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

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy

in English at Massey University

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2002

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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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank Doreen D'Cruz for her supervision of this thesis.

For discussing ideas with me and helping me clarify my position, I would like to acknowledge the help of Rob Thorne, Chamsy el Ojeili and Tim Corballis. I am also grateful to Chamsy el Ojeili and Tim Corballis for proof-reading.

The support of fellow Masters students, Tamsyn Knight and Damon Ellis, has been very valuable.

I would also like to thank my parents.

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 electro-convulsive 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?

Chapter One – Ted Hughes on Trial

Hughes's response to his public image shapes, to a large extent, the whole *Birthday Letters* collection. In explaining what forces and feelings played a part in Plath's death, he is also explaining his own role. To provide an explanation of Plath's death is also to answer his accusers.

One of his harshest accusers is Robin Morgan. Published in 1972, her poem "Arraignment", is one of the first public attacks on Hughes. It introduces the idea of him being on trial. The poem characterises itself as an arraignment. The speaker is so convinced of her own case that Hughes's punishment is already imagined. There is no subtlety in its accusations or indeed in its threats.

It is clear that the speaker would like to accuse Hughes of murder outright. Instead she accuses him of the crime of marriage. In the poem each marriage results in a death, first that of Plath and then that of Assia Wevill and Shura. The speaker warns at the end, that Hughes has married again, implying that death will follow.

The speaker's accusations, which must be read between the lines, are very strong. She implies Ted Hughes's daughter with Assia Wevill, Shura, is better off dead than being raised by Hughes. Accordingly she speaks of rescuing Frieda and Nicholas. She accuses Hughes of raping Plath, of brainwashing their children, of appropriating her imagery, withholding poems hostile to him (such as "The Jailor"), making money (lots of it) off her work, writing bad ("ostentatious" (line 74)) poetry in his own name. Morgan makes a pun on the word 'executor' to further imply that Hughes was Plath's killer. The speaker does not say (very pointedly, too pointedly) that Hughes is a "one-man gynocidal movement" (line 48), meaning that he is.

However, the subject of the poem is not simply Ted Hughes. There are also charges against society. The speaker laments the injustice of a legal system that protects Hughes from accusations of murder. She cannot say outright that this is the crime he has committed without being culpable of libel. Hughes's reputation is protected more solidly than Plath's actual life.

Furthermore, the blame for Plath's death is laid at Plath's feet by a male-dominated literary establishment according to the speaker of the poem. Plath is mad, unbalanced, the author of her own misery and death. This diagnosis both explains her suicide and nullifies her apparent anger at Hughes.

Plath's achievements as a poet are belittled by what the speaker would see as misreadings of her poems. The speaker accuses A. Alvarez, George Steiner, and Robert Lowell of complicity in this crime. Robin Morgan may have mentioned George Steiner because of his review of *Ariel.* He cannot seem to get it right. When he comments that "by her last poems and sudden death, she had come to signify the specific honesties and risks of the poet's condition" (211) he seems to be missing the point that she was a woman and the risks she took were consequently greater. When he does acknowledge the fact that Plath was a woman, he does so in what Robin Morgan must have found the most offensive way possible. For Steiner it seems that the problems of being a woman are fundamentally of a physical nature and do not relate in any consequent way from gender-based social stratification:

> This new frankness of women about the specific hurts and tangles of their nervous-physiological make-up is as vital to the poetry of Sylvia Plath as it is to the tracts of Simone de Beauvoir or to the novels of Edna O'Brien and Brigid Brophy. (215)

He claims that Plath was obviously in physical pain. In the light of his subsequent comments (quoted above and below), this is presumably on account of her defective (that is to say, feminine) physiology:

> [T]he tyrannies of blood and gland, of nervous spasm and sweating skin, the rankness of sex and childbirth in which a woman is still compelled to be wholly of her organic condition. (216)

But no matter how corrupt the society in which these events have taken place, there is no excuse for Hughes. The level of the individual and society connect. Society's normalisation of the abuse of women and the raping of wives do not exculpate him. In a poem from the same volume, "Monster" (*Monster*, 1972), Morgan cannot excuse men born into patriarchy for propagating it and for reaping its benefits.

