hotel room in Paris: 'I am actually looking forward to going up to Ted's wuthering-heights home next week' (LH 304-5). In her next letter dated 2 September 1956, she and Hughes are in Yorkshire:

I wish you could see your daughter now, a veritable convert to the Brönte clan... looking out of three huge windows over an incredible, wild, green landscape of bare hills, crisscrossed by innumerable black stone walls like a spider's web in which gray, woolly sheep graze, along with chickens and dappled brown-and-white cows. A wicked north wind is whipping a blowing rain against the little house, and coal fires are glowing. This is the most magnificent landscape... incredible hills, vivid green grass, with amazing deep-creviced valleys feathered with trees, at the bottom of which clear, peat-flavored streams run.

Climbing along the ridges of the hills, one has an air-plane view of the towns in the valleys. Up here it is like sitting on top of the world, and in the distance the purple moors curve away...

...Ted's marvelous millionaire [*an exuberant exaggeration - Aurelia*] Uncle Walt... took us over to Wuthering Heights Friday in his car... a powerful, heavy man with a terrific, dramatic sense of humor and we got along fine. ...How can I tell you how wonderful it is. Imagine yourself on top of the world, with all the purplish hills curving away, and gray sheep grazing with horns curling and black demonic faces and yellow eyes... black walls of stone, clear streams from which we drank; and, at last, a lonely, deserted black-stone house, broken down, clinging to the windy side of a hill. (LH 305-6)

Unusually for Plath, she does not use their visit to the Bröntes's home until her poem, written five years later on September 1961, suggesting the impetus for its writing may be caused by an emotional trigger and not by the event itself. Hughes published his version thirty-five years later in *Birthday Letters*. Recollecting and retelling their visit to Wuthering Heights clearly affected Plath, who mentions it a second time in the letter with more detail.

In Plath's poem, the setting is imbued with all the romance of Brönte's novel but it is concentrated into the single perception of the speaker as a solitary figure, who attempts to acclimatise somehow to this land that is desolate, menacing, indifferent and torpid at the same time. While the speaker notes the landscape's indifference, its very air of detachment fogs her point of view, overwhelming her almost to ghostliness:

...the wind
Pours by like destiny, bending
Everything in one direction.
I can feel it trying
To funnel my heat away.
If I pay the roots of the heather
Too close attention, they will invite me
To whiten my bones among them. (11-8)

She is almost a part of this physical, deathly world but somehow she resists its mute invitation. The speaker is ushered elsewhere, with a sense that she should not linger here too long, since amid the natural elements, there is a danger that her life force 'will be snuffed out by the immensity of the landscape' (Uroff 94). She is lost, wandering in her personal desert and attempts to orient herself by mapping through landmarks, whether horizon or sheep. Though the speaker feels disconnected from this place, the sheep are certain: 'The sheep know where they are' (19). Warily, she feels as if she is the source of their solemn contemplation, as they 'stand about in grandmotherly disguise, / All wig curls and yellow teeth / And hard, marbly baas' (25-7). Eileen Aird notes, '...the sense of personal loneliness is balanced against the analytical apprehension of the sheep as rather foolish human beings', an observation that disregards too easily the underlying danger these sheep pose for the speaker (138). They watch her indolently: 'the black slots of their pupils take me in' (22). The wigs and detached way the sheep look at her evoke an image of judges in a courtroom, which raises the question of what crime or misdemeanour she is being judged for. In this way, she is belittled, reduced to 'a thin, silly message' (24).

Sheep are a symbol imbued with acquired meaning for Plath and Hughes. In Hughes's essay analysing Plath's drafts of 'Sheep in Fog', he writes,

She reaches out for her old comforters, the sheep, mysteriously beautiful. But they have already metamorphosed... into the 'souls of worms'. At once she tries to reconvert them into something more reassuring — as one tries to force an image in a dream to become something more propitious....

[A]gain she separates herself more forcibly from it, returning to her baby-faced sheep... And 'Like saints, they inhabit an absence'. We now see why these sheep were important enough to give the poem its title. At this point they represent her desperate effort to bring the poem to a close in a positive, sacred, talismanic image that can float on the darkening current of the poem and protect her from it. (WP 202-4)

For sheep to be spiritually possessed by a predatory wolf indicates something seriously awry in the place recalled by Plath's memory. The menace pervading the landscape is compounded by Plath's doubled fairytale allusion to 'grandmotherly disguise' and a Big Bad Wolf (25). As the wolf figure is present in several of Hughes's poems (one poetry book is titled *Wolfwatching*), Plath's totemic appropriation and subsequent interspecies combination not only underscores an unnatural amalgamation of predator and prey, it also alludes to the parable of a wolf in sheep's clothing. This allusion emphasises the ambiguous sense of warning that permeates the poem.

Plath's 'Wuthering Heights' is a personal, if coded address to grievances with Hughes. Notably, it is written a month after the couple's initial meeting with David and Assia Wevill, Hughes's mistress-to-be. Aurelia Plath notes this is the time when '[t]he marriage grew seriously troubled' (LH 501). The mention of dissolution, of promises unkept, of things retreating as she advances implies the speaker's suppressed bitterness. In an undated, descriptive journal-entry of her visit to the Brönte house, Plath ends her recollections on a sour note: 'The furious ghosts nowhere but in the heads of visitors and the yellow-eyed shag sheep. House of love lasts as long as love in human mind — Anger jolts like heartburn in the throat' (J 148-9).⁴

The excerpt suggests a strong personal disappointment. Since the visit to Wuthering Heights took place not long after their honeymoon, their wedding vows would be fresh in Plath's

⁴ The last line of this excerpt does not exist in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962: Transcribed from the Original Manuscripts at Smith College* (589). The line's insertion and the excision of the phrase 'blue-spindling gorse' from the first edition of the *Journals* are curious editorial anomalies.

mind. Plath's sense of betrayal is reflected in 'Wuthering Heights' not only in the horizons which 'evaporate' and 'dissolve/Like a series of promises', suggestive of inconstancy and infidelity, but also in the speaker's observation of 'the solitudes / That flee through my fingers', alluding to a thematic concern with evanescence, of exploring loss in the transitory moment (6-29). The lines are particularly resonant, foreshadowing a poem Plath is yet to write, 'Thalidomide': 'The glass cracks across, / The image // Flees and aborts like dropped mercury' (24-6).

The reader perceives an 'intense, menacing yet undefined threat' here (Stevenson 221). Plath enhances the sense of these objects' impermanency with the implicit statement that constancy is rare, especially of people, who can evaporate easily into the air:

Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass;
Lintel and sill have unhinged themselves.
Of people the air only
Remembers a few odd syllables. (31-4)

Paul West writes that, in Plath's poem, 'we read about the insubstantiality of being someone — some *one* — in a world of instant certitudes', a true comment but only up to a point (48-9). For the speaker, a transformation to certainty has already occurred with the gradual reversal from insubstantiality and dissolution to the newly acquired idea of the self's corporeality and wholeness.

Once the speaker braves the scrutiny of the sheep, she appears to pass a test. She solidifies, becomes surer of step, certain of herself if not her destination, and the gift of visibility and presence appears bestowed upon the speaker by some unknown power. Even disquieting images do not much affect her. She focuses on what remains behind in the landscape surrounding her, rather than on what it lacks. Upon coming to the stone house, she observes there are no more windows — lintel and sill are unhinged as if the spirit has already been let out. She can impassively recognise the chaos of nature as it goes on around her, knowing that 'The sky leans on me, me, the one upright / Among all horizontals' (37-8), an affirmative statement tinged with disbelief at the change in her self, lines presaging a similar bravado in

Plath's 'Nick and the Candlestick': 'You are the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious. / You are the baby in the barn' (40-2). She is solid and certain, no longer 'delicate' or terrified of the darkness, her corporeality a challenge to the inconstant people who ghost the scene, a duality related to Brönte's themes of spiritual and physical love.

The speaker's newly found detachment is intensified to include in its survey the valley and the town of Haworth. Noting the commodification of domestic life and the simple economics of raising a family in a community, Plath questions the value of civilisation. From prior images of evanescence and nebulousness, the reader strikes a particular hardness and solidity in the image of coins and purses: 'Now, in valleys narrow / And black as purses, the house lights / Gleam like small change' (43-5). Terry Eagleton remarks, '[T]he monetary imagery of the final lines, while appearing to domesticate Nature, in fact transmutes it to a commodity, trivializing and distancing it in the act of seeming to appropriate it to human concerns' (155). The speaker recognises that what she is looking at, the image of community and family, is valuable and yet somehow, it is negligible as well, 'small change' (45). Although alert to the exploitation of nature, Eagleton overlooks Haworth's transformation from its origins as a mining town to its new gleam of tourist wealth, founded on Brönte fame. Of the town's seduction and manipulation of the Brönte pilgrims, Plath notes: 'Most people never get there [the Brönte house], but stop in town for tea, pink-frosted cakes, souvenir's [*sic*] and colored photographs of the place too far to walk to... There are two ways to the stone house, both tiresome' (J2 588-9). Hughes's poem is an apparent narration of the event, incorporating Plath's themes of commodification, but offset by his interpretation of fame.

Hughes's 'Wuthering Heights' begins with shorthand speech, much as a friend would: 'Walter was guide' (1). Using the comic figure of Walter to establish instant familiarity by placing the reader and 'I' mid-conversation, Hughes simultaneously relates a story and presents the point of view of 'you'. The speaker recounts 'your transatlantic elation', underlining her difference of nationality and temperament to everybody else, including himself (5).

Through the rest of the poem, the speaker refers to Brönte familiarly as Emily, as if he were including the literary figure within their circle of intimacy. He notes Brönte's possessions as 'midget', 'elvish' and 'dwarfish', implying her to be a fairytale character, slightly unreal, descriptions that, while not naming the items as child-like, childish or related to childhood (though allusions to size evokes such associations), leaves an impression of juvenility and of the speaker's condescending attitude. For 'you', the whole expedition to Brönte's house is unusual entertainment:

It was all
Novel and exhilarating to you.
The book became a map. *Wuthering Heights*
Withering into perspective. We got there
And it was all gaze. (23-7)

There is a distinct series of undermining comments directed at 'you' by the speaker. The word 'novel' is doubly loaded, meaning both something new and a narrative, which indicates to him that, for her, it is all a story. Designed to undercut 'you', Hughes's repetition of 'it was all' encompasses and diminishes the value of what she experiences. The male speaker states that 'you' and nature share a sickness, and not just a physical or mental ailment, but a deep-seated spiritual illness.

Hughes's poem may be responding to Plath's poem, her journal passage or both; since her journal passage underpins the poem, it might be the latter. Does Hughes's 'crazed sheep' merely mimic Plath's sentiments (45)? Detailed descriptions in Plath's letter to her mother also appear in Hughes's poem, though whether these arise from his memory and evocation of that time and place, or whether it is another borrowing is uncertain: 'The heath-grass, fidgeting in its fever, / Took idiot notice of you' (80-1).

Plath's theme of dissolution and impermanence breaks through the surface of Hughes's poem, which observes structures 'flaking', 'worn-out' or 'evaporated', and notes the 'rubble', 'leakage', 'scatter' and 'crumble' around the moors (32-61). Only the floor of black stone is left behind. The bleak repetition of stringencies, of 'Iron beliefs, iron necessities, / Iron

bondings' dissolve into the one constant, 'the wild stone' (60-1). Such stringencies allude to bondage or debt, a theme to which Plath returns in 'Lady Lazarus'.

The speaker's reference to a debt so large that even hope is not free to her, since it is a 'huge/Mortgage of hope', alludes to a time after the death of Plath's father, when Plath's mother mortgaged her future for her daughter's (77). The price exacted is revealed in her mother's practice of taking '...a loose frond of hair from your nape / To be clipped and kept in a book' (74).

Her mother's ambitions as well as her own are the engines that drive 'you'. The speaker watches, as 'You breathed it all in / With jealous, emulous sniffings'; under his cruel scrutiny, the quarry that is 'you' moves about her surroundings (53). Hughes's speaker, hypocritically, calculates the nature of 'you', whom he views as calculating her chances at literary fame and immortality. Yet, as if to redeem himself and placate her, he points out what 'Emily' did not have:

Weren't you
Twice as ambitious as Emily?
...
Doing as Emily never did. You
Had all the liberties, having life.
...
What would stern
Dour Emily have made of your frisky glances
And your huge hope? (53-76)

The speaker mentions the missing 'door frames, window frames', with nothing left but the stonework. In *Wuthering Heights*, doors and windows are not only symbols of the past and family but also signal the potential for escape and freedom, if only those imprisoned were to accept the opportunity. The missing frames suggest a lack of structure, chaos. Hughes names the idea of ghosts, something not overtly specified by Plath, although it is a motif to which both poets return. Hughes's poem ends in questions: Do these ghosts haunt her, are they stilled, do they burst into flame again, or will they finally be quenched with understanding? The questions appear unanswered.

Pairings 6: Plath and Hughes, 'The Rabbit Catcher'

In each of Plath and Hughes's 'The Rabbit Catcher', the textual overlaying of various themes — religion and marriage, ritual and sacrifice, entrapment and escape, sex and death — reflects the central figure's personal difficulty and confusion. Plath's poem is crowded with images and relationships, vacillating according to the shifting alliances of the speaker, while the speaker in Hughes's poem is concerned with assigning blame to anyone but himself. Both address issues of obligations and responsibility.

On 14 May 1962, Plath writes to her mother of plans for the coming weekend, 'We have a nice young Canadian poet and his very attractive, intelligent wife coming down for this weekend — they're the ones who took over our lease for the London flat' (*LH* 536). The couple is David and Assia Wevill. During their weekend stay, the other woman's presence troubles Plath: 'Assia confided... that Sylvia had picked up "a current of attraction" between Assia and Ted and had reacted badly' (Stevenson 243). Stevenson observes that 'nothing had happened to harm [Plath's] marriage other than her upsurge of jealousy' (245). As it turns out, Plath's behaviour is warranted, her intuition sound: Hughes begins an affair with Assia.

Plath's knowledge of Hughes's adulterous relationship triggers the writing of 'The Rabbit Catcher' and 'Event', both 'evidently [refer] to the brief interval when Plath and Hughes were still living together despite her discovery of his infidelity' (Perloff 299). Though Plath mentions this discovery neither in the *Journals* nor in *Letters Home*,⁵ Stevenson describes a moment of revelation for Hughes:

It originated during a walk... Coming upon a line of snares along a clifftop, Sylvia had wildly rushed around tearing them up. As a countryman, Ted Hughes was sympathetic to the simple economics of village life and saw nothing admirable in Sylvia's harming the rabbit catcher's livelihood. It was one of the small incidents, after they came to Devon, that made Ted realize how different their attitudes toward country life were. (244)

⁵ In *Poetic Licence: Essays on Modernist and Post-Modernist Lyric*, Marjorie Perloff writes that Plath's discovery 'is documented in her unpublished letters' (183).

