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Double Image: The Hughes-Plath Relationship As Told in *Birthday*
Letters.

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ABSTRACT

Proceeding from a close reading of both *Birthday Letters* and the poems of Sylvia Plath, and also from a consideration of secondary and biographical works, I argue that implicit within *Birthday Letters* is an explanation for Sylvia Plath's death and Ted Hughes's role in it. *Birthday Letters* is a collection of 88 poems written by Ted Hughes to his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, in the years following her death. There are two aspects to the explanation Ted Hughes provides. Both are connected to Sylvia Plath's poetry. Her development as a poet not only causes her death as told in *Birthday Letters*, but it also renders Ted Hughes incapable of helping her, because through her poetry he is made to adopt the role of Plath's father. This explanation is possible because Hughes conflates Sylvia Plath's self with the personae of her poems.

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Introduction

Claire Tomalin describes Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* as "a sequence of poems written for his wife Sylvia Plath, who killed herself during a period of angry estrangement between them" (152). It is a collection of poetry by a well-known British poet about a relationship about which he has never before publicly spoken. The publication of *Birthday Letters* was heralded as a major event. John Walsh, in the *Independent Friday Review*, claimed that the publication of *Birthday Letters* was "a cataclysmic moment in the poetry world" (1) because, although many people had commented on the Plath-Hughes marriage, Ted Hughes had not been one of them. *Birthday Letters* contains poems written by Hughes that describe and explain the nature of his relationship with Plath, from their courtship to their separation and beyond, and also describe and explain what he knew of her state of mind. In spite of the fact that Hughes's place in Plath's life and death has been the subject of acrimonious debate, he has confined his discussion of Plath to her work, commenting on her life only briefly and only where it could not be avoided.

Birthday Letters can be regarded as an attempt by Hughes to represent himself, both in the literary sense and in the legal sense. Until the publication of *Birthday Letters*, he was publicly represented by the poetry of Plath and by critics' interpretations of and responses to it. He is presumed to be the husband mentioned in some of Plath's poems. In many readings of "Daddy", for example, he is the model of Plath's father, a man with "a Meinkampf look" (line 65) and "a love of the rack and the screw" (line 66). A man who is often presumed to be Hughes is also mentioned in "Stings", and implied in "Burning the Letters". Besides his representation in Plath's poetry and in critical responses and interpretations of it, he has also been represented in Plath's biographies.

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes have become archetypal figures. Their separation and Plath's death have taken on a meaning beyond that of a personal tragedy. Criticism of Hughes has been magnified accordingly. Janet Malcolm describes the unsympathetic attention he has received in relation to his relationship with Plath as being like the attention Prometheus received from birds that daily pecked out his liver (8). Despite the decades since her death, this attention has never really ceased. Arriving in Australia in 1976, he "was greeted at the airport by demonstrators holding placards which accused him of murdering Sylvia Plath" (Motion 22). Whatever debate there is about the role Hughes played in Plath's life while she was alive is compounded by the fact that Hughes was Plath's literary executor. Marjorie Perloff's article about the arrangement of Plath's poems into the *Ariel* collection, "The Two *Ariels*: The Remaking of the Sylvia Plath Canon", is one example of the way Hughes's actions as literary executor have been questioned. This is not to say that Perloff is hostile to Hughes, but it shows how his actions after Plath's death continue to be the focus of attention. Perloff claims that the arrangement by Plath of the poems that would make up her next book was sufficiently different from the book that appeared after her death as to change the tone of the collection. As literary executor Hughes was responsible for choosing which poems would go into the book that was published, and the order in which they would appear. Perloff argues that Hughes's ordering of the *Ariel* poems "changed the trajectory of the work from a narrative that emphasizes spring, hope, and rebirth, to one that emphasizes suicide, death, and completion" (Churchwell 113). Her argument focuses on the poem "Edge" which describes a dead woman. It is the second to last poem in Hughes's *Ariel*. In Sylvia Plath's list the last poem is "Wintering", the last word of which is 'spring' (line 50).

I am taking an intertextual approach to the interpretation of the poems of *Birthday Letters*. The meaning of the poems is not merely contained within them, but also depends on their relationship to other texts. Among these other texts are the biographies of Plath. These biographies provide a view of Hughes's relation with Plath that can either be refuted or reinforced. They are also important because of the biographical nature of *Birthday Letters*. From time to time I refer to these biographies to give background or context to the incidents Hughes recounts in his poems. However, these biographies do not collectively provide a unitary view about Plath's life, most especially when discussing her relationship with Hughes.