The speaker says Hughes's love is lethal. Marriage means death. His marriage to Plath was "the perfect marriage": he will not be punished. It is the patriarchal context of Hughes's crime that guarantees this. It is the patriarchal context that belittles Plath's rage and makes her expendable. The impression is of Hughes as a serial killer, killing one woman after another through marriage. No one will stop him. There is no justice through legal channels. Whatever justice there is will come through the posse or the mob. The speaker suggests young women will break down Hughes's door and punish him as they see fit.

Robin Morgan's attack is rather singular in its baldness. Most of the accusations levelled at Ted Hughes are contained within biographies of Plath and are less direct. Hughes is implicated in every biographical representation of Plath since the story of their relationship is a large part of the story of Plath's life. Some biographers have portrayed him favourably, some have criticized his conduct. One of the first biographical pieces about the Plath-Hughes relationship, and one of the first to criticize Hughes, is the memoir of Sylvia Plath written by A. Alvarez. It was included as a prologue in *The Savage God*, his book about suicide. Janet Malcolm describes the effect of the prologue thus:

> Alvarez's memoir set the tone for the writing about Plath and Hughes that was to follow; it erected the structure on which the narrative of Plath as an abandoned and mistreated woman and Hughes as a heartless betrayer was to be strung. (*The Silent Woman*, 23)

Although Alvarez says nothing explicitly negative about Hughes, it is what he does not say which is damning. When he describes how in refusing to be involved with Plath more deeply he felt he had let her down in some final and unforgivable way, the reader cannot help but think of Hughes. Alvarez may have been unable to give Sylvia Plath what she wanted, but then he had never promised that he would. Hughes was Plath's husband. He had vowed to stay with her no matter what.

The biographies of Plath by Anne Stevenson (1989) and by Ronald Hayman (1991) are the best known contemporary contributors to the public discussion of Hughes's role as a husband. Hayman, like Paul Alexander before him, subscribes to the "mistreated woman"/ "heartless betrayer" paradigm which was arguably introduced by Alvarez. Stevenson does not. Drawing upon the legal metaphor introduced by Morgan, Hayman represents the case for the prosecution and Stevenson represents the case for the defense.

The biography of Sylvia Plath by Ronald Hayman was written after that of Anne Stevenson. Although Hayman's book is considered to be anti-Hughes and Stevenson's is considered to be pro-Hughes, they bear a surprisingly close resemblance to one another. The differences in their points of view are expressed mainly in very specific areas of the text.

They both convey a sense of the inevitability of Plath's death and, even though Hayman specifically takes issue with Hughes's characterization of "Poem for a Birthday" as a turning point ["it's misleading to say she wasn't herself until she reached a specific turning point in a development that was full of turning points" (142)], both books echo the description of Plath's development provided in various texts by Hughes himself.

Stevenson's biography is pro-Hughes by being anti-Plath. It devotes a great deal of space to Plath's alleged personality defects and outrageous behaviour. Hughes is portrayed as unusually patient and loyal, and in the breakdown of their marriage, curiously passive. Plath seems to destroy their marriage more or less single-handedly. Stevenson makes much of Plath's state of mind, but she relies heavily on Plath's poems to divine it.

Stevenson's provides several explanations for the breakdown of the Plath-Hughes marriage. In all of them Hughes's affair with Assia Wevill is downplayed. For example, in one of the explanations Hughes's affair is only one part of the crisis which destroyed their marriage. Most of the responsibility can be attributed to Sylvia Plath in one way or another. Stevenson speaks of a crisis precipitated by the convergence of three events. In this description it seems that Hughes's affair with Assia Wevill was of equal importance with each of the other two events: the death of an elderly next door neighbour in Devon, and Plath taking up beekeeping. These two events are shown as fuelling and reflecting

Plath's unresolved feelings about her father and his death. Therefore the crisis in their marriage is shown to be mainly the product of Plath's emotional problems.