In this passage, Stevenson's bias is evident. Plath is the wild and harmful city-girl, while Hughes is a man of the country, 'sympathetic' to the plight of the rabbit catcher. Yet while Plath's actions elicit Hughes's disapproval and a realisation of their differences, Plath, in her poetry, shares an awareness of this rift in outlook and position.

In Plath's 'The Rabbit Catcher', the speaker recounts the rabbit catcher collecting his catch from a secret and hidden place, a memory tinged with ambiguity: 'It was a place of force' (1). From the line's proximity to the title, this 'force' is contiguously linked to the rabbit catcher, an implied violence carried out in the concluding verses (Rose 136). Rose notes that

...the second line seems to turn this image, the violence of nature back on itself, or rather to turn the female speaker on herself, one part of her body against the other, gagging her mouth with her own blown hair. But this does not unsettle the basic, syntactically reinforced image of her as someone gagged, voice torn off, blinded by the light of the sea. 'Gagging', 'tearing', 'blinding' — the formal repetition drives home the force of the physical constraint, the assault and battery of the natural world. (136)

The central figure is akin to a prisoner, a hostage under another's control, blindfolded and gagged in a palpably resentful, helpless relationship towards the other. It makes sense for this hostile other to be nature: the wind, the sea, even her own body batters down on her, conspiring to render her dumb and silent. After the violence in the 'place of force', her sense of taste returns but the impression is negative: 'I tasted the malignity of the gorse' (6). Resentment combines with recognition of the speaker's role as an unwitting accomplice to her own entrapment.

Her state of confusion is reflected in the paradoxical yet ominous image of 'lives of the dead', lives dumped and leaking out to sea like oil, an image linked to 'unction' (4-8).

Encompassing the religious images in the poem (the perfumed path, the candle-flowers and anointments suggest enlightenment through religious ritual), 'unction' can also mean sycophantic behaviour and hypocrisy. To the rabbit catcher, who makes a living from 'those little deaths', rabbits only exist as food for people (24). Thus her insinuation of hypocrisy

rebukes the rabbit catcher, hiding behind tradition to justify and excuse death, camouflaging a disregard for life. She views his tradition as 'extravagant, like torture' (10).

She defends herself against his logic, intuiting the possibility that, underlying his acts of violence towards animals, the same might be aimed her (Wagner-Martin 184).

I felt a still busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him. (21-5)

The repetition of 'I felt.../ I felt' and the description of the 'white china' heightens her sense of threat (21-3). Perloff interprets her perception as a 'fevered vision' where she 'confutes the rabbit snare with the male hand squeezing the white china tea mug and, by extension, the throat of the woman who serves him his tea' (186). In this passage, his hands are both sensual and deadly, focused with 'a still busyness, an intent' as if before a kill; thus the rabbit catcher becomes doubly identified with sex and death (21). The same 'dull, blunt hands' exact 'little deaths' and are 'excited' by it, hinting at the rabbit catcher's bestial and necrophilic bent (22-5). Furthermore, the rabbit catcher's hands, while delivering literal 'little deaths' to his prey, also provide euphemised orgasms to waiting 'sweethearts' (25). Since rabbits represent sexual promiscuity and proclivity, a catcher of rabbits becomes nothing more than a 'dull', mindless, sexual and animalistic predator chasing after sexual prey (22).

While the rabbits (his 'sweethearts') are, in a sense, the speaker's rivals, she identifies with them: in marrying, she too walked into the trap, an accomplice to her own doom. Imagining the rabbits' pain reminds her of 'birth pangs', a bittersweet pain felt at a time when her relationship was unthreatened by betrayal (16). She elaborates the association, stating that his mind is a trap, shaped like a rabbit-snare ring, waiting to catch on 'some quick thing' (29). Seeking escape from 'malignity' and extravagant 'torture', she says, 'There was only one place to get to' but the path to the hollow is 'Simmering, perfumed' (6-12). The senses are oppressed and beauty is no relief here.

Despite her difficult situation, the speaker is clear-sighted about the damage at its core. Just as tradition veils death as a necessary sacrifice, so marriage, in its turn, conceals infidelity. The promise of the hollow (and its association with the wedding ring) is nonexistent, even harmful: 'the snares almost effaced themselves', transforming the track to the hollow into a path of superficial beauty and concealed sins (14). The wedding ring becomes both a constrictive snare and, through infidelity, reduced to a meaningless zero, 'shutting on nothing' (15). The halting mechanism of their relationship and its eventual breakdown is exposed. What had held it together now proves injurious. In the original draft of this poem, first titled 'Snares', the reproach is made more directly: 'Those hands / Muffled me like gloves' (Wagner-Martin 205). The threat of violence presaged in the earlier verses is now performed in the killing act, with wires, pegs and blunt hands intimating strangulation or garroting. The images of 'zeros', 'absence' and effacement describe the death of love (15-7).

In 'The Rabbit Catcher', Plath indirectly approaches the biographical episode that took place on that clifftop. This poem and 'Pursuit' both originate from the Plath-Hughes biographies, and explore the shared themes of sex and death, though 'Pursuit' idealises circumstances whereas 'The Rabbit Catcher' is more perceptive. The latter poem is a belated apprehension that 'yellow candle-flowers' coexist with 'the malignity of the gorse', that practitioners of country tradition profit from and excuse death as necessity, religion conceals hypocrisy, and marriage breeds mendacity and infidelity (6-8). Yet its very obliqueness in concluding this magnifies the event's significance, refiguring the actual event with added insights into two archetypes: the oppressor and the oppressed.

Plath's poem is also notable because of Hughes's unprepared reaction to its existence, even as it witnesses and proves their relationship's deterioration. He writes to Stevenson, 'The only thing that I found hard to understand was her sudden discovery of our bad moments ('Event', 'Rabbit Catcher') as subjects for poems' (qtd. in Malcolm 143).

Hughes's 'The Rabbit Catcher' is a direct response to Plath's poem. Even its beginning argues with Plath's first line by countering, 'It was May' (1). His version of events is an alternative reality. Opening with a remembrance but in a questioning vein, his speaker tries to make sense of an accident that happened too quickly for comprehension.

Already the event is given a slightly hyperbolic feel, with the figure of 'you' a 'dybbuk', hurling babies in a fury, while the speaker asks plaintively, 'What had I done?' (4-6). Sensing her recklessness, he jumps in the car and they drive 'West. West', representing new beginnings, a bright future but, as in Plath's poem, tension mounts (14). Ever the peacemaker, the speaker 'Waited for you to come back to nature', a notable line, in light of nature's tendency to suppress speech in Plath's poem, strongly suggestive of an implicit wish to silence her (20).

The archetypes Hughes employs in the poem seduce the reader into choosing sides, between 'I', the person more sinned against than sinning, and 'you', the villainess. Though a similar technique is used in Plath, between the oppressed 'I' and the dull 'you', in Hughes's poem the technique is more conspicuous. She is 'crazy', iron-faced, raging with a 'Germanic scowl' while he is the helpful one: 'I simply/Trod accompaniment', 'I searched the map', 'It seemed perfect to me' (11-35). She only notices the 'grubby edges', while he comments, 'It was a fresh day' (25-7), his passivity belies both figures' roles in this almost gladiatorial battle:

What
Had bared our edges? What quirky twist
Of the moon's blade had set us, so early in the day,
Bleeding each other? (1-4)

The tone of the poem darkens as they reach the 'eyrie hollow' (aptly homophonous to 'eerie') and are forced to cope with the affront of the snares, the catalyst of their quarrel with the speaker remaining passive. As with 'Wuthering Heights', the questions remain unanswered, blame unassigned, as the two vulnerable figures spill each other's blood, the 'edges' and thin sliver of moon their instruments, enabling bloodshed. For the rest of the poem, the violence is

one-sided. She is the aggressive one, who 'hated', 'tore' and 'threw', while he 'Trailed after like a dog' (39-47).

As it relates to biographical record, Carol Bere states, 'Probably one of the more controversial aspects of... [*Birthday Letters*] is Hughes's apparent belief that regardless of his effort to either assuage or understand Plath's turmoil, he was ultimately a helpless witness' (n. pag.). Such passivity contrasts with Hughes's early work, where forcefulness, arrogance and even violence is the more natural mien of his characters. Hughes's 'I' utters uneasily the voice of victimhood and helplessness, colouring his statements with the patina of fakery. Of an early Hughes poem, Anderson comments that his work

...forces us to perceive the violence implicit in possessiveness, the justifications that accompany cruelty, the societally characteristic methods of woman and man, the equivalence of overt and insidious violence, and – perhaps most intriguingly – an awareness in complicity in destruction. (105)

Destruction does occur but it is wrought in silence. Plath and Hughes's poems feature two archetypal figures distanced from each other, where the silence between them parallels a commensurate lack of communication in the marriage of Plath and Hughes. What catalyses the arguments and the hostile silence is a conflict of opinion, their differing outlook on the matter of rabbit-snares reflecting not only social and cultural division (Hughes's speaker thinks that ridding the snares is 'sacrilege', an allusion to Plath's religious imagery), but class schisms as well. Hughes's poem definitively underscores national differences: 'You / Raged against our English private greed' (22), and class divisions:

I saw
The sanctity of a trapline desecrated.
You saw blunt fingers, blood in the cuticles,
Clamped round a blue mug. (50-3)

The paradoxes and oxymorons in Plath's work ('still busyness', 'the lives of the dead', 'unction', 'clear wall') and the presentation of both sides of an unresolved argument in Hughes's poem ('I saw... / You saw') epitomise a similar discord, borne out by Hughes's speaker's inability to 'find... hear... [and] understand' her that widens the silence,

exacerbating her isolation in 'some chamber gasping for oxygen' (an image resonant of Plath's bell jar and its stale air) (65-7).

Hughes's practice of borrowing words is consistent. Victoria White observes that for most of *Birthday Letters*, 'Hughes does not stray beyond Plath's images of her own life, and does not reinterpret those images', although in this poem, Hughes makes a curious deviation (n. pag.). Plath names the item in the rabbit catcher's hand as a 'tea mug... [of] white china' yet in Hughes's poem, the mug is coloured blue, an anomaly related to a contrariety in perception: one must ask, to whom might these hands actually belong? In Plath's poem, the 'I' had a relationship with these hands, while the 'I' in Hughes's poem does not specify, hinting at an avoidance of responsibility. Hughes's 'I' neither denies nor claims to be the rabbit catcher. He is disengaged, simply representing what he sees:

I saw
Country poverty raising a penny
...
I saw sacred
Ancient custom (50-1; 56-7)

The significance of this difference between apportioning blame and avoiding responsibility in the two poems becomes clear.

Hughes's poem intends for an association to be made between their work. With their overlapping and slippage, these paired poems generate intertextuality within Bakhtin's zone of dialogical contact. The hostility between the two sets of figures in Plath and Hughes's poems reflects the tension 'simmering' between the works. From such fraught textual relationships a dialogue between the literary couple manifests and continues to take new forms.

Even the literary critics are dragged into the fray. When Rose offered a feminist critique of Plath's 'The Rabbit Catcher', Hughes wrote a censorious letter to the *TLS*: 'Professor Rose distorts, reinvents etc Sylvia Plath's "sexual identity" with an abandon I could hardly believe'

(qtd. in Malcolm 178-9). But what is Hughes himself doing when he takes Plath's title, 'The Rabbit Catcher', and rewrites her scenario?

His poem, with its passive central figure, defends both the rabbit catcher and Hughes himself. With its lack of formal structure and its matter-of-fact tone, a sharp contrast to Plath's formal artifice, Hughes's poem sounds more direct, unmediated and, consequently, 'true'.

In fact, its image of gladiatorial combat is highly symbolic and, given its source, Plath's 'The Rabbit Catcher', the mode of response is highly literary. Hughes as poet argues and undermines Plath's work: it is a power-struggle, a literary combat. Van Dyne notes that Hughes's poems are 'remarkable':

...not so much for what they can tell us about who Plath 'really was' as for the literary contest they represent. Hughes's poems continue the dialogue begun when Plath composed some of her *Ariel* poems on the reverse of poems she'd typed for him. In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes takes titles from Plath's poems for his own and tries to reappropriate some of her most famous lines and images. He seems quite intent on having the last word on Plath not only as a woman but as a poet. (qtd. in Shanahan n. pag.)

Van Dyne adds that 'the posture of the whole [Hughes] volume is "I knew her better, and I have the last word"' (qtd. in Geier n. pag.).

Few critics other than Van Dyne have pointed out the undercurrents of barely suppressed animosity in Hughes's work, focussing instead on how the book impinges on Plath's work and life. Some have read Hughes's book as an apology to Plath, a confession, an explanation or, all three. Calvin Bedient notes wryly that *Birthday Letters* 'is, of course, as it was designed to be, the hottest literary gossip material and confession around' (n. pag.). Cora Kaplan calls it 'a lyric, tragic memoir of their life together' (n. pag.), while Edna Longley suggests the book 'has a mission to explain — as much to Hughes himself as to the public' (n. pag.). Valentine Cunningham's observation that Hughes's 'last volume of poetry... has him, yet again, striving to have the last word' is, perhaps, more astute (n. pag.).

Pairings 7: Plath, 'Stings' and Hughes, 'The Bee God'

A significant proportion of *Birthday Letters* takes issue with Plath's bee sequence, re-visioning and emphasising the elements of biography which Plath's poetry obscures. Plath's 'Stings' introduces the speaker and the bee-seller, a 'man in white' as they transfer a batch of bees from one hive to another; in 'The Bee God' Hughes uncovers the autobiographical hooks concealed within Plath's poem.

The final published version of 'Stings' is dated 6 October 1962. According to Hughes's notes, 'Stings' made an initial appearance on 2 August (CP 293). The first verse of this early draft reads:

What honey summons these animalcules?
What fear? It has set them zinging
On envious strings, and you are the center.
They are assailing your brain like numerals,
They contort your hair (293n)

In the intervening months from first to last draft, the focus shifted from addressing 'you' to 'I', reflecting the poem's new central concerns of selfhood, the 'you' ignominiously relegated to 'third person' unimportance, mirroring a similar shift in focus that is detailed in my reading of Hughes's two 'Daffodils' in Chapter 1.