Victoria Laurie claims that since her death, Plath has been the subject of 112 biographies (18). In her book, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Janet Malcolm cites five of these. They are Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*, Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic*, Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, and Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. Of these biographies, I refer most often to Stevenson, Hayman and Wagner-Martin.

Stevenson's biography is notorious for being pro-Hughes, while Hayman's is considered anti-Hughes. Wagner-Martin's biography is pro-Plath, but has little to say about Hughes. This selection provides some kind of balance since neither side goes unchallenged. I refer less often to Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic*, and not at all to Butscher, as I consider the ground to have been adequately and comprehensively covered by these other biographers. In addition to the biographies, biographical information comes from Plath's published journals, her published letters, as well as Aurelia Plath's commentaries on these letters, and also from Erica Wagner's book, *Ariel's Gift*, which provides a commentary to *Birthday Letters*. The question of the difficult nature of establishing biographical truth

remains however. It is not a question I will answer here. My use of biographies, the journals, letters, and Wagner's commentary is one that attempts to side-step the issue. It is not a question of whose account is more true in this instance, since there is such controversy, only that incidents described in *Birthday Letters* have often also been described elsewhere.

The poems of *Birthday Letters* gain their meaning intertextually not only from their relationship to Plath's biographies, but also from their relationship to what Hughes has previously written on the subject of Plath. A comparison between the ideas that underlie and structure Hughes's prose writings about Plath's work and those that underlie and structure *Birthday Letters* reveals the extent to which Hughes's point of view about the life and, in particular, the death of Plath is consistent between these documents. The positions taken in the poetry and that taken in the prose are mutually reinforcing.

Furthermore, the poetry of *Birthday Letters* not only suits, but requires, an intertextual interpretation because it is intertextual itself. Hughes refers not only to Plath's life, but to the poetry she wrote in the course of that life. The representation of Plath in *Birthday Letters*, in fact, increasingly relies on her poetry. The meaning of each poem by Hughes that contains references to a poem by Plath cannot be adequately fathomed without a consideration not only of Plath's poem in itself, but also its recontextualisation as part of a poem by Hughes.

In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes's allusions to some of the poems that have been read as hostile to him, and particularly their recontextualisation in his poems, make other interpretations possible, interpretations which do not implicate Hughes in any marital misconduct. Susan Van Dyne's reading of "Burning the Letters", for example, implies a hostility by Plath

towards Hughes. By alluding to Plath's poem in his own poem "Suttee", Hughes implicitly calls into question this interpretation, offering other motives for the fire "Burning the Letters" describes. Hughes response to this alleged attack from Plath is to imply it was never an attack at all.

In this thesis I examine the story of Plath's death as it is told in *Birthday Letters*. When considered as a group, the poems of *Birthday Letters* can be seen as providing an explanation of her death. It is not so much the content of each poem which provides this explanation; it is the way the collection is structured and the way Plath's poetry becomes more and more evident in the poems. In *Birthday Letters*, Sylvia Plath's death is intimately connected with her poetry, and with her preoccupation with her father, who died when she had just turned nine. According to Hughes he was unable to prevent her death because the memory of Otto Plath either excluded him completely or made him into a substitute.

In the process of writing about Plath's life and death, Hughes fuses the person of Plath with the personae of her poems. Because of this, her death seems ineluctable. This has significant consequences for Hughes's representation of himself. Because of her death's inevitability he becomes a helpless bystander in both their lives. Correspondingly, the collection is permeated by fatalism. Events are described with distress, but also resignation, as if there was never anything anyone could do.

The first chapter gives an outline of the context into which *Birthday Letters* was received. The second chapter concerns the structure of *Birthday Letters* as a whole. It is the structure of the collection that reflects and reinforces the teleological explanation of Plath's development as a writer found in Hughes's previously published writings. In these

writings Hughes closes the gap between Plath and her poems' speakers, until they are indistinguishable. The third chapter is concerned with the conflation of poet and personae in Hughes's representation of Plath in *Birthday Letters* and the fourth chapter concerns the conflation of Ted Hughes and Otto Plath in his representation of himself. These two strands are the predominant elements in Hughes's account of Plath's death. Chapter Five explores Hughes's representation of Otto Plath's role in the breakdown of their marriage.