In another explanation it is Plath's poetry which drove them apart. With regard to the poetry Stevenson says:

> As the peculiar nature of her gift took over at last, it inevitably made itself oppressively felt from time to time in her moods; her very essence was imbued with it. For someone isolated in close proximity with her in a country village, the effect could not be other than profoundly disturbing. Ted Hughes must have begun to feel himself trapped under the same doomed bell jar. (239)

The phrase "took over at last" implies an inevitability which is surely questionable. Stevenson states that

> [i]f Ted's adultery had really been the critical issue, their advice [Dr Beuscher's and Mrs Prouty's to divorce] would have been sound enough. (257)

The critical issue in the relationship between Hughes and Plath was connected to Plath alone:

> The inflexibility of her self-absorption, coupled with the dark moods that were inseparable from her strange genius, may finally have broken down her husband's defenses at the very time Sylvia's fierce daemon or inner self was emerging. (257)

Yet another explanation is given when Stevenson quotes Wevill as saying that it was Plath's overreaction to the attraction between her and Hughes which caused the affair. Stevenson makes no editorial comment, leaving Wevill's statement as a description of

events. The impression given by Stevenson's biography is that what harmed the marriage was Plath's jealousy, rather than Hughes's infidelity.

As her death approaches the overwhelming force of Plath's poetry and her personality defects are emphasised by the exclusion of almost all else. She as described as having a "weak grip on reality" (284) and her behaviour is "disturbed" (283). Her poems are used to show there was no hope for her:

> Marvellously impressive as these last poems are, they are the work of a poet who, as Joyce Carol Oates pointed out, no longer associates her own life with that of the cosmos. She has accepted a deathly distinction between subject – "I am I" – and object: the fusion between herself and 'the things of this world" is refused, if it cannot be on her own terms. (290)

Bitter Fame's anti-Plath stance is inseparable from the controversy that surrounded its production. Anne Stevenson had been commissioned to write a short biographical work on Sylvia Plath for the Penguin series *Lives of Modern Women*. She had sent a draft to Ted Hughes for comments. What she received instead was an offer from Olwyn Hughes, Ted's older sister and executor of Plath's literary estate. She suggested to Stevenson that she turn her small book into a biography of Plath, withdrawing it from the Penguin series. Forseeing no problems with Olwyn as far as point of view about Plath was concerned, Stevenson accepted. Janet Malcolm writes that "Anne already shared Olwyn's point of view of Plath as a brilliant poet but a trying and unlovable person" (76). During her research Stevenson changed her feeling toward Plath. She went to the Lilly library to read Plath's journal and correspondence and felt an empathy for Plath that had previously been missing. Olwyn Hughes was not happy with the new direction Stevenson wanted to

take and persistently demanded revisions. Stevenson felt the final product was such a compromise on the biography she had ultimately wanted to write that she did not want her name on it. She felt that it was as much Olwyn Hughes's work as it was hers because of the changes she had been forced to make. Stevenson compromised by including an author's note (which itself was revised by Olwyn), explaining Olwyn's contribution.

It was in the wake of this controversy that Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* appeared. Hayman takes issue with Stevenson's portrayal of Sylvia Plath. In his review of her book for the *Independent* Hayman makes his position clear; *Bitter Fame* is anti-Plath. He cites *Bitter Fame*'s two strategies:

> One is to lay blame for the breakup of the marriage squarely on Sylvia Plath by depicting her behaviour as so consistently outrageous that no husband could have put up with it for long, while Ted Hughes is characterised as patient, generous, warm, innocent, reluctant to be unfaithful. The other strategy is to undermine her poetic achievement by representing her as negative, sick, death-oriented, and comparing it unfavourably with his. (*The Silent Woman* 26-27)

Hayman reacts to the disparagement of Plath, by disparaging Hughes.

Hayman's criticisms of Hughes occupy discrete passages of the text. The feeling that Hughes was a defective individual does not permeate the whole text. Furthermore although the focus of Hayman's book is on the death of Sylvia Plath and its relationship to her marriage with Hughes, most of Hayman's criticisms involve Hughes's handling of her literary estate.