In Plath's 'Stings', the speaker and the bee-seller wear protective clothing. The images of lilies, hands and pure white clothing of veiled hats and 'cheesecloth gauntlets' suggest a ritual (3). The repetition of 'hands' and the bared 'throats of our wrists brave lilies' emphasise a shared vulnerability as they handle the bees, with the conflation of 'throats' and wrists suggesting sacrifice, even suicide (4). While the speaker seeks to protect herself from the bees' stings, she also risks being stung in exchange for 'the thousand clean cells', the 'eight combs of yellow cups' and 'Sweetness, sweetness' (6-11). Such protection from physical pain indicates a similar vigilance against emotional suffering. The yellow and pink colours, the feminine daintiness of 'cups', 'teacup', 'flowers' and 'love' are optimistic images bordering on the saccharine, anomalous to the rest of the poem's intensity (6-10). With more risk in a

new undertaking, she enamels and protects the future symbolically with totems, the pink flowers, in the same way she covers herself from stings.

Initially, the 'thousand clean cells' are a source of satisfaction, but her tone turns into disappointment when she sees the gray 'brood cells' bereft of either honey or eggs, fossilised and akin to 'wormy mahogany' (6-14). The cells' void points to the queen's task of filling the egg-receptacles, mirroring the speaker's search for the queen to fulfil an absence of selfhood. Both the speaker and the queen are under pressure to fill the vacuum with something meaningful.

'I stand in a column', the speaker declares, her vertical stillness distinguishing her from 'these women who only scurry', the 'honey-drudgers', who keep the cells clean. While her dissociation from these 'winged, unmiraculous women' is fervent, she reveals a similar past: 'I am no drudge / Though for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair' (23-5). Her account is both aggrieved and matter-of-fact. Through empathetic association, the identity of speaker and bees almost merge: the speaker also knows about enslavement. Yet her disdain is apparent when she labels the bees unmiraculous. Though winged like angels, they are neither holy nor will they be privy to the miracle of giving birth (unless through Immaculate Conception), since worker bees are sterile females. She chooses to ally herself with the queen, personified as an old woman: 'Her wings are torn shawls, her long body / Rubbed of its plush— / Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful' (18-20). Her observation communicates an anxiety over age, indicated by 'rubbed' and its consonantal rhyme to 'robbed', both words pointing to loss of and damage to newness or youth. Like the queen, she has sacrificed both 'years' and individuality for a greater good: 'And seen my strangeness evaporate, / Blue dew from dangerous skin' (27).

The speaker faces dichotomised choices: worker or queen, youth or age, a miraculous or an unmiraculous life. She was miraculous once, as testified by her 'blue dew', a loss she regrets, though there is compensation: 'I am in control' (27-32). Her rejection of the honey-drudgers' disenfranchisement validates the self she chooses to 'recover', the authority of queenship (52).

The new self is the miraculous queen who lives after death, a half-beautiful, half-terrifying vision of a 'lion-red body, her wings of glass' (55). Their identities are inseparable in the end and the word 'she' merges speaker and queen. 'Now she is flying', she announces, prefiguring the triumphal flights of Lady Lazarus and Ariel.

Another binary choice is apparent in the figures of the man in white and the third person. The bee-seller and the speaker work in harmony, contrasting the non-involvement of the anonymous and unhelpful third person, whose gaze is full of foreboding and judgement. He is punished for his difference and megalomaniacal gaze, portrayed as foolish. Patronisingly, the speaker describes him as 'sweet' once, until the bees, drawn by his saccharine lies, sting his lips shut, preventing hurtful speech (45).

The speaker's miraculous exudations of 'blue dew' are delicate compared with his baser secretions of sweat, her concerns microscopic and cellular, his over-extensive and unwieldy. The enterprise of honey-making is a female domain, where the speaker, the queen and the workers create a pure product, the honey, rendering the third person's presence superfluous. His attempts at creation are gauche in comparison: 'The sweat of his efforts a rain / Tugging the world to fruit' (47). This contrasts with the male figure's easy efforts in an early Plath poem, 'Ode for Ted', suggesting that Plath is writing back to her early paean. In it, the speaker hyperbolises the eponymous 'Ted' while characterising herself as 'adam's woman'. As Adam, Ted names the plants and animals in their Eden: 'For his least look, scant acres yield: / ...bright grain sprung so rarely / he hauls to his will early' (13-6). In marked correspondence with Plath's description of the third man's sweaty endeavours, the effortlessness of Ted's creative act contrasts comically with the third man's graceless energy.

The reference to a 'third person' stung by bees relates to a similar account written to Plath's mother (38): '[T]he bees were furious from being in a box. Ted had only put a handkerchief over his head where the hat should go in the bee mask, and the bees crawled into his hair, and he flew off with half-a-dozen stings. I didn't get stung at all' (*LH* 539). This catalysing event is unrecognisable within Plath's poem since it is transformed into a significant expanded

metaphor and a comparably insignificant footnote, so that it is much more than a reconfiguration of the lived experience into poetry. Her letter is the first account of the event, followed by drafts of the poem, until finally the original details have taken quite a different shape in the final 'Stings'. Stevenson, however, goes too far when she claims its archetypal status for the drama of the poem.

This is not to deny that the details are still visible to readers who know the Plath biography. There are 'eight combs' and the 'eight great bounds' (7-41). Sylvia Plath was eight years old when her father, a renowned bee expert, died. Also, Plath and Hughes separated after almost seven years, yet according to Van Dyne, six years is 'the actual length of her marriage, although the more magical number seven also exists as an alternate choice in the same draft' (112). While it is inconclusive that 'eight' parallels the years of Plath and Hughes's married life, Plath's inexactitude over the number suggests a willingness to bend biographical facts to fit the poem. Wood observes that her personal references, such as the unnamed 'third person' (38), demonstrate that 'Plath had come to feel free to pursue her own artistic ends, without the restriction, interference or shadowing influence of her former partner' (116). Wood's implication, that the personal references in 'Stings' is a recent development, is suspect. Although Plath's poetry is rarely uninfluenced by her biography, its hallmark is a transfiguration where the experience of the personal articulates at the level of the universal.

Unlike 'Stings', Hughes's 'The Bee God' refuses to proceed beyond the biographical. Writing back to Plath as poet, Hughes's references to 'Daddy', the 'arrow' and 'the fixed stars' establish intertextual links to Plath's 'Daddy', 'Ariel' and 'Words' (2-49). By re-writing Plath's delicate 'pink flowers' as bloody 'crimson hearts and flowers', he truncates Plath's phrase 'fixed stars govern a life' ('Words') in this poem and expands it in 'A Dream': 'Not dreams, I had said, but fixed stars / Govern a life' (7). These textual attacks are aggressive acts of staking ownership. Van Dyne observes, 'Hughes implies that he fed Plath one of *Ariel*'s most famous lines' (qtd. in Geier n. pag.). The marking of textual territory undermines Hughes's aggressive response to Al Alvarez's contention of professional rivalry: 'Not even temporary insanity would explain your completely false remarks implying that there was some

sort of artistic jealousy between Sylvia and me...' (qtd. in Malcolm 125). If Hughes's textual possessiveness was not apparent during Plath's life, it is undeniably evident in *Birthday Letters*.

After reading both 'Stings' and 'The Bee God', one might be lured into approaching Plath's poem seeking the same biographical clues Hughes's work lays bare so eagerly. Hughes attempts to position and privilege his version through specious information. Clues do exist for a revisioned interpretation. The lilies and white clothing in 'Stings' might evoke the idea of a wedding, where the 'man in white' acts as the priest. This is a scene that 'The Bee God' re-interprets: 'But when you put on your white regalia, / Your veil, your gloves, I never guessed a wedding' (7-8). In 'Stings', one might read the proximity of the wedding image to the 'cells' as signalling discordance, adumbrating the speaker's experience of a constrictive relationship. The wax mausoleum with a thousand prison-like 'cells' might signify the speaker's unsatisfactory marriage, the empty cells a sign of frustration and resentment at unspoken expectations of fulfilment. One might further suggest an ambivalence towards the responsibility of childbirth, with her options limited between being childless but productive, or being obliged to bear children indefinitely; however, such slanted, biographised interpretations limit and oversimplify the poem's access to myth.

Hughes's 'The Bee God' reinscribes and claims ownership of Plath's words, and exploits her biography, pushing Plath's complicated relationship with her father to the forefront. He mines the troubled period following her suicide, incorporating Plath's biography in his poem ('golden mane', 'their volts, their thudding electrodes') (22-45), violating what Malcolm terms as 'Plath's writer's privacy' (35). Carole Ferrier warns, 'Plath maintains a persona (sometimes a dual one) in all her writing, even the most intimate and personal; it is ultimately unproductive to equate the persona with the poet' (205). In uncovering what Plath recovers in 'Stings', Hughes disregards the created persona's narrative, intent on asserting his story, by claiming certain psycho-biographical truths, over hers; from this, one learns that he is either unable or unwilling to shield her biography from scrutiny.

Early in Plath's relationship with Hughes, she wrote two poems: 'Ode for Ted' (21 April 1956) first appeared in *Letters Home*, while 'Pursuit' (9 March 1956) was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1957 (Tabor 113). Both describe intense relationships and according to Plath, are inspired by or dedicated to Ted Hughes, 'the man and nature god and colossus [Plath] made him' (Uroff 71). As I mentioned in the first chapter, Plath dedicates 'Pursuit' to Ted Hughes (*J2* 214). Writing to her mother, Plath encloses a copy of 'Ode for Ted'; two days later Plath writes to her brother, Warren: 'Maybe mother will show you one or two poems I've sent her about him; his name is Ted Hughes' (*LH* 269).

Although Plath did not send 'Ode for Ted' out for publication, she submitted 'Pursuit' to *Atlantic Monthly* and to the Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards' *Best Poems of 1957* (Tabor 67-8). One can conclude that 'Ode for Ted' is a personal poem intended for circulation only within Plath's family circle. As with the bulk of Plath's poems and private papers, Aurelia Plath (to a lesser extent) and Ted Hughes would have decided on the posthumous publication of 'Ode for Ted'.

In addition to its relationship to 'Stings', the poem's reference to a 'boot' is notable: 'From under crunch of my man's boot / Green oat-sprouts jut' (1-2). The boot, coupled with the speaker's perspective from underfoot, prefigures the domineering male figures and exaggerated descriptions in 'Daddy'. The shift in Plath's use of the boot mirrors the movement from admiration to fear. Instead of merely crushing nature, it escalates to crushing human faces. A section of 'Daddy' appears to comment directly on the speaker's overweening adoration and subjugation in 'Ode for Ted': 'Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you' (48-50).

Meanings from 'Ode to Ted' appear intertextually in 'Daddy', with Plath writing back — consciously or unconsciously — to her own work. The key indicator is the boot image.⁶ Her act of revisiting an early poem in new work is a variation, expanding on the dialogic intertextuality with Hughes, so that the narratives in 'Ode for Ted' and 'Daddy' plot an

⁶ From discussions with Dr Felicity Plunkett, 1996.

emotional trajectory, from romantic merging to an estrangement of identities, from willing subservience to a struggle for ascendancy.

The aforementioned lines in 'Daddy' are one of the most problematic in Plath's poem because they contain the only generalisations regarding male/female relationships. Bundtzen observes, 'Plath does not say, "I adore a Fascist"... She says, "Every woman adores a Fascist"' (159). Furthermore, Rose points out that the wearer of the crushing boot's gender is unspecified: '...the only generalisation in the poem regarding women is, after all, that most awkward of lines: "Every woman adores a fascist [*sic*]"' (237). Rose elaborates:

The problem is only compounded by the ambiguity of the lines which follow that general declaration. Who is putting the boot in the face? The fascist certainly (woman as the recipient of a sexual violence she desires). But, since the agency of these lines is not specified, don't they also allow that it might be the woman herself (identification with the fascist being what every woman desires)? (233)

Rose's observation links neatly with the usurpation of male authority in 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Ariel' in which Plath inverts several masculinised images and appropriates them for a female voice, an issue to which I shall return in the next chapter.

The speaker widens her scope from her father to include a husband, the 'man in black' to whom she says, 'I do, I do' (65-7). Just as the speaker's father moulds her into who she is, so she acquires a similar power to create when she makes a model, her husband, in an aggressive act of creation resulting from conflicting feelings of longing, rebellion and determination, a contrast to her earlier passivity and fear. Her 'model' recalls the superstitious element in the 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head' and the unnatural bond between the original and its copy: 'I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw' (64-6). Whereas 'Stings' eroticises descriptions of the paternal 'man in white' and the speaker working in concert together, marriage to a sexually sadistic husband in 'Daddy' reunites her with her fascist father, hinting at a repressed sexual component in their filial relationship, a desire deferred onto the 'man in black', the father's 'model' (64-5). Her

deferral demonstrates the enormity of her desire, consummated when she becomes the father's 'wife through marriage to his surrogate' (Blessing 72).

Pairings 8: Plath, 'Daddy' and Hughes, 'A Picture of Otto'

'Daddy' is written on the verso of drafts of Hughes's unpublished radio play, 'The Calm', which Plath describes to her mother as 'a dark opposite to Shakespeare's *Tempest*' (qtd. in Van Dyne 9). *The Tempest*, notably, is a tragicomedy of revenge and usurpation with a pivotal father-daughter relationship. Plath's comment is striking since Hughes's play centres on the relationship between husband and wife, a relationship relegated to secondary status in 'Daddy'. According to Van Dyne, 'The Calm' includes a scene of 'a deadly quarrel in which a wife accuses her husband of fraudulent artistic ambitions' (103). Both Hughes's play and 'Daddy' share themes of creation ('they stuck me together with glue', 'I made a model of 'you'), duplicity ('the vampire who said he was you') and blame. The speaker of 'Daddy' sides with the wife in 'The Calm', especially since she names her own husband a 'vampire':

Drinking his wife's blood [is] an analogy for using her money, her energy, her love, her own poetic talents.... When all her resources were exhausted, he would move on to another host. It is because the husband has never really existed as a person that the persona addresses the poem, throughout, to "Daddy." (Wagner-Martin 130)

The curious and seemingly random image of the 'black telephone' harkens to other Plath poems written about adulterers, infidelity and betrayal. Written in the month prior to 'Daddy', 'Words heard, by accident, over the phone' contains intentionally repulsive language that describes the dialogue the speaker overhears as little more than loathsome sewage:

What are these words, these words?
They are plopping like mud.
O god, how shall I ever clean the phone table?
They are pressing out of the many-holed earpiece, they are looking for a listener.
Is he here?