The structure of *Birthday Letters* reflects the importance Hughes gives to Plath's *Ariel* poems. He has not only stated that the subject of her poems became more and more bound up with herself, which partly accounts for the confusion between Plath and her poems' personae, but he has also made these poems an end point to the narrative of her life. Correspondingly, it is not until the end of the collection that it becomes apparent that Plath's poetry is used to justify and explain her death, particularly its inevitability. Her death, however, and Hughes's inability to stop it, are important thematic elements throughout the collection. Chapter Six explores the way Hughes conveys the inevitability of Plath's death without making its cause apparent. This is done through the idea of being subject to a large, impersonal force.

It is important, however, firstly to give some background to the events about which Hughes writes. In order to provide, not only a context for these poems, but also a sense of their respective order in the chronological narrative that structures *Birthday Letters*, I am beginning with a brief summary of Hughes and Plath's shared biography.

They met in 1956 while Sylvia Plath was studying at Cambridge. She had already completed by then an undergraduate degree at Smith College in the United States, and

had won a Fulbright Scholarship to study in England. Ted Hughes had previously attended Cambridge, first majoring in English and then in Anthropology. He was still in contact with friends he had made there. Their first meeting, taking place at a Cambridge party, has become, according to Erica Wagner, “a literary legend” (49). Although this was their first meeting, Plath knew enough of Hughes’s poetry from reading *St Botolph’s Review* – the party was to celebrate the journal’s launch – to quote some of his lines at him across the din. Subsequently, in a back room he kissed her first on the mouth, then on the neck. She bit him on the cheek. Plath’s wrote of it in her journal:

I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf which had weathered the sun and much love [. . .] and my favourite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when he came out of the room, blood was running down his face.

(212)

During one of his ensuing visits to Cambridge, in an incident he recounts in *Birthday Letters* in “Visit”, Hughes and a mutual friend, E. Lucas Meyers, threw mud at Plath’s window in order to attract her attention. It did not attract her attention because the window was not in fact hers. When they did meet again, it was in London. Plath was on her way to Paris, and Meyers had invited her to stop in London in order to see Hughes and himself at the place they were staying. Plath met up with Hughes on the way back from Paris as well, and soon Hughes was visiting Cambridge in order to see her.

They were married on June 16, 1956, scarcely four months after their first meeting. Plath’s mother, Aurelia, attended the wedding. She was the only guest. There was no one from Hughes’s family since he did not tell them about his marriage until later. For their

wedding trip Plath and Hughes travelled to Paris with Plath's mother, then continued on to Spain without her. After their honeymoon, Plath returned to Cambridge alone. At first she kept her marriage a secret because she feared it would affect her scholarship. When she did reveal that she was married, there was no problem with either her scholarship or her college. After finishing at Cambridge, she and Hughes left England for America. Plath had a teaching job at her former school, Smith College. Although her students and colleagues found her to be a good teacher, the job terrified her. Two years later they returned to England, having first toured the country by car (Aurelia Plath 322). Their time in the United States, living in Boston and their valedictory car tour of the country, is well represented in *Birthday Letters*.

In England they settled in London. Throughout their time together both had been writing poetry. Plath had written some prose as well. This continued. Plath also gave birth to a daughter, Frieda, in April of 1960. They moved out of London in 1961, buying a house in Devon. The house had extensive gardens, which they both worked. Plath began keeping bees. This was where their next child, Nicolas, was born, in January of 1962. This is also where they were living when they separated. Hughes moved out of their home in Devon in October of that same year. Plath continued to live in Devon until December when she moved to London with their children. In London on the morning of the February 11, 1963, Plath, still separated, but not legally divorced from Hughes, killed herself.

In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes mentions little about either of their lives before they met. The obvious exceptions to this are his references to Plath's father, who died in 1940 from complications following undiagnosed diabetes, and his references to Plath's suicide attempt in 1953. Both of these events have become part of the Sylvia Plath mythology. References within Plath's poetry to a dead father and references to returning from the

dead seem to be derived from these real life events. During the summer vacation of 1953 Plath exhibited signs of depression. She was treated as an outpatient with electroconvulsive therapy. Nevertheless, her depression was exacerbated, and she tried to kill herself. Plath took a bottle of sleeping pills into the crawlspace under her mother's house. She swallowed pills until she became unconscious. She did not die, and was found three days later when her brother, Warren, heard sounds of moaning coming from the crawlspace. She was admitted to a private psychiatric hospital from which she was discharged some months later.

The story of Ted and Sylvia is a controversial one. The controversy has to do with how the story is told, and by whom, and seems to revolve around the question: who is to accept responsibility for Sylvia's death?