Hayman's criticisms of Hughes as a husband are sporadic and rely on a pre-existing anti-Hughes feeling for their strength because they have little of their own. Many of his criticisms are surprisingly minor and are contradicted by Hayman's own text. For example he briefly criticises Hughes for his domestic habits saying that he threw his clothes on the ground, instead of folding them neatly – this vein of criticism was begun by Paul Alexander who claimed that Hughes did not bathe frequently enough – but also says that Hughes was good at sharing household chores.

Hayman wonders about Hughes's attitude towards women, speculating that "he gave the impression of caring primarily about himself and secondly about a few male friends [. . .] giving them more consideration than the women who threw themselves at him" (96), implying an initial callousness towards Sylvia Plath. He reinforces this impression by quoting from Plath's letters where she describes his "mask of cruelty", his "ruthlessness" and his "callousness" (96), but this also has the effect of questioning Plath's attitude towards men.

Hayman's most significant criticism of Hughes as a husband is the insinuation that Hughes was a violent man. The passage in which this criticism reveals itself relies, not on argument, but on the juxtaposition of disparate facts and is therefore unconvincing. The paragraph begins thus:

> According to Lucas Myers, Hughes was never violent, even in his gestures; the violence in his poetry reflected the violence of the universe. But in his Yorkshire boyhood he enjoyed fishing, shooting and trapping animals on the moorland.

Hayman immediately proceeds to discuss the Sylvia Plath poem "The Rabbit Catcher" in which the speaker identifies with the rabbits killed by a man. The juxtaposition indicates

a link between Hughes's childhood animal catching and domestic violence, a link which logic cannot uphold. Furthermore, Hayman gives no indication of the social context in terms of place, social class and history, in which Hughes's animal killing took place. It seems therefore to be an aspect of Hughes himself, a personal predeliction. He implies by the allusion to "The Rabbit Catcher" that Hughes took pleasure in killing, but the evidence Hayman has given does not support this.

Furthermore the simplistic picture of Hughes's relation to animals and wildlife is brought into question by the description further on in the biography of Hughes constructing a bird feeder. This action of Hughes's suggests a more complex relation with the natural world than Hayman has previously allowed for.

In the final chapter Hayman presents a list of Hughes's faults. Almost all of these 'faults' concern Plath's literary estate. Hayman writes that Hughes has failed to divulge the biographical information about his relationship with Assia Wevill and about the end of his marriage to Plath that would make some of Plath's poems more readily understood. Hayman also accuses Hughes of critically failing to make public some of Plath's poems that were about Assia. He suggests that some of Hughes's commentaries to some of Plath's poems are misleading (for example his commentary to "The Rival") and give rise to the suspicion that he may be holding back some of Plath's writing.

Some of the other charges include putting Olwyn Hughes in charge of Plath's literary estate even though Plath did not like her, denying paternity of Assia's daughter; controlling what biographers can say about Plath by imposing conditions on the amount of material that can be quoted if they do not submit their work for approval:

> Writers who wanted to quote from the poetry have been required to submit their work for approval, and have been told – so they say – to cut material that reflects unfavourably on the Hughes family. (206)

According to Hayman Hughes has also made it difficult for Plath's mother to publish her letters.

The idea of guilty consciences hiding the truth is a strong theme in this list and, overall, Hayman's style often suggests tabloid sensation. The story of Plath's death is presented as a titillating detective story. Hayman says there are a number of unsolved mysteries, and that the "most important" "hinge on the last few days of Sylvia's life" (212). Was Trevor Thomas, her downstairs neighbour, the last person to see Plath alive? What happened to Plath's car? Who was the man at the inquest? He claims that if Plath were as well-known at the time of her death as she is now, these mysteries would have been fully probed. The assumption is what? That something criminal has been concealed? Or is the real question whether or not Sylvia Plath meant to die: did she expect to be saved?