Now the room is ahiss. (11-6)

As with Plath's 'Fever 103°' and 'Burning the Letters' (discussed in the next chapter), allusions to adultery refer to Hughes and his mistress. An early Hughes poem 'Do not Pick up

the Telephone' views the telephone as a wilfully malicious bearer of bad tidings, 'a bad god' with a 'snake head', a 'plastic crab' (17-21):

Death invented the phone it looks like the altar of death
Do not worship the telephone
It drags its worshippers into actual graves
With a variety of devices, through a variety of disguised voices
...
A dead body will fall out of the telephone. (4-40)

Both 'Words heard' and 'Do not Pick up' are grounded in a shared biographical event. According to Stevenson, after the conflagration of poems, letters and other literary effects, 'Assia phoned Ted through a male colleague at her office. Sylvia, who answered the phone, suspected a ruse. After Ted had taken the call, Sylvia yanked the telephone off the wall' (251). Seen in this light, the line 'The black telephone's off at the root' in 'Daddy' signals the speaker's decisive moment of denying and disconnecting the line of power from those that would hurt and betray her.

The following lines in 'Daddy' foretell a death: 'Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time' and 'If I've killed one man, I've killed two' signals the end of Daddy's oppressive regime through an act of murder (7, 71). Yet the speaker announces his death in a curious deferral: 'There a stake in your fat black heart', as if to disclaim the act as hers (76). The villagers act as proxies and helpers, putting her back together, acting out her rage, killing for her, and providing an audience and jury to the final confrontation between her and 'daddy'. The stake and the villagers' stamping indicate a victory, but whether she is emotionally avenged it is uncertain, betokening a cyclical re-enactment of what Plath characterises as the speaker's 'awful little allegory' of a 'girl with an Electra complex' (293).

Hughes's 'A Picture of Otto' shares with 'Daddy' the theme of relationships, attempting to explain the triangle between 'you', the daughter and 'I', where 'you' no longer refers to the one usually meant in Hughes's poems, addressing Otto instead. Significantly, Hughes begins the speaker's dialogue with Otto through Plath's line 'You stand at the blackboard, daddy' by echoing it (51): 'You stand there at the blackboard: Lutheran / Minister manqué' (2-3). In

'Daddy', Plath's line marks the mergence of father and husband's identities. Hughes's echoing highlights a need for engagement with this overlap but whether the poem's dialogue with Plath's work is out of protest or agreement with the diminished presence of the husband is unclear.

The inclusion of details such as 'Lutheran/Minister manqué', 'Prussian backbone' and 'son's portrait' seduces the reader into seeking and privileging biographical facts within its lines. Even the poem's naming of Otto attempts to remove the barrier between fiction and fact, inviting a biographically based reading, Hughes's eponymic titling reminiscent of Plath's 'Ode for Ted'. 'A Picture of Otto' places Plath's 'Daddy' under similar scrutiny, just as Hughes's 'The Bee God' forces a more biographical examination of 'Stings', with Hughes utilising characters reinvented for his purpose, ransacking Plath's store of private narrative and biography. Hughes's poem contains distorted and claustrophobic representations of the relationship between parent and child, in which familial predetermination occurs in its disturbing identification of the son as identical with his grandfather Otto: 'Your portrait, here, could be my son's portrait' (16). It is a sinister statement, for not only does the speaker identify with Otto but the ghost is reincarnated in the son. The son's presence implies a level of incestuousness and lack of individuation between the people present in Hughes's work, a lack that is apparent elsewhere in the poem.

The speaker's repeated statement of denial: 'I never dreamed', shifts to an acceptance of his and Otto's shared guilt, so that it is 'our guilt' while not specifying the incident to which this 'occult' guilt refers (12). His recognition of culpability on his and Otto's behalf is a conspiratorial act, resonant with images of his entanglement with the dead: 'To find yourself so tangled with me', 'She could hardly tell us apart in the end' and 'Inseparable, here we must remain' (7- 20).

It is apparent the speaker esteems the ghostly company of Otto above that of Otto's daughter. Her shadowy presence, almost obscured by Otto, is notable for her relationship to the males, providing a counterpoint to the female-centric relationship in 'Stings', where instead the

daughter oversees a pack of male drones: the speaker, Otto and the son, alluded in the line: 'radically / Modified by the honey-bee's commune' (4). Hughes's allusion to Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting' and its narrative of an uncanny relationship between a soldier and the man he killed parallels the strange camaraderie between Hughes's speaker and Otto's 'ghost' (13). The focus on death manifests in the cave-like setting, intimidated by the claustrophobic environs of the hive and evoking the idea of a necropolis, emphasised by images of entombment and excavation in the words 'Earth', 'coffin', 'adit', 'family vault',⁷ 'underworld' and 'catacomb' (3-24). The resurrected ghost resembles the father in Plath's 'Daddy', who is a part of the speaker's self she wishes to 'recover', polyvalent for burial, disinterment, therapy, retrieval, reclamation and recuperation.

Both 'Daddy' and 'A Picture of Otto' are dialogues with a ghost, one advocating revenge on the ghost, the other forgiveness. The war and conflict in Owen's and Plath's poems raise issues of national culpability, mirroring the emotional conflict within familial and personal relationships. The delineation of national differences, which also appears in 'Daddy', hearkens to its thematic prevalence in poems such as 'The Rabbit Catcher'.

Hughes's sympathetic portrayal of an almost-embrace between one living and one dead is at odds with his expression of anger and bitterness towards critics who he felt trespassed on the rights of the living and the dead:

Critics established the right to say whatever they pleased about the dead. It is an absolute power, and the corruption that comes with it, very often, is an atrophy of the moral imagination. They move onto the living because they can no longer feel the difference between the living and the dead. They extend over the living that licence to say whatever they please, to ransack their psyche and reinvent them however they please. They stand in front of classes and present this performance as exemplary civilised activity — this utter insensitivity towards other living human beings. (qtd. in Malcolm 46-7)

Hughes is not free from similar criticism. Joanny Moulin observes, in *Birthday Letters*, 'only an image of [Plath] is conjured up and exorcised, in the interstices of a text which erases her, or from which she has erased herself' (n. pag.).

⁷ The 'family vault' is Hughes's family plot in Heptonstall, Yorkshire where Plath is buried. Her gravestone names her as Sylvia Plath Hughes; Plath's admirers often chip off the married name in protest.

The final lines in Hughes's poem are the most problematic, raising further unanswerable questions, since it is ambiguous to whom or what the speaker refers. Who is 'like Owen'? Is this the poet, who shares Owen's profession? Who sleeps 'with his German as if alone'? Is it Otto or the speaker? Is the German a person or a book, like a German dictionary? If the daughter is hidden behind 'you', then the speaker is apparently 'inseparable' from Otto, so it is credible the speaker is concealing something. When such equivocation and obscurity is evident, it is uncertain whether the speaker's indeterminacy is deliberate or not, and especially difficult to accept his assurance: 'Everything forgiven and in common' (21).



Heptonstall Cemetery, Yorkshire

Raiding Prometheus

Raiding Prometheus

The pure gold baby
That melts to a shriek.

'Lady Lazarus',
Sylvia Plath

Babe of dark flames and screams
That sucked the oxygen out of both of us.

'Suttee', Ted Hughes

Prometheus created men from clay, animating them with fire stolen from heaven. In the myth of Prometheus is combined the creative spark and the vital principle. A similar combination is inherent in Plath's dual roles as poet and mother. She authors both text and life. Like her created female persona Lady Lazarus, Plath is a 'protean female force' (Van Dyne 408). Hughes, in attempting to appropriate her creative achievements as a poet and mother, also endeavours to steal the Promethean spark, which Plath appropriates from male authority.

Hughes's focus, which includes Plath's poems that involve an 'emerging female alter ego', coincides with an aggressive engagement with themes of creation, creativity, birth and rebirth

(Van Dyne 397). Positioning his role as pivotal in Plath's construction of selfhood, Hughes diminishes her achievement and appropriates her autonomy and authority for himself, an authority Plath exacts out of her struggle with male authorial figures. It is a conflict addressed in 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy', embodied in its strong female personae and taken up by the male personae in Hughes's poetry. Such textual territoriality marks the boundaries of creativity between the two writers. This chapter will examine each poet's attempt to displace and replace the dominant version of events and chart the shifts of technique when addressing issues of selfhood and identity.

'Burning the Letters' catalyses the fire motif that runs through Plath's *Ariel* poems, initiating a thematic dialogue, in which poems serve as immolatory responses. Fire emblematises the destructive and creative impulse. It is deleterious and effective at erasing textual obstacles: Hughes employs it to destroy Plath's last journal. Plath's poem records the tensions of a personal event, the female persona revealing the thoughts of a wife betrayed. It also carries textual responses to Plath's raiding of Hughes's seminal work, 'The Thought-Fox'.

In 'Burning the Letters', a marking of boundaries is evident. The female speaker's account of ridding herself of her lover's textual effects is a depressed one, as if she is too enervated from carrying out her impulse of destruction. The poem begins on this lethargic, resigned note, emphasised by her use of internal rhyme: 'I made a fire; being tired', where 'Tired' is repeated twice to underline her emotional strain and passivity, the tone barely departing from the observational (1). Her detachment is at odds with her reason for burning the letters — to be rid of something unwanted and hateful. Instead, she maintains her housewifely mien of clearing out the rubbish in her 'housedress' (29).

The letters place the speaker on the defensive; she sees them as vicious and violent ('white fists'), snaky ('death rattle') and the unfair possessor of knowledge (2-3). She asks querulously, 'What did they know that I didn't?' (5). What intelligence do they hold in their fists? She imagines a conspiracy involving 'a dream of clear water', an Edenic beach shaped into a grin but a malicious one, as illicit as a getaway car in a robbery (7). The grin's

arrogance implies a crime already committed, thus justifying her lack of apology about the fire. She is 'not subtle' and her term of endearment, 'love', is rendered meaningless, if not by repetition, then certainly by virtue of her lover's infidelity (9-10).

She vents her grievances against things hidden and censored, such as the 'cardboard cartons' and a dog pack suppressing its rage, especially since their presence and alliances are not stated (11). Is the dog pack's anger directed at the speaker or with the grinning criminal? Is it under the control of 'the pack of men in red jackets' (13)? While the language of this first verse is opaque, with its tangled syntax and deliberately obscured meaning, clarification lies at poem's end.

'Burning the Letters' is pervaded by a heightened sense of paranoia. Dogs, letters, men and especially fire are not to be trusted, since fire's shifting quality signifies its potential for either succour or destruction. Plath uses the claustrophobic bell jar motif ('the glass case') to describe the deceptive fire as a doubled threat: 'it is merciless', though it may 'lick and fawn' (15-6). The speaker's triumphant mood is muted: 'And here is the end to the writing'. Erasing text, the fire erases the hand behind those 'spry hooks that bend and cringe' (21). Hooks are significant, as Bundtzen observes:

Hughes's handwriting... is here conceived as a series of springlike hooks, with bending and cringing backward strokes. More important, though, than its physical appearance is the sense of smirking duplicity attributed to Hughes's writing. (441)

The hooks link 'Burning the Letters' to a moment in 'Tulips' when the female persona contemplates the hooks of family: 'Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage — / ...My husband and child smiling out of the family photo / Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks' (18-21). In both poems, the speaker seeks to be rid of barbs and unhook all painful attachments. The obsequious, meaningless smiles in 'Burning the Letters' link to the fawning fire, another warning against deceptions but the *caveat* comes too late.

Her confidence wavers, repeating the phrase 'at least', for reassurance, knowing the attic is purged, that she is no longer a 'Dumb fish / With one tin eye', silent about betrayal or turning

a blind eye to infidelity (24-5). The image of the upward-looking eye, first introduced in Plath's 'Love Letter', emphasises both speakers' powerlessness:

You didn't just toe me an inch, no —
Nor leave me to set my small bald eye
Skyward again, without hope, of course,
Of apprehending blueness, or stars. (5-8)

Evacuating the attic empowers her by subduing the letters' malevolence, transforming them to carbon birds, 'beautiful', consoling and safe (30). These carbon birds are the inverse of the choughs inhabiting Plath's 'Blackberrying': 'Overhead go the choughs in black cacophonous flocks — / Bits of burnt paper wheeling in blown sky. / Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting' (10-2). Unlike the carbon birds, the choughs, metamorphosed into 'bits of burnt paper', are still able to voice their discontent, contrasting the birds of 'Burning the Letters', which are deliberately 'blinded' and with 'nothing to say to anybody', just as she was once silenced and blind (11-34). Now the birds are 'coal angels', fallen messengers unable to deliver prophesy, commandments or messages (32-4).

The speaker's experience of the letters' latent violence ('white fists') is arrogated, put to use with easy menace, to avenge herself: 'I have seen to that' (2, 35). Her sense of righteousness is justified: 'And I am no criminal. I am killing a photograph. / ... As it blackens, I grow tall. // And I am not subtle' (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 130). These three lines do not appear in 'Burning the Letters'. In a state of critical amnesia, Wagner-Martin quotes fragments of a draft copy and does not attribute her sources, a duty she fulfils competently elsewhere. Of these draft lines, only 'I am not subtle' remain in Plath's published version. The relationship between criminality, violence and inversions of power, barely implied in the published version, is more clearly delineated in the omitted lines. In the final version, her violence touches birds, angels and people ('papers that breathe like people') (37). With an intensity borne of goading beyond endurance, she annihilates all to flakes of ash, though the targets of her fury are not faceless people, but rather the thief and the accomplice in 'the getaway car', those who betrayed her (8).

In Plath's biography, the other woman is Assia. Before she discovers the affair, Plath describes Assia to her mother as 'German-Russian', a 'very attractive, intelligent wife' (496-536). Hughes, in 'Dreamers', writes:

She sat there, in her soot-wet mascara,
In flame-orange silks, in gold bracelets,
Slightly filthy with erotic mystery —
A German
Russian Israeli with the gaze of a demon
Between curtains of black Mongolian hair.