In Hayman's biography the point of view slips around. It is often unclear whether he is paraphrasing someone else, or if the sentiments he is expressing are his own, because he moves between points of view without acknowledging the change. One example of this tendency is when he poses the question: "But why, after a year of marriage, was she having [bad dreams]?" (105). Is this Hayman's question; is it Plath's? Later Hayman satirises the naïve idea that marriage will solve all one's problems, the idea that in fact underlies this question, when he writes of "the comforting assumption that everything in her life would be incomparably better as soon as she married: she would be just as capable as any fairy tale princess of living happily ever after" (123). It is unclear exactly what Hayman's position is. Furthermore, because Hayman was unable to quote at length

from any of Plath's poems, he summarises them in his own words. This further adds to the confusion about point of view.

It is clear in some passages that Hayman's biography is meant to be a refutation of Stevenson's. For example, a comparison of a passage from Hayman with one from Stevenson shows how closely Hayman has followed Stevenson's narrative in order to engage with its assertions. Writing of Plath's move to London, Stevenson gives a long list of the people Plath was in contact with:

> The Sillitoes were away in Morocco for a year, but Sylvia saw a lot of the Macedos and of new friends, Jillian and Gerry Becker, to whom Suzette had introduced her on one of her London visits earlier that autumn. (279)

Hayman seems to counter with the statement that

> Many of the local shopkeepers remembered her, but she didn't have many friends in London, and of those few she had, the Sillitoes were away. (187)

All of these accusations, speculations, and justifications preceded the publication of *Birthday Letters*. At last, through the 88 poems the collection contained, Hughes would speak for himself. He would be his own star witness.

When Hughes does speak for himself through the poems of *Birthday Letters*, it is not only what he says that is important, but also how he says it.

Chapter Two – The Structure of *Birthday Letters*

Birthday Letters is arranged chronologically in terms of when the poems are set. As the collection progresses, Plath's poetry becomes more and more significant in explaining her life and death. At the same time, there are more references to her death and there is a growing feeling of horror. The following description of the structure of *Birthday Letters* combines a discussion of the poems' increasing intertextuality (the references to Plath's poetry) with a discussion of the individual poems' themes and tone (the subject of death and the feeling of trepidation). While conceptually distinct, the intertextuality and the themes and tone of the poems are empirically related.

I have divided *Birthday Letters* into three sections. Each section is made up of poems from a particular phase of Plath and Hughes's relationship. In the first section (from "Fulbright Scholars" to "The Blue Flannel Suit"), which corresponds to the beginning of Hughes and Plath's relationship, there is generally a feeling of optimism. There are few references to Plath's death. In the second section (from "The Blue Flannel Suit" to "A Dream"), a feeling of fear begins to dominate. "The Badlands" expresses this sense of menace most clearly. Plath's death begins to feature in these poems. In "The Bird" it is everywhere. How Plath came to die is not yet evident. Plath's obsession with her father is increasingly referred to. In "Child's Park" she is reunited with him. There are more references to Plath's poetry. In the third section of *Birthday Letters* (from "A Dream" onwards), covered in detail in Chapter Four, a feeling of horror predominates. Plath's death is almost always the focus of the poem. Allusions to Plath's poetry become numerous.

The collection begins just before Hughes meets Plath. In the first poem of the collection, "Fulbright Scholars", Hughes remembers seeing a photograph of the Fulbright Scholars of 1956. He imagines that he must have seen Plath in that photo, but he does not

remember. From there he recounts his experiences with her poetry before they had even met, in three poems, "Caryatids 1", "Caryatids 2", and "God Help the Wolf After Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark". All three poems refer to an incident where Plath submitted some poetry to a Cambridge poetry review and, according to Wagner "Hughes's friend Daniel Huws, also a poet, published a piece mocking the two works" (47). The poem "St Botolph's" describes their eventual meeting. This meeting, written about in Plath's journal, and much discussed in biographical and critical writing, features not just in this poem, but also in "Trophies". In "Trophies" Hughes refers extensively to the poem "Pursuit", which Plath wrote and dedicated to him. After this meeting, in Hughes's collection, descriptions of his courtship with Plath, their marriage, honeymoon, and first home follow each other in quick succession.

There are so few references to Plath's poetry in the first section of the collection that what follows is almost exclusively a description of theme and tone. "Fulbright Scholars" is largely a poem of happiness and innocent expectation. Hughes contrasts the youth of the person the poem describes (himself in 1956) with his present age. What Hughes describes happened so long ago that he is not sure he remembers all the details correctly. He knows he saw the photograph of the Fulbright Scholars of 1956, and he knows he thought about which of them he might meet, but he cannot be sure how much else he really remembers: "the Fulbright Scholars. /With their luggage?" (lines 20-21); "Could they have come as a team?" (line 22); "Was it then I bought a peach?" (line 24). He might have noticed Plath, her hair, her smile, but if he did he then forgot her. The repetition of questions, and the mention of fruit, bring to mind the final lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

I grow old. . .I grow old. . .

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?

(lines 120-122)

Unlike J. Alfred Prufrock, the person this poem describes is not old: he dares eat a peach. He is at the beginning of his life. It is still all before him.

In the final lines of "Fulbright Scholars" Hughes remarks that he was "dumbfounded" (line 28) by his "ignorance of the simplest things" (line 29). It is this sentiment that is at the root of "Caryatids 1" and "Caryatids 2". In his poem "Caryatids 1" Hughes recounts his experience of reading the Sylvia Plath poem "Epigraph in Three Parts". It was the first poem of Plath's that he had ever read and he did not like it. Looking back on that time he realizes that his misguided reading of Plath's poem (he was looking for omens) reflects his youthful inability to focus on what was really significant: he thought he already knew what to look for. In focusing on the women's faces in Plath's poem he saw their frailty, but he could not see what they were bearing:

That massive, starless, mid-fall, falling

Heaven of granite

Stopped, as if in a snapshot,

By their hair.

(lines 18-20)

It was what they were holding up that was important and he missed it.

In "Caryatids 2" the theme of youthful overconfidence is developed a little further. Looking back Hughes sees himself as being too ignorant to be as sure of himself as he was. He and his friends, really mere children, were too careless in their criticisms. That they knew very little of life is expressed in the image of them in play clothes being borne along in a palanquin. They are not responsible for their own movement and yet they have criticized Plath's poem as if they had every right to.

Their criticisms of her poems were not meant to be attacks. They felt they could criticize her because they had no idea that what they said mattered. Everything they did was "[p]laying" (line 7), "charade-like" (line 10), or "for laughs" (line 8).

In "St Botolphs' Hughes returns to the portrayal of a happy, optimistic beginning like that in "Fulbright Scholars". However, since all of the *Birthday Letters* poems were written in the years following Sylvia Plath's death and Hughes and Plath's separation, this happiness and optimism is often tainted by knowledge of an unhappy future. There can be no innocent expectation of future happiness when the future has become the past, everyone has suffered, and someone has died: innocence and memory are essentially incompatible. A tone of optimism can only really be achieved by keeping the future, with its pain and death, out of the poems. Hughes captures a feeling of beginning and innocence in "St Botolph's", for example, by stopping time. Once time is stopped the future will never happen. Although Ted Hughes, the poet, knows what the future holds, the Ted Hughes who appears in the poem knows nothing. It is only by creating this distance that the feeling of newness and happiness can be evoked because to know the future, or to admit knowledge of the future, would significantly change the tone of the poem.

"St Botolph's" describes Hughes and Plath's first meeting at a party celebrating the launch of the Cambridge journal *St Botolph's Review* (Kukil 207n). Hughes begins the poem by referring to the astrological imperative that drew him and Plath together beyond their will, noting especially their failure to take it seriously. It might be the case that Chaucer, knowing what Hughes knew about the heavens that day, would have stayed home, but Hughes goes to the party regardless, tempting Fate. Contributing to the idea of tragedy to follow, he describes the floor of the hall in which the party was held as "like the tilting deck of the *Titanic*" (line 28). The stars have already predicted "disastrous expense" (line 6), and Chaucer has sighed and shaken his head seeing their marriage in the stars. The details of this future misfortune are beyond the scope of the poem. The emphasis is on a moment when what is, in actual fact, the well-known past is only a potential future, a hint of which is barely discernible, except in these portents of adversity. Hughes says he remembers little about that night except an image of Plath, an image as still as a photograph. He uses the image of the photograph to freeze time. By freezing time Hughes can create a past in which knowledge of the future is held at bay.