After a single night under our roof
She told her dream. A giant fish, a pike
Had a globed, golden eye, and in that eye
A throbbing human foetus —
You were astonished, maybe envious. (37-47)

Assia's exotic parentage is both eroticised and demonised. In 'Burning the Letters', the 'German cabbage' points to Assia, her manner of speech reduced to 'patent-leather gutturals', itself a caustic reference to boots worn by goose-stepping Germans in the Second World War (46). Bundtzen notes, 'In Draft 1, p. 3, Plath misspells "gutturals" as "gutterals" (a Freudian slip?), alluding to Assia's German accent and also suggesting that it belongs to a guttersnipe' (447). Plath's Freudian slip is perpetuated in the poem's first publication almost 11 years later in *Pursuit* (1973), a limited edition of 100 copies (Tabor 39). The excerpt from Hughes's poem also contextualises Plath's obscure lines: 'Involved in its weird blue dreams, / Involved as a foetus' (36-7).

Her galling inability to exorcise Assia is evident in Plath's six drafts: '[The final stanza] will continue to be the most troubled passage in the poem and will be extensively revised even in the last of Plath's six complete drafts' (Van Dyne 37). The speaker is similarly unsuccessful at obliterating the rival to ash ('a name with black edges'), the one word almost homophonous to Assia (42). Unable or unwilling to name her, Plath resorts to addressing her cryptically as 'Sinuous orchis', her snaky sinuosity connoting the 'death rattle' of the letters (3-44). For Plath, 'the most resonant totem for Ted and Assia's adultery was an orchid. The image may have been inspired by the visual appearance of wood ash... , or Plath may have intended an etymological pun, since *testicle* is the Greek root of orchid' (Van Dyne 38). Denigratory

allusions to genitalia are also apparent in the line, 'In a nest of root-hairs', linking it to the earlier reference to hooks, which the speaker associates with the unnamed rival. In a footnote, Van Dyne observes the similar coded use of adulterers and orchids in 'Fever 103°', another poem full of fire imagery (189):

The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air

...

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
(20-1, 25-6)

The grease evokes the greasy rain in the speaker's hair of 'Burning the Letters' as she watches the conflagration. The rain does not extinguish the fire inside her, feeding it instead, almost as if she is infected by a fever: 'My veins glow like trees' (48). The constant evolutions signify shifts in self-perception, depending on the crime perpetrated on her: by turns, she sees herself as a dog pack, a dumb fish, a fiery tree. These shifts mimic the conspicuous obscurity pervading Plath's poem.

The dogs' reappearance clarifies the obscured significance of the pack imagery in the first verse. They are 'tearing a fox' — an animal associated with Hughes and his poetry — under the invisible command of the foxhunters, the men in red jackets (49). The pack of men foreshadows an image in Plath's 'Cut', in which the speaker asks explicitly about alliances and loyalty:

Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.

Whose side are they on? (18-21)

'Cut' is linked to 'Burning the Letters' through the image of the fox's blood bursting 'from its ripped bag' (51). It does not stop, even for the poet of 'the dead eye / And the stuffed expression', who writes about its dying (52-3). Plath's 'Kindness' stresses the importance of this creative fluid: 'The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it' (18-9). The fox's blood is

real, dyeing, staining and inscribing all around it, achieving immortality. The fox's other significance relates to the physical inscription of Plath's poem on the obverse of Hughes's 'The Thought-Fox', the poem marking his initiation as a poet: 'Til, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox / It enters the dark hole of the head... / The page is printed' (20-4). Van Dyne suggests that

...reinscription was an essential element of Plath's strategies for gestation and revision. Her borrowings from earlier, underlying texts is common enough in the Ariel manuscripts to suggest that Plath read and reread the reverse of these pages while composing, especially to get started or whenever she was stuck. (34)

Hughes's 'The Thought-Fox' is the primary narrative to which Plath responds through her poem. Her reinscriptions are talismanic; in the same way, the female persona burns the letters to gain control of the text. This is Plath's raid on Hughes's poetic authority.

Two of Plath's biographers have offered unsourced and therefore dubious accounts of the event behind 'Burning the Letters'. According to Stevenson:

...while Ted was in London, [Plath] invaded his attic study, hauled down what papers she could find — mostly letters — and made a bonfire in the vegetable garden. The mother watched, appalled, as her daughter performed whatever rite of witchcraft she thought appropriate. As the fire consumed the letters, Sylvia fanned out the ashes "Between the yellow lettuces and the German cabbage." A "name with black edges" unfurled at her feet: *Assia*. Sylvia now had confirmation of the name of her rival... (Stevenson 250-1)

Paul Alexander retells a similar episode but comes up with a different name:

...she built her fire, and burned everything. Soon, as she threw handfuls of letters onto the flames, she began to dance around the bonfire. She did this for two reasons: to exorcise Ted from her system and to seek an omen in the form of a signal. While she danced, the documents burned. A steady stream of smoke curled skywards. Then, to air the fire, Sylvia stirred the flames with a rake. Ash and bits of charred paper floated up weightlessly. Once, when she had poked at the fire especially hard, she stood back to watch the ascending debris. And suddenly, as she would tell a friend later, a scrap of unburned paper drifted over to land conspicuously at her feet — an omen in the form of a signal. Sylvia picked up the paper. On it was written a word: "Dido." (286)

Aurelia Plath, the one witness who might be able to verify the truth, never mentions the incident. Neither does Hughes, although he does refer to an earlier destructive act in 'The

Inscription': 'She saw his Shakespeare. The red Oxford Shakespeare / That she had ripped to rags when happiness / Was invulnerable. Resurrected' (39-41). Following his separation from Plath, Hughes confided in Dido Merwin who says, 'All his work in progress, his play, poems, notebooks, even his precious edition of Shakespeare, had been torn into small pieces, some "reduced to 'fluff'" (qtd. in Stevenson 206). Plath's act of destruction was a 'poetic suttee', implying sacrifice and death and linking her poem to Hughes's 'Suttee', examined later in this chapter (Bundtzen 441). Terry Gifford, examining the burnt material housed at Emory University, notes:

There is also sad evidence of Plath's manic behaviour towards the end of their relationship. Some of the handwritten drafts of poems are burnt around the edges, relics presumably of the fire in which she tried to destroy Hughes's work. A typewritten manuscript page from her novel of mental breakdown, *The Bell Jar*, has been used on the reverse side for a handwritten poem by Hughes called "Digging". This is one of hundreds of unpublished poems here. It has been torn in two places and taped back together. In his inventory for the papers, Hughes has written, "torn by S.P. and repaired". (n. pag.)

Hughes 'steeped himself all his adult life in Shakespeare' (Sagar 246). While one might expect resentment over the loss of his Shakespeare, Hughes writes to Stevenson to clarify his lack of animosity over the loss:

I regret not deleting one phrase in particular. When Sylvia's destruction of my papers etc. has been described, it is said "this could never be forgotten nor forgiven," or words to that effect. I remember that conclusion was first drawn by Dido, but it seems to have been understood by you and Olwyn as if it were self-evidently true. I don't think I altered it in Dido's text — I was so exercised trying to persuade her to understand Sylvia altogether differently.

The truth is that I didn't hold that action against [Sylvia] — then or at any other time. I was rather shattered by it, and saw it was a crazy thing for her to have done. But perhaps I have something missing. She never did anything that I held against her.... But to say I could not forgive her for ripping up those bits of paper is to misunderstand utterly the stuff of my relationship to her. It is factually untrue, in other words. (qtd. in Malcolm 143)

When emotions are involved, truth becomes less a matter of facts and more a reconstitution by the teller of the tale. As Hughes writes in 'Visit',

look back
At the book of printed words.
You are ten years dead. It is only a story.
Your story. My story. (66-9)

'Burning the Letters' illustrates how biography impinges on the textual life while also highlighting its dialogue. Decades later, *Birthday Letters* enters the dialogic zone of 'Burning the Letters'. Like fire, *Birthday Letters* is doubled, 'merciless' while it creates, though the poetry through which Hughes remembers Plath can never be said to 'lick and fawn' (15-6).

The connection between creative fluids and death is underscored by critical observations into Hughes's 'Night-Ride on Ariel'. Responding to its biographical allusions, Jay Parini writes:

Hughes summons the specter [*sic*] of Death repeatedly, facing it down, evading it, coddling it, scorning it. One has not seen such ferocity in the face of extinction since Plath herself wrote the great death poems of "Ariel." Hughes is, undoubtedly, siphoning off some of Plath's creative fluids here. His tone, the kinds of imagery he evokes, even the diction, will seem familiar to readers of Plath. This was, perhaps, inevitable. But it seems justified in these circumstances. Hughes was there, and he shared the terror of her last years as she teetered on the edge of oblivion. (n. pag.)

The siphoning Parini detects is Hughes's raiding of Plath's text, though his observation that it is Hughes who stares down Death is improbable, since it is usually the figure of 'you' who struggles with death and its incarnations.

The impact of Plath's 'Ariel' on Hughes is manifest in 'Sam', 'Freedom of Speech' and 'Night-Ride on Ariel'. In particular, 'Night-Ride' shows the other side of the dominant narrative of 'Ariel', reflecting Plath's practice of inscribing on the obverse of Hughes's drafts. Where her poem depicts an ascendant self-immolatory mergence with the dawning sun, Hughes's concentrates on presenting Ariel's journey of the night before. He shows the stasis and the darkness in the hours prior to the blueing of the horizon and the transformation of the 'I' into the final 'Eye' of the morning.

The poem's references to electrocutions, plus its borrowings from other Plath poems, such as 'Daddy' and 'Balloons', indicate further biographical and textual raids on Plath's life and poetry, while challenging the arguments of selfhood underpinning 'Ariel'. Katha Pollitt notes, 'Hughes frequently employs Plathian language, and several poems (...[including] "Night-Ride on Ariel") are written as if to answer, or contextualize, poems of hers' (n. pag.). Yet Plath

creates a solitary persona without ties to any other figure apart from the synecdochically represented horse. Wagner-Martin theorises that 'as long as she has to do battle with men, readers have been tempted to read these poems as autobiographical, as poems about the battles — literal and figurative — between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes' (113). Hughes's inclusion in 'Night-Ride' of other biographical figures frustrates the autonomy and mergence of identity her poem achieves.

'Night-Ride' presents Plath's female mentors and guides as sinister phases of the moon, Plath's totemic device, portraying them as fomenters of the apocalyptic event occurring on 'that Monday' (52). The split self is not reintegrated as with 'Ariel' and, unlike the salutary sun in Plath's poem, the moon has a cold, monitoring eye. In Plath's poetry, the moon connotes a cold, sometimes malignant, distant mother figure. Hughes's 'Night-Ride' constructs 'you' as a self resurrected by fairy godmothers surrounding her bed: 'Your moon was full of women' (1). Though Hughes's poem reinstates a missing viewpoint, his negative allusions undermine the positivity Plath endows the sun.

Biographical references in the poem refer to specific women: Olive Higgins Prouty, Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse Beuscher⁸ and Mary Ellen Chase. Plath's mother describes Prouty as

... not only the benefactress whose fund made Sylvia's education at Smith [College] possible, she also was Sylvia's friend and came to her rescue when Sylvia suffered a breakdown in 1953. ...Sylvia spoke of Mrs. Prouty as her "literary mother," in whom she could confide with complete trust and freedom. (3)

Contradictorily, Plath's journals indicate only feelings of obligation, 'I thought of the myriad of physical duties I had to perform: write Prouty...' (J2 149). Plath expresses a similar ambivalence towards Dr Beuscher (her doctor at McLean Hospital, subsequent to her breakdown) in her journal entries:

⁸ The surname Beuscher was eventually dropped. Reverend Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, author of *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion* (New York, Seabury Press, 1977), was one of the first women to become a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas. 'Ruth Barnhouse and Ruth Beuscher are the same person. She was divorced. Beuscher is not spelled with a t as in Beutscher, even though Ted Hughes spells it that way in "Night-Ride on Ariel" and Olwyn Hughes spells it incorrectly as well in the Houghton Mifflin papers at Smith. This may be a Freudian slip conflating Ruth Beuscher with Edward Butscher, Plath's first biographer. Neither one of them is particularly well-liked by the Hughes's [sic]' (Bundtzen n. pag.).

Bothered about RB: I seem to want to cover everything up, like a cat its little crappings with sand, perhaps before leaving for California.

.... (am very ashamed to tell her of immediate jealousies - - - the result of my extra-professional fondness for her, which has inhibited me) (*J2* 481-4)

Writer Mary Ellen Chase was a professor of English at Smith College and the importance of her approval is evident:

How can I be happy when I did something so dangerous [that is, marry Hughes] as follow my own heart and mind regardless of [mother's] experienced advice and Mary Ellen Chase's disapproval and the pragmatic American world's cold eye: but what does he do for a living? (*J2* 435)

Plath often expressed discomfort at and even hostility towards single, unmarried women, including Chase: '...talked of MEChase, Lesbians, (what does a woman see in another woman that she doesn't see in a man: tenderness). I am also afraid of MEC: you must hate her, fear her: you think all old women are magical witches (*J2* 460)'. Like 'Lady Lazarus', 'Ariel' embodies a wish by a female speaker to 'stand alone' (Wagner-Martin 113). By including these women in his poem, Hughes re-invents the narrative and its focus, making explicit the moon's image and its intense significance to Plath: 'And there is a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her "hood of bone"...' (*WP* 161). This is a clear reference to Plath's 'Edge':

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag. (20)

To Hughes, 'Edge' is 'eerily frightening, an unalterably spot-lit vision of death' (*WP* 161). Adopting the moon in 'Night-Ride' emphasises Hughes's omission of a symbol of equal weight — the sun used in Plath's fiercely exultant 'Ariel'. Erica Wagner writes, '[“Night-Ride on Ariel”] is both homage and appropriation: as if by using her words and ideas in this way the poet could somehow gather back into himself something that had been lost' (181). Yet Hughes's insertion of this symbol is not homage but a cruel reminder that all is not well, no matter how Plath's poem attempts to gloss it with triumph.

‘Ariel’ straddles twin themes of birth and death — common to Plath and Hughes’s *oeuvre*, and symbolised in Plath’s by fire and baby imagery — that links with the poem’s major theme of the persona’s achievement of an essential self, accomplished after a journey over land, sea and, finally, in its upward trajectory to the sky. The poem’s importance in Plath’s body of work is marked by its departure from allusions to biographical detail: her creation of an ungendered self. The speaker’s gender fluidity almost exempts ‘Ariel’ from feminist arguments and Hughes’s attempt to negotiate its themes in ‘Night-Ride on Ariel’.

The speaker in ‘Ariel’ adopts and transgresses male and female characteristics, as opposed to the speakers in ‘Fever 103°’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’, who identify themselves as female incendiaries. The sole burning image in it is neither male nor female, though one might say it is a female self-confronting ‘I’. The repetition of I’s indicates an eventual affirmation of identity, so that the speaker’s ultimate consummation into the fiery ‘eye’ becomes her reward, the gratification of desire, where ‘I’ finally meets the ‘eye’ (31).

The literary allusions to Ariel as Prospero’s spirit in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and the biblical definition of Ariel as ‘Lion of God’ are incorporated in Plath’s ‘God’s lioness’; signalling her engagement and subversion of the male, and her questioning of the authority and legitimacy of the male’s elevated position. Negating the male is consistent in ‘Ariel’, especially when the speaker notes the shape of her horse’s neck is a ‘sister’ to the ploughed furrow passing beneath them. This kinship and its link to ‘Nigger-eye / Berries’ evokes Plath’s ‘Blackberrying’:

Blackberries
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes
Ebon in the hedges, fat
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me. (4-8)

The sexualised image of the split furrow and the ‘black sweet blood’ also identifies an aggressively feminine cast to the poem (13). The berries filling her mouth as if to gag her —

recalling the wind gagging the speaker in 'The Rabbit Catcher' — and the sensuality of the brown neck augment the poem's heavy erotic undertones. Responding to its erotic charge, Janice Markey's gynocentric reading theorises the action taking place 'on three levels: a sexual experience, horseriding and the creation of a work of art'; however such a reading neglects the issue of selfhood on which the poem pivots (28). The speaker's statement of their mergence indicates a need for complete immersion with this other being. Yet this desire is unconsummated because she 'cannot catch' or hold on to it (9). A watchful malignity manifests in the 'Nigger-eye berries' that, instead of dark looks, 'cast dark / Hooks' and shadows (11-2). As stated earlier, hooks are a recurrent symbol gesturing towards Hughes's handwriting.

The rider's speed hauls the skin from her; she 'flakes' and sheds her old identity (18). The disinfleshment of 'Thighs, hair' is resonant with Lady Lazarus's act of paring down to skin and bone, though the speaker's self 'unpeel[ed]' does not signify vulnerability— she is strong because of it (17-20). Becoming a 'White / Godiva' revises the legend 'in which the heroic wife performs a rebellious striptease' (Van Dyne 119-20). Unlike Godiva, however, there is not even her hair to cover her. Stripping to the essentials enables her to both leave behind the dark hooks and dead hands (in Plath's drafts, these hands are male (Van Dyne 121)) that would constrain her and the obligations of motherhood, letting her ignore the 'child's cry [that] / Melts in the wall' (24-5). 'Ariel' has affinities with Plath's 'The Other' sharing imagery (walls, arrows, horses, blood and fruit) and strong-willed women: 'White Nike, / Streaming between my walls...' (3-4), where the figure of Nike mirrors that of rebellious Godiva. Because of this discernible relationship, the themes of adultery and infidelity in 'The Other' identify what the rejected 'Dead hands, dead stringencies' are in 'Ariel', and, once shed, signals that the speaker is freed (21).

The speaker's assumption of the Godiva persona signals a series of rapid, object-oriented mutations that represent male and female parities, recalling a similar volatility in 'Fever 103°'. Markey observes, 'The female speaker stops being passive and instead takes control of

her life at every level...' (123), thus her Godiva persona is a sign of progress, of moving from 'Stasis in darkness' to the adrenaline-charged flight to the sun (1).

Plath inverts several masculinised images and appropriates them for a female voice. The seminal image of the foam indicates a procreative impulse that is strikingly male, yet the foam originates from 'a glitter of seas', a female symbol, as is the wheat (23). An identical metamorphosis occurs when the phallic arrow becomes the suicidal dew.⁹ The arrow detumesces, yielding to liquidity and returning to the first verse's 'blue / Pour', yet its propulsion is enough to fly the dew to its destiny (2-3). Van Dyne interpreted this mergence to indicate 'a residual ambivalence' (122). The act also betokens the speaker's explicit desire to merge all separate identities into a unity without gender, one that is not 'a surrender to dying' (Bundtzen 256).

The multiple conflations of carnal images and the allusions to fertility suggest an incipient conception of a new self, a consummation concluding in the persona's identity, of the 'I' merging with the dawn's 'red / Eye' that monitors and emblazons the poet's birthday (30-1). This newly created persona is touched with the holy, beginning from her ride with 'God's lioness' (4) and ending with a fusion into Ariel and the sun.

When Blessing asks, '[W]ould we know [that Ariel is a horse] without biographical materials — would the reference to Godiva, the brown arc of the neck, suffice?' the answer is yes (65). Understanding 'Ariel' is not hampered by lack of biographical detail, which only serves to clarify the links between the poem and her life. The genesis of 'Ariel' is from when Plath learned to ride on her horse Sam:

Then there was the time... when the horse galloped into the street-crossing and the stirrups came off leaving me hanging around his neck, jarred breathless, thinking in an ecstasy: is this the way the end will be?

.... I wrote what I consider a 'book poem' about my runaway ride in Cambridge on the horse Sam: a 'hard' subject for me, horses alien to me, yet the dare-devil change in Sam & my hanging on god knows how is a kind of revelation: it worked well. (J2 220, 403)

⁹ Cupid is said not to have aimed his arrows at the heart but through the eyes, on the theory that people fell in love on sight — an interesting relationship between eyes and arrows.

Plath's language, style and expression in 'Whiteness I Remember', her 'book poem', is considerably different to 'Ariel': the startling event marks a progression in her writing from mere reportage to an engagement and incorporation of the alien other. Plath's memory of the event is ecstatic, even epiphanous, despite the danger; the same ecstatic recklessness characterises the speaker's headlong, arrowed flight into the sun.

The poem's ethereal opening alludes to the stillness of a rural, pre-dawn setting, perhaps Devonshire where, according to Hughes, Plath took lessons on her horse Ariel (*CP* 294). The change from dark to light is marked by a liquid onrush of colour: 'Then the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances', the speaker's perspective collapsing the solid and the abstract together (2-3). This integration reflects the subsumption and merging of the speaker's identity into 'God's lioness', becoming no more than their own body's mechanics of 'heels and knees' (4-6).

'Ariel' is significant for its technical accomplishment. Stanley Plumly observes that it is a 'singular and famous example of form completely at one with its substance, the language exactly the speedy act of its text' (24). Plath arrives at this poem in the same way her persona arrives at its essential self, by shedding the excess, while depicting the possibilities attained after necessary sacrifice. The single-focus of the speaker bespeaks the value of the goal. Christina Britzolakis recognises that the poem 'forges its own myth of transcendence through the ecstasy of physical motion, an ecstasy which is seen as transitory and self-immolating' (184). 'Ariel' is the culmination of what 'Lady Lazarus' expounds: the ascension of the self to a state above everything tawdry and immaterial.

Plath's preoccupation with inverting and displacing canonical male figures with created female personae manifests in 'Fever 103°'. Setting her female speakers in opposition to these privileged and traditionally male roles re-privileges them with new authority and provides a new context for female experience, something apparent in the *Ariel* poems, populated as they are by a female Dante the pilgrim, Christ, Icarus, Phaeton, Elijah and a Lady Lazarus. The

issue of selfhood, its transformations and dissolutions, are explored through these female figures.

'Fever 103°' is Plath's condensed, feminised refiguring of Dante's journey. The speaker's journey records the phases of her relationship, from the agonies of betrayal, to a purging of the adulterer's existence from her life, concluding with the triumphal rise to purity. The journey reflects the three canticles of *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Like *The Divine Comedy*, Plath's poem is composed of tercets. To begin with, the speaker questions the meaning of the word 'pure', a very charged word in the poem, since she feels the significance and currency of purity is lost: nothing is incorrupt. She is located in a hell where purity is achieved by suffering its punishing fires.

Mimicking pilgrim Dante's guides, the speaker takes the reader on a tour of her private hell. In *Inferno*, Cerberus is the triple-headed dog standing at the edge of the previous circle that contained the adulterers, while guarding the gates leading to the gluttonous. She dismisses it as ineffectual, 'fat', ailing, even dull, the word's triple repetition underscoring the sense of boredom it holds for her; it tolls monotonously in the first two verses (4). Cerberus is corrupted by a fever felt in its very muscles: by licking, it tries to soothe and cleanse itself of the sin corrupting it. When 'the tinder cries', she is at the heart of her burning hell (8). In anthropomorphising the tinder, the speaker alludes to souls burning like wood, with the smell of smoke as from 'a snuffed candle' (10). The poem's dark menace is heightened by the assonantal o's in the speaker's address to her loved one, the betrayer: 'Love, love, the low smokes roll' (11). The smell uncoils from her, tangible and ominous as one of Isadora Duncan's strangling scarves. The 'smokes' have a murderous intent, stalking and choking 'the aged', 'the meek', babies, orchids, adulterers'¹⁰ (14-7). Plath's evocation of Duncan points to an admiration of an independent woman not bound by social conventions, though the admiration is tempered by a warning, for Duncan was punished by an ignominious death. It is also ambiguous whether the warning is meant for the speaker or the adulterers, as signified by the orchid (which also symbolises Assia).

¹⁰ Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) had two children out of wedlock, who were fathered by two different men. She believed in independence, not in marriage, and was unconventional for a Victorian.

Problems related to the attempt of reconciling the personal and the aesthetic in Plath's poetry are evident in her extant draft versions: 'In five separate drafts Plath worries over... the name that cannot be suppressed'; 'the naming of the ghastly orchid prompts a burst of revisions in the first draft' (Van Dyne 37, 116). However, the difficulties Assia presents are not only aesthetic and not just to Plath.

The 'ghastly orchid' reference is omitted in the poem's publication in *Review* on October 1963 (20). This omission in the published version is notable since 'Fever 103°' was originally published two months earlier in *Poetry* (August 1963). Hughes, as literary executor, would have been responsible for mailing out her work to publishers and effecting the textual/editorial excision since Plath could not have done so, having died eight months earlier in February 1963. The poem's original publication is not marked by any such omission (Tabor 127-128).

The speaker changes the tone of her endearment from 'love' to the more flirtatious 'devilish leopard'. An animal signifying natural danger, it recalls Plath's 'great African cat' in 'Tulips', the panther in 'Pursuit' and Hughes's animal poems on predatory cats. The speaker states: 'Radiation turned it white / And killed it in an hour', though it is unclear what 'it' may be (23-4). While potentially referring to the smoke, the scarf, the baby, the orchid or the leopard, the proximity of the two lines to 'The sin. The sin' echoes the third verse and indicates the best possibility is the 'aguey' Cerberus (7-27).

In Dante's *Inferno*, adulterers are reserved special punishment in the second circle of Hell, blasted by unrelenting winds, an analogous punishment meted out for the passions that swept such lovers on earth. In Plath's poem, adulterers' bodies are greased by the blast of nuclear winds, Hiroshima ash and the grease one gets from 'eating in' (26). Plath protested actively during the war, her frustration evident in exhortations to her mother:

Now stop trying to get me to write about "decent courageous people" — read the *Ladies' Home Journal* for those! It's too bad my poems frighten you — but you've

always been afraid of reading or seeing the world's hardest things — like Hiroshima, the Inquisition, or Belsen. I believe in going through & facing the worst, not hiding from it. (qtd. in Bundtzen 26)

Plath's fixation on the apocalyptic is apparent in poems alluding to holocausts and atomic bombs. Two weeks after her daughter's birth, she writes to her mother about an anti-nuclear march:

...attended the arrival of the Easter weekend marchers from the atomic bomb plant at Aldermas[t]on to Trafalgar Square in London.

.... I felt proud that the baby's first real adventure should be as a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation. (439-40)

Plath almost revels in such extremes, the apocalyptic and the final. Much more than a rebellion against her fears, these experiences symbolise and contextualise Plath's own internal dramas, mirroring the speaker's holocaustic rage in 'Lady Lazarus', and her desire for vengeance and punishment.

Just as the act of burning the letters cleaned out the attic, so the retching or purging of herself is the speaker's way of flushing something she is unable to stomach or ingest. Appropriately, the speaker marks this entry into Purgatory: 'Three days. Three nights. / Lemon water, chicken / Water, water make me retch' so that any possible nourishment 'chicken water' may provide is rejected (which, by extension, rejects the 'darling' who made it) (28-33).

After the birth of both her children, Plath suffered postnatal milk fevers. On 27 January 1962, ten days after her son's birth, she wrote of having 'a temperature of over 103 for two nights... Ted's been a saint, making me mushrooms on toast, fresh green salads and chicken broth' (523). The poem's movement between the surreal, part-hallucinatory quality (the camellia's unearthliness) and the mundane (chicken broth) captures the vacillations of a fever, while the repetition of 'three' links with both the triple-headed Cerberus and the religious allusion to Christ's interment in the tomb. Crucially, the link extends to Plath's biography and her first suicide attempt, the 'first death' Hughes indicates in 'Suttee' (1).

Interestingly, poets in Purgatory go to heaven for purification. At this juncture, the speaker recognises her relationship to that word: 'I am too pure for you or anyone' (34). Her pure state causes acute sensitivity, intensified by her self-description of delicacy and the other person's body, which provokes pain on a par with the world's wickedness hurting God. But she metamorphoses, adapting to her circumstances: 'I am a lantern', she says (36), connecting with Dante the pilgrim's third ecstatic vision of Christ: 'I saw, above a million lamps, / A Sun that kindled every one of them' (Canto XXIII, ll. 28-9). She becomes the sun and moon in one, both a light-giver and -reflector, sharing Lady Lazarus' performative sense that borders on exhibitionism. 'Does not my heat astound you' is a rhetorical question; she *is* astounding, 'a huge camellia', a hybrid in which heat, light and life integrate (40-1). She charts her ascent and transformation:

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise —
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim, (43-9)

Fiery with fever, she is torchlike and on an upward flight, prefiguring Plath's fire-consumed Ariel and Lady Lazarus, and alluding to the mythical Icarus and Phaeton, and the biblical figure of Elijah: 'there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, / ...and Elijah went up by a / whirlwind into heaven' (Kings 2:11). Her use of mythical and biblical figures signals an engagement with what is traditionally male. By appropriating these icons, she encodes and asserts her independence.