Ted Hughes thinks something terrible will happen if he enters into a relationship with Plath. Throughout the beginning of *Birthday Letters,* he claims the heavens knew it, but he would not heed their warning. "18 Rugby Street" tells of Plath's visit to Hughes in London when she was on her way to Paris to meet Richard Sassoon. Plath had been having a love affair with Sassoon, and wrote effusive passages in her journal about how much she loved him. The poem starts with Hughes describing the house at 18 Rugby Street and all the people and all the unhappiness it had seen and would see. This house is the house in which he lived, and it is the site of their second meeting. Following the poem "Pursuit", where Plath writes "The panther's tread is on the stairs, / Coming up and up the stairs" (lines 49-50), Hughes hears her coming, hears her approach before he can see

her: "I can hear you / Climbing the bare stairs, alive and close, / Babbling to be overheard, breathless" (lines 75-77). He describes her eyes and her face and her "[r]aving exhilaration" (line 85.) Towards the end of the poem, Hughes says they "clutched each other" (line 127) on a "bombsite becoming a building site" (line 126). The building site mirrors their relationship because what is being built is being built on the remains of something destroyed by violence. Plath's two "deaths", her father's death from diabetes, and her attempted suicide, are the violent past on which their relationship is built. Hughes mentions the scar on Plath's cheek where she scraped her face on the concrete of her mother's basement during her suicide attempt. In fact, in the heavens, a star warns him away from her. It is a warning he does not heed. The star that warns him away is described as "[a] poltroon of a star" (line 136), and Hughes does not cease "for a moment" (line 133) to kiss Plath. His heedlessness of cosmic signs is like that shown in "St Botolph's." Optimism has, so far, won out over fear of catastrophe.

Hughes and Plath are at the beginning of their relationship and their life together. In the poems "Chaucer" and "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress", the feelings of hope and anticipation are associated with spring, spring flowers and spring weather. "Chaucer", for example, is set in spring and the first lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, which are also the first lines of Hughes's poem, evoke this same season:

> Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
>
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote.
>
> (lines 1-2)

"Chaucer" is perhaps the most unequivocally positive poem in *Birthday Letters*. In this poem Ted Hughes recounts an incident where Sylvia Plath recited Chaucer to a group of cows. But as in "St Botolph's", happiness is achieved when the future cannot happen. In this poem it is Plath's recitation, her "sostenuto rendering of Chaucer" (line 34), that

holds the future at bay. Hughes describes it as "perpetual" (line 35). It is perpetual because it takes his entire attention. The future has to go back to where it came from; it is consigned to "oblivion" (line 37), because there is no room for it where they are.

The exuberance and hope of spring is conveyed vividly in Plath's gestures which reflect the season's weather. The particular action implied in the image of Sylvia Plath swaying on top of a stile with her arms raised is mirrored through Hughes's description of the sky looking like "flying laundry" (line 8). In contrast to the image of the photograph used in "St Botolph's", in this poem blocking off the future is done through movement: it is done through smooth, sustained recitation and Plath's waving arms.

In "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress", spring is implied in the presence of rain and the description of Plath as a spray of lilac. Not only is she like an inflorescence of spring flowers, she is also "naked and new" (line 40): everything is beginning. The emphasis is on innocence. The poem is set on their wedding day, and "[b]efore", Hughes says, "anything had smudged anything" (line 2). Plath prophetically sees the heavens open for them. Her hope is enormous and big enough for them both. Nevertheless, as in "St Botolph's", there are small indications that the future may disappoint their expectations. In "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress" Plath's misplaced optimism is expressed through the allusion to Caliban's speech in *The Tempest* where he recounts a dream:

> The clouds methought would open, and show riches
>
> Ready to drop upon me. (*The Tempest*, III ii 142-143)

Sylvia Plath also sees "the heavens open / and show riches, ready to drop" (lines 44-45.) In *The Tempest,* however, riches do not drop upon Caliban, and there is no happy ending for him as there is for Ferdinand and Miranda. The hope this allusion expresses is one that has already proven through literature, if not yet through biography, to be false.