As 'Burning the Letters' raids Hughes's poetic authority, so 'Fever 103°' and other *Ariel* poems record and re-vision the displacement of the male from canonical texts. The excerpt of the speaker's torch-like ascent echoes a passage in *The Divine Comedy* where Dante's eyes are unable to follow the Virgin Mary's ascent: 'My eyes did not possess the power, then, / To

follow the crowned Flame in upward flight / As she soared into heaven toward her Son' (Canto XXIII, ll. 118-20). In *Paradiso*, the rose symbolises the Virgin Mary, the torch encircling her, the angel Gabriel. These symbols link with Plath's lines: 'Virgin / attended by roses' (47-8). The hot metal flying from the acetylene Virgin are the burnt-off remains of impure metal. She sheds 'the gold beaten skin', fake guilt sloughed off by the heat, leaving her pure of soul, like Dante (38): 'Because the soul burns to express itself / Each radiance reached upward with its flame' (Canto XXIII, ll. 123-4).

The speaker's flight concludes in triumph. She leaves her old selves behind, the negatives dissolved: Not you, nor him // Not him nor him', like 'old whore petticoats', unadulterated by the adulterers (51-3). Like Dante, it is through sacrifice that she achieves knowledge; her reward, an ascent 'To Paradise' (54).

For a broadcast reading of 'Fever 103°', Plath's introduction underlines the fire motif's importance, validating this reading as a revision of Dante's work: '[It] is about two kinds of fire — the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second' (CP 293). In hell, suggests Plath, the punishment exacted is not as annihilating as what is expunged from an individual in heaven. 'Fever 103°' is a response to biographical events in Plath's life, and transcends its origins, allegorising a common betrayal and re-visioning it beyond mere female vengeance to an undertaking of Divine justice and punishment.

There is a clear intertextual link between Hughes's 'Fever' and Plath's 'Fever 103°', not only through the titles but also in reference to the soup the wife is given during her sickness. While adultery is not the explicit crime in Hughes's poem, the speaker's scepticism and the inadequacy of his support and devotion to his wife indicate betrayal. 'Fever' argues for the speaker's blamelessness, rebutting the accusation embedded within 'Fever 103°'. It presents the speaker as overwhelmed by circumstance and not, therefore, accountable.

'Fever' recounts the occasion of a husband nursing his wife back to health and, like most of the poems in *Birthday Letters*, is another second-person address to an unnamed 'you'. The first five sentences of the first verse and the first four of the following verses begin with 'you': the speaker sounds, if not accusatory, at least resentful. His detachment mirrors the speaker's in 'Burning the Letters'. Both are observers of a crisis, although her detachment stems from emotional fatigue, while his is rooted in the need for self-preservation:

And I thought
How sick is she? Is she exaggerating?
And I recoiled, just a little,
Just for balance, just for symmetry,
Into sceptical patience, a little. (42-6)

Hughes's poem is set in Spain, a biographical parallel with Plath and Hughes's honeymoon there. To her mother, Plath writes: 'Both of us got sunstroke on our first day, Ted burning an excruciating red, and me getting that terrible siege of dysentery, which leaves one utterly weak' (298). Her journal provides more details. The combination of a recently ripped stomach muscle and a reaction to salt-pork in a beef-stew triggers her memory of Spain:

'...remembering Spain & the poisonous red Spanish sausage; the channel crossing & the tuna sandwich & wine & acrid vomit in the nose, searing the throat & me crawling under the chairs...' (J2 302). Since Plath does not mention a fever during their trip to Spain, it is quite likely Hughes's practice of conflating facts, evident in 'Suttee', resurfaces in 'Fever'. The descriptions of Plath experiencing illness in Spain are the nearest match to Hughes's poem of a woman suffering a fever in that country. The memoirist and poet's self-conscious language ('To find oblivion from your burning tangle') is at variance with the husband's intimacy in 'Fever': 'You had eaten a baddie' and 'I fancied myself at that' (2-18). With speech fluctuating from formal to colloquial, the slippage discloses the speaker's multiple roles.

As with 'The Rabbit Catcher', Hughes is careful to make national differences clear. The speaker is 'vital' and efficient as 'you lay helpless', crying for America while entombed in 'the shuttered Spanish house' (3-20). Hughes's perception of Plath as emblematic of her country is a consistent one: 'To me, of course, she was not only herself: she was America and

American literature in person. I don't know what I was to her' (n. pag.). The figures in his poem represent countries synecdochically, describing America as hysterical, self-involved and prone to exaggeration, Spain stifling and insular while Britain coolly gets on with the job. Hughes's 'You Hated Spain', first published thirteen years after Plath's death, underlines Spain's utter foreignness for the American tourist:

Spain frightened you. Spain
Where I felt at home.
... You did not know the language, your soul was empty
Of the signs, and the welding light
Made your blood shrivel. (1-9)

The 'Spanish galleon of a bed' holds its occupant prisoner (6). In another act of borrowing, perhaps unconscious, the juxtaposition of 'tossed' and 'galleon' strongly alludes to Hughes's fellow countryman Alfred Noyes' 'The Highwayman': 'The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas'.¹¹ Detachedly, the speaker observes 'you' writhing on bedsheets, pitching about as if on that storm-tossed ship. Reflecting similar manoeuvres in 'Suttee', the male speaker adopts feminised roles of nursemaid and mother during this crisis: 'I was nursemaid'; 'Suddenly mother... / woke in me' (19-22). Transforming himself into a caretaker, a physician curing an illness, he is masterful, in control of the crisis, regarding her simply as a problem to be solved. Though not hardened completely to her misery, he relates the illness to her self-imposed exile from America (just as Voltaire was twice exiled from France to England) and treats her with the same 'elixir' that saved Voltaire from the plague, as if this might assuage her feelings of displacement (25).

The contrast between the woman's fevered distress and the protagonist's cool assessment of the crisis underlines their difference. His shifting relationship to her is marked by his changing roles of nursemaid, mother and parent-bird; as the pilot reading her dials, he objectifies her, a mere machine from which he interprets her signals and reactions. His roles reveal a contradictory nature of being nurturing and critical at the same time, so that by the sixth verse, he no longer addresses her as 'you' but in the more formal third person, and the

¹¹ With its theme of love and loyalty, in the poem, Bess sacrifices herself by shooting a musket at her breast to warn the highwayman of the presence of King George's men.

poem ends by referring to her surreally as 'the burning woman' (71). This distancing technique is consistently employed in *Birthday Letters*. 'A Pink Knitted Wool Dress' strikes this same note of detachment:

I see you
Wrestling to contain your flames
In your pink wool knitted dress
And in your eye-pupils — great cut jewels
Jostling their tear-flames... (50-4)

'Fever' concludes on an allegorical note — the speaker is nothing but stone, the woman, all heat. Pain and fire consume the burning woman while the stone man is literally numb of feeling, disclosing a relationship that is, at its core, antithetical.

In describing the woman's illness, the speaker also represents a younger self who is inclined to retreat into 'sceptical patience'. This parallels the image of the two selves meeting. Dianne Middlebrook says, 'And what I think I've found in [*Birthday Letters*] is an artist coming into contact with both his younger self, who was also an artist, and the art that his wife left behind her and is a legacy to him' (qtd. in Farnsworth n. pag.). Recollecting the incident, the speaker is self-castigating: 'What I was really saying was: 'Stop crying wolf'. / ...It seemed easy / Watching such thoughts come up in such good time' (50-6)

The speaker's feelings of numbness, he reasons, are necessarily self-protective (analogous to anaesthesia for polar creatures, callousness for doctors and unconsciousness for planarian worms), although he knows his silence may have prevented 'the most impossible of all / Horrible things' from happening (58-9). Unable to prevent, by speaking aloud his thoughts of not crying wolf, the death she foretells ('I'm going to die'), he blames himself (47). The liberation comes too late. He knows he is a part of 'the whole world [that is] / Too late to help' (61-2). There is a strong relationship between this care-giver and the doctor in Hughes's 'Moonwalk': 'The doctor who humours, and watches / As the patient dies in his care' (34-5). Though both poems are tainted by guilt, death is not so easily accepted in 'Fever'. The

speaker's retrospective self-condemnation is imputed in his silence: 'I said nothing. / I said nothing' (69-70).

The dialogue between the two poems functions on both an intertextual and thematic level.

'Fever' addresses issues of selfhood and its dissolution, shown in 'Fever 103^o', by representing an unstable multiplicity of the male speaker's selves, mimicking the reconfigurations that Plath's female persona undergoes but without the clear demarcations of metamorphosis in her poem.

As an account of the creation of poetry — with a shockingly visceral birth-scene of poetry through 'you' that dramatises the creative process — Hughes's poem, 'Suttee' yields to similar reconfigurations. 'Suttee' examines the myth created between speaker and addressee. The male speaker is midwife to his wife's birth as a poet; the birth is a violent one.

'Suttee' positions the male persona as the co-creator of poetry. He has advanced from his initial role of facilitator by supplanting woman's authority over the birthing process. The poem is predicated on the speaker's role being tantamount to the author and creator of poetry: 'I had delivered an explosion', ousting 'you' in her part of the process (62). Yet despite these claims, he is ineffectual: '“What are these flames?” was all I managed to say' (64). His arrogated role subverts the act of creation by transferring the claim of conception from the mother to him, an assistant. His appropriation reduces the mother's role to an incubator. This usurpation of creation mirrors several acts of textual and biographical manipulation and theft by Plath and Hughes.

'Suttee' makes a claim for reincarnation, in clear opposition to Plath's themes of death and resurrection in 'Lady Lazarus'. Where Lady Lazarus dies and is born again, the baby in 'Suttee' is also the woman giving birth. The first lines of 'Suttee' respond directly to lines in Plath's poem: 'In the myth of your first death our deity / Was yourself resurrected. / Yourself reborn' (1-3). Resurrection is the miracle in 'Lady Lazarus', emphasised by Plath's use of the biblical Lazarus, replacing and displacing the male with a female resurrectee. Rebirth is

Hughes's trope, though it is not miraculous but terrifying. The circularity of conception amplifies the confusion of the male midwife who, observing the splitting of self from self as acts committed on the body, is helpless to do anything. His terror is a direct response to the question in Plath's poem: 'Do I terrify?' (12)

Hughes's religious referencing invests much weight in biographical knowledge of Plath, specifically her three-day self-enclosure in her home's crawlspace and her subsequent rediscovery as akin to Christ's three-day burial and subsequent resurrection, signalled by the rolling back of Jesus's tombstone. For Plath, suicide attempts are anecdotes told with bravado:

The first time it happened
I was ten.
It was an accident.
...
Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well. (34-45)

Hughes's speaker asserts this first death is a 'myth', that they both worshipped 'you' and her reincarnation (1). 'Suttee' counters the biblical references in 'Lady Lazarus' through the persona of 'you'. Though it is possible 'you' is the female inversion of the Holy Trinity (with its paradoxical nature of being one and three entities simultaneously), it is more likely Hughes refers to an Indian religion. Reincarnation is part of the Hindu belief-system, which links it strongly to the Hindu practice of suttee, a wife's sacrifice through fire, thus explaining the speaker's disturbing claim of being her husband and father simultaneously: 'And I was your husband / Performing the part of your father' (74-5). The speaker performs unwittingly, or so he claims, the father's role of sacrificing his daughter after the death of the husband. In effect, both male figures perform a double sacrifice of the woman.

'Suttee' also encourages a biographical reading. Plath's mother writes, 'Sylvia gave birth at home to Frieda Rebecca; she was attended only by an Indian midwife' (415). Hughes's allusions to the Hindu midwife and the depletion of gas (though occurring at Nicholas's birth,

not Frieda's) conflate details between their children's births and is a manipulated reconfiguration of the truth.

The line 'I was midwife' erases the Indian woman and intensifies his own involvement (21). 'My midwife's hands' recalls as well the woman's hands tempted by the flames in 'Burning the Letters' (65). In 'Suttee', the speaker is overwhelmed by birth-water to the point where he is 'engulfed' but the amniotic fluid is destructive instead of nurturing (43). This and the placebo reference borrows from the biographical event of the birth of their son as recorded in Plath's journals and in a letter to her mother:

The minute I stopped pushing, the pains made themselves felt, awful, utterly twisting. At the same moment, I was aware that I seemed to be breathing only air in the mask, which I had taken up. The cylinder of gas had run out. There was no more... I felt very upset at this. (J2 646)

Then at 5 minutes to 12, as the doctor was on his way over, this great bluish, glistening boy shot out onto the bed on a tidal wave of water that drenched all four of us to the skin, howling lustily. It was an amazing sight. (LH 521)

Hughes's consistent employment of birth imagery in his descriptions of Plath's writing process reveals a perception of poetry as rivalling giving birth. Hughes emphasises the importance of Plath's pregnancy and giving birth as catalysts for her *Ariel* poems, making a direct connection between these two creative acts:

But the truly miraculous thing about her will remain the fact that in two years, while she was almost fully occupied with children and house-keeping, she underwent a poetic development that has hardly any equal on record, for suddenness and completeness. The birth of her first child seemed to start the process. All at once she could compose at top speed, and with her full weight. Her second child brought things a giant step forward. (WP 162)

Hughes adopts the trope of childbirth in other discussions of Plath, using terms such as 'the problematic accouchement in the poems' and the 'oracular foetus' to describe her creative process (186):

Sylvia Plath's poetry, like a species on its own, exists in little else but the revelation of that birth and purpose.

.... It may have something to do with the fact [that] she was a woman. Maybe her singularity derives from a feminine bee-line instinct for the real priority, for what

truly matters – an instinct for nursing and repairing the damaged and threatened nucleus of the self and for starving every other aspect of her life in order to feed and strengthen that, and bring that to a safe delivery.

.... After its introductory overture (everything up to 1953), the drama proper began with a 'death', which was followed by a long 'gestation' or 'regeneration', which in turn would ultimately require a 'birth' or 'rebirth'...

.... It gave the impression of being a secret crucible, or rather a womb, an almost biological process – and just as much beyond her manipulative interference. And like a pregnancy, selfish with her resources. (*WP* 178-81)

Notably, during Plath's trial separation from Hughes, she writes of her feelings of creative liberation:

It is as if, out of revenge for my brain and creative power, he wanted to stick me where I would have no chance to use it. I think now my creating babies and a novel frightened him — for he wants barren women like his sister and this woman. (qtd. in Bundtzen 27)

Hughes viewed Plath's creative growth consistently through the metaphor of childbirth and regeneration. Echoing the grotesque imagery in 'Suttee', Hughes says a poet has 'actually little idea whether he is really helping or not, in most of this busy midwifery', with some poems representing 'the unique originals that died in the womb – and were reabsorbed' (*WP* 208).

'Suttee' incorporates the many levels of raiding explicated in this thesis, borrowing textually, biographically and thematically. It seeks to control creativity and, by extension, control the text. Through its vigorous denial of the opposite point of view, its multilevelled dialogue with Plath's poems underlines its polarity from her work. The resultant tension illuminates their discourse. 'Suttee' reinvents and revises the portrayal of rebirth and resurrection in Plath's poetry, focusing on reincarnation to re-conceive the self. For Plath, the self was always in conflict, split between creative and procreative tensions unique to women writers.

The eponymous 'Lady Lazarus' is a strong, defined female persona created as a 'charge' against male authority figures (57). She serves to accuse, electrify, instruct, and impute fault and blame. She is a burden, an attack, an explosive, a record of debt, an injunction, a cost and

a thrill. Lady Lazarus exists to oppose and rupture male authority and arrogate it, to raid from their power and add to her own. Through her capacity for self-renewal, she can even challenge death.

'Lady Lazarus' depicts a woman capable of surviving death by suicide. Plath's introduction at a broadcast reading points out her unusual nature: 'The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman' (CP 294).

Van Dyne views 'Lady Lazarus' as paralleling Plath's 'literary self-conception', a view that agrees with Hughes's interpretation of Plath's creative process (397). What occurs in the poem is clearly a resurrection. The speaker is the female version of the figure of Lazarus. Full of showmanship and confidence, she declares, 'I have done it again' (1). Where the male speaker in 'Fever' is masterful over the body of 'you', Lady Lazarus has complete mastery and control over her own, choosing when to reveal it, conceal it and kill it. Unlike Lazarus, Lady Lazarus is not meek, waiting patiently to be brought forth and revealed: 'Peel off the napkin / O my enemy', she dares, specifically addressing one person in the 'peanut-crunching crowd', taunting him (10-26). 'Do I terrify?' (12).

The napkin swaddling Lazarus is transformed, now used to describe her face as 'a featureless, fine / Jew linen' (8-9). Her body is a site of conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed, the Nazis and Jews, as if warring with itself, which is strongly related to her tendency to dismember and compartmentalise her body. Her self-annihilation and, at the end, self-immolation is a way to wrest control from her watchers and enemies.

Lady Lazarus's relationship to these authority figures is a rebellious one, expressing antipathy towards all the figures. Her address seems directed to two separate camps, one composed of the three evil figures ('my enemy', Herr Enemy and Lucifer), the other of two good figures (Herr Doktor and Herr God) (11). However, another interpretation is that these two camps

(represented by Herr Doktor and Herr Enemy) are the same. In this poem, Herr Doktor is a multiply-laden name with connotations good and bad, reflecting its complex relationship to Lady Lazarus. Generally, a doctor heals the sick and is, in common usage, a similar figure to the speaker in 'Fever', ministering to his 'burning woman', or to the doctor humouring his dying patient in 'Moonwalk'. Another meaning lies in the Latin root of doctor, *docere* (to teach), so that Herr Doktor means, specifically, a university lecturer with a doctorate.

In letters, Plath writes: '[My poems] come from the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth that Ted is teaching me'; 'Ted is teaching me about horoscopes, how to cook herring roes...'; and 'Ted and I went up a green river... I learned to punt' (265-281). In her journal, Plath writes, 'Whatever Ted does, I would like to submit myself to it. It would require a long discipleship' (J2 450-1). Echoing Hughes's intimacy of language used in 'Fever', Plath indicates a similarly familiar (but shadowy) relationship with Hughes. Lady Lazarus's address of 'my enemy' recalls a saying: 'Keep your friends close, your enemies closer still'. Lady's Lazarus's enemy is 'an intimate tyrant', her increasing animosity encompassing not only Herr Doktor (both as healer and teacher) but God and Lucifer as well (Van Dyne 116). Out of malicious pleasure, Lady Lazarus dares her enemy to look on a face newly emerged from death. It is a face composed of both death mask and shroud. When she promises that '...soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me', she is describing her resurrection, a reversal of the disinfleshment of death (16-8).

Lady Lazarus's speech has all the informal patter, *braggadocio* and bravado of a perfectly poised Master of Ceremonies, but her spiel also reveals flashes of hurt, resentment, vengefulness and sorrow. Though readers are privy to the exchange, her vulnerability is directed at the anonymous addressee, as implied by the language. Plath's use of German reinforces the Jew/Nazi dichotomy, accentuating the conflict between the speaker and the unspecified addressee.

The image of the smiling woman is overlaid with the earlier image of the full set of teeth: her smile is neither benevolent nor maternal but a grinning rictus of death. The ritualised aspect

of her suicides (annihilating 'each decade') indicates death is a necessity, both an act of creation and validation because she excels at it: 'Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well' (43-5). For Lady Lazarus, each decade unravels into a million threads, her life undoing itself to its components. Yet the filaments are also a hopeful sign, a million points of light.

The peanut-crunching crowd to whom she panders and performs outrageously her dramatic monologue are unruly, shoving in to view the spectacle, with an added element of unnatural symbiosis or parasitism in their relationship (Pollitt 98). Mummification or preservation of her body from decay leads to this display to the crowd, but who unwraps her? Hand and foot could refer to her body being unwrapped, or 'them' being her slaves at her bidding, waiting on her (28). She is not an ordinary creation; the cats' nine lives are incorporated in her and the ritualised act of self-immolation is part of her program.

Lady Lazarus's apprenticeship to death was accidental. There is pride in recalling its details. She regains her confidence as the repetitions increase in tempo. This is her comeback, both her repartee and revenge. She ascribes the blame, lays charges. But the plaintive quality in her speech returns: 'I may be skin and bone' (33). The switch in tone is surprising since she is so aggressive, almost predatory at the end. Phoenix-like, the speaker will rise above the ash (Assia) to wreak her revenge on men.

The fire and ash imagery at the end of the poem reveals a desire to 'reduce to ashes any remnant of a self derivatively defined by [Plath's] relationship to Hughes', paralleling the creation of a self-actualised version from the dross of the old self, independent of influence or another person's control (Van Dyne 407). Lady Lazarus can withstand and 'survive each deconstruction of the self' by the male figures in her lives (Van Dyne 400). 'Beware' is her warning to God, Lucifer and all men.

While Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar* gives both a thorough (and fictionalised) account of her suicide attempt, she writes a more succinct version in a letter:

I broke the lock of my mother's safe, took out the bottle of 50 sleeping pills, and descended to the dark sheltered ledge in our basement, after having left a note to mother that I had gone on a long walk and would not be back for a day or so.... My mother believed my note, sent out searching parties, notified the police, and, finally, on the second day or so, began to give up hope when she found that the pills were missing. In the meantime, I had stupidly taken too many, vomited them, and came to consciousness in a dark hell, banging my head repeatedly on the ragged rocks of the cellar in futile attempts to sit up and, instinctively, call for help.

My brother finally heard my weak yells... (LH 142)

The link between *The Bell Jar* and the biographical material is as strong here as the poetry's link to biography. Comparing the letter and the relevant passage in the novel reveals definite similarities. Plath survived the suicide experience with a sense of triumph: '...having been on the other side of life like Lazarus, I know that my whole being shall be one song of affirmation and love all my life long' (LH 273). However, her statement emphasises the problem of separating the biography and its relationship to the poem, a problem attributable to Plath's myth making, such as the use of the Lazarus myth.¹²

She is not self-created but someone else's creation, like Frankenstein's monster: "But soon," he cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames..." (Shelley 185). Both Lady Lazarus and Frankenstein's monster use the same imagery and share an exulting tone that states rather than accuses. In the novel, Victor Frankenstein attempts to usurp the female procreative process by creating his own child, just as male figures in Hughes's poetry position themselves as creators and birth-givers of poetry. Mary Shelley's literary career and her marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley reveal parallels to Plath and her marriage to Hughes. Of *Frankenstein*, a reviewer writes, 'For a man, [the novel] was excellent, but for a woman it was wonderful' (Smith 196). In Hughes's poem 'Blood and Innocence', the line 'Yourself by Frankenstein, stiff-kneed' exhibits an awareness of the nature of the female figure remodelled by its creator.

¹² There are two Lazaruses in the Bible. The first Lazarus is the poor man living from the crumbs of the rich man's table. The second is Lazarus of Bethany, brother to Mary (who anointed Jesus' feet and washed it with her hair). He lay in his grave for four days before being brought back to life. The religious figure of Lazarus presages Christ's own resurrection: 'And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go' (John 11:44).

'Lady Lazarus' argues against the voyeuristic impulse of the 'peanut-crunching crowd', even as that same crowd pruriently scrutinises the psyche of the performer on stage (26). It also argues for a space usually reserved for male authority figures such as doctors and professors. As a coded address to Hughes, 'Lady Lazarus' communicates on both a textual and biographical level, which is evident in its references to Plath's suicide attempts and the poets' intertextual concerns with selfhood. While it is embedded with biographical detail, the poem 'transmute[s] personal autobiography into more public poetic myth', countering a tendency in Hughes's work (Van Dyne 401). Despite Hughes's attempts, 'Lady Lazarus' is neither undermined nor outdone. Van Dyne posits that Plath 'worried not only about how she would define the self but how she would defend it' (395). As a defense against Hughes, Plath's work is fortified from such raids on her self-definition. What she could not have anticipated, of course, was his turning raider after she had no more control over her words.



Sylvia Plath, with Frieda and Nicholas, Devon, (1962)

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

O love, how did you get here?

'Nick and the Candlestick',
Sylvia Plath

The intention of my thesis is not to denounce or accuse Ted Hughes. Though my examination of the Plath-Hughes relationship is grounded in personal biographies, I have no interest in casting aspersions of a personal nature on Hughes. Rather I aim to disclose the oddness of the position Hughes has chosen to take, that is, an antagonist to Plath. These directed dialogues with Plath are not elegiac, but aggressive, even hostile in tone. Initial reviews of *Birthday Letters* tend to overlook a negative predilection in Hughes's work. His insistence and elevation of his version of events above Plath's poems diminishes her accomplishment. His poetry acts as a personal, almost invasive commentary on Plath's work, while refraining from directing a similar degree of scrutiny towards himself. One of the few critics to review *Birthday Letters* at length, Jack Kroll remarks, '[W]hat seems missing [in *Birthday Letters*] is any deep self-examination by Hughes' (n. pag.). While a belligerent stance is evident, genuine grief and nostalgia is manifest, if rarely, in poems such as 'Red', 'Chaucer' and 'Perfect Light'.

In its celebration of a happy family portrait, 'Perfect Light' uses simplicity in language that is as clear and transparent as the 'perfect light' the poem evokes, while also recognising the transience of such perfection. The poem's overtly biographical references require extra-textual information. In 1961, Hughes and Plath left London for Devon, settling finally at Court Green:

The church-yard and cemetery were nearby, and a nine-foot stone wall surrounded the garden.

Both Sylvia and Ted were intrigued by the history of Court Green. ... Beneath the ancient elm tree, about which Sylvia would write several poems, was the mound of a Roman fortress (Wagner-Martin 192).

Hughes conflates the past with the freshness and immediacy of a remembered day, emphasised through a repetition of key words: 'daffodils' is mentioned five times; 'light' four times, and 'perfect' and 'innocence' thrice. In addressing the reader as 'you', the speaker creates a paradoxical sense of intimacy and distance, since 'you' is not any reader but a specific absent other who shares his memory. That Hughes capitalises the word 'mother' signals that this is not an ordinary family but a 'Holy' one. The picture's kinship to 'the Holy portrait' (10) parallels a similar disclosure by Plath when she likens her son to baby Jesus in 'Nick and the Candlestick': 'Remembering, even in sleep, / Your crossed position. ... You are the baby in the barn' (25-42).

The scene is a 'portrait', a picture 'posed' for the viewer, with emphasis on words denoting artistic composition or artifice, accentuating the contradictory tensions between the artificiality of the pose and the artlessness of the figures within the photograph. The speaker positions figures to achieve a satisfying representation, as a camera would. Whereas a photograph records what a poem cannot, the poem can voice a premonition, intuited solely by its writer, of 'your next moment / Coming towards you like an infantryman / Returning slowly out of no-man's land' (18-20). Hughes shadows the daffodils' cheeriness with the menacing image of the burial ground. An allusion to the ruined Roman fortress carries its overtones of death and war to underscore the fragility of life and happiness.

Abrupt line-breaks mirror the disturbance provoked by the image. Powerless to prevent the portent's approach into their lives, the speaker is, or can claim to be, as innocent as his family, since that moment's significance only becomes apparent in his recollected present. The photograph in the poem splits allegiances over the reliability between the tangible evidence of the photograph and the textualised memory, yet neither medium could capture the poem's one significant intangible: 'Your words were lost in the camera' (14).

A reader might expect more glimpses of 'perfect light' throughout *Birthday Letters*. As Hughes's final volume, published when he knew he would soon die, one might also expect a reconciliation with the past, perhaps through poetry infused with gentler emotion. When one expects a work written at the end of the writer's life to contain poems of tenderness and nostalgia, it is difficult to come to terms with poems of vitriol and hostility that directly engage with Plath's work. There is no generosity of spirit in these works or, oddly enough, love.

Though conflict apparently taints the poets' relationship, the connections between their poetry remain undeniable. Each poet plunders the other's work to challenge ideas within it; Plath inserts Hughes's text in her work to neutralise, appropriate and incorporate its authority, while Hughes constructs identities and viewpoints to oppose ideologies within her text. In the final analysis, Hughes's *Birthday Letters* provides the link between what is created on the page and the events in their life.

The link continues with the poets' daughter Frieda Hughes who, along with her brother, often received dedications in her parents' books. As extra-textual information, these dedications are an insight into the poet-family's thematic of a lack of individuation. In Frieda's book *Wooroloo*, which is dedicated to 'Daddy', images from the poets' private narrative (a flame-haired woman, the rabbit catcher, sheep, foxes, identity, betrayal, fate, sacrifice and fire) represent themselves. Significantly, the symbol of Plath and Hughes's first encounter, the purloined earrings of Plath's journals and 'Trophies', are now in Frieda's ownership, appearing in her poem 'Earrings':

Pearled and gold, like florentines,
They were her ears. Your eyes
Read in them her history.
...
Your depth and breadth had seen
All this within those decorations. (1-15)

When asked whether her own poetry is an entry into a conversation of family members, Frieda Hughes replies, 'I can't deny there isn't an element of that, because sometimes I feel as if I'm

having a conversation with one or the other. But that's because they're in my head, and always will be' (Laurie 19). Her poetry signals a new voice in the intra-family dialogue.

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