In one way or another, through stillness (in the case of "St Botolph's") or through movement (in the case of "Chaucer"), Hughes has ensured the future is largely absent from the poems at the beginning of *Birthday Letters*. What signs there are of the future's horrors are ambiguous. The poems give away little. Most of the poems' energy is used to convey a sense of beginning, of newness and of hope. It is the future that contains tragedy, and where the future is held at bay, so is tragedy. However, in some of the poems set at the beginning of their relationship, Hughes establishes a contrast between Plath's perspective and his own, which corresponds to their respective situations later on when they are both overwhelmed by her poetry. What Plath's point of view, as it is described here, and her poetry have in common is the elevation of the quotidian into something so significant that it takes on the stature of myth. The portrayal of Plath's emotional extravagance is a characteristic of poems such as "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress", "Fate Playing", 'Fever", and "The Machine".

"Fate Playing" shows Plath as having both emotions and perceptions which magnify relatively ordinary situations into tragedies of mythic proportions. The poem describes her going to meet Hughes at the bus station. When she discovers that he is not there, she is distraught. She feels herself being engulfed by a catastrophe. Someone sends her to the train station. She arrives at the very moment Hughes's train pulls in and is overwhelmingly relieved to see him. He describes his complete lack of awareness of any disaster. He had been calm, simply sitting on the train, unaware that anything could possibly be wrong. Plath's thoughts, on the other hand, were full of deities and gods and returns from the dead. In the poem, everything associated with Plath is exaggerated. Her triumph in finding him, for example, is like "love 49 times magnified" (line 48), and the taxi driver who takes her to the station is "like a small god" (line 33). Correspondingly, the parts of the poem that describe Plath are full of movement:

Somewhere down at the root of the platform,

I saw that surge and agitation, a figure

Breasting the flow of released passengers,

Then your molten face, your molten eyes

And your exclamations, your flinging arms.

(lines 22-26)

The images are on a grand scale. When she meets him it is as if a drought has broken:

The whole cracked earth seems to quake

And every leaf trembles

And everything holds up its arms weeping.

(lines 51-53)

The parts of the poem that describe Hughes are quiet and still. The images are fewer and more ordinary:

I was not walking anywhere. I was sitting

Unperturbed, in my seat on the train

Rocking towards King's Cross.

(lines 17-19)

The word "rocking" is the only figurative expression in these lines. The descriptions of Plath's movements and thoughts are made up of long sentences, covering five lines or more, often with clause after clause joined by "and." The descriptions of Hughes are made up of short sentences, such as those above. This difference reinforces the contrast between their perceptions of events.

In "The Machine" also, Hughes is just as unaware of their different experiences of the same situation. Plath is overcome with terror while waiting and praying for him to come to see her. He is with a friend perhaps, having a drink. He quotes from her journal, where she writes:

> And again the dark eats at me: the fear of being crushed in a huge dark machine, sucked dry by the grinding indifferent millstone of circumstance. (Plath 233)

In his poem what he does not quote word for word from this passage is paraphrased. Such a close rendering of her journal entry invites a comparison of his lines with hers. He describes the sunset she saw as "orange" (line 5); she describes it in her journal as "a lowering orange eye, blank and mocking" (Plath 233.) Such a difference reinforces the comparison he draws between his experience and hers. His description of the sun, even when closely following her journal entry, is still more matter of fact than hers. In hers, the anthropomorphised sun judges her and finds her wanting.

Although, at the time, to conceive of the terror Plath was experiencing was impossible for him, with everything that the future has taught him, Hughes can now imagine the danger she felt herself to be in. He concedes from the point of view of the present, in which he is writing the poem, that Sylvia Plath's fear was real enough. It was sufficiently real that if he had been a dog he would have sensed it. But he did not. He imagines, but only retrospectively, this terrible thing that had come to Plath when he did not. He imagines it swallowing him and their whole future, foreshadowing poems such as "The God" and "Suttee", where they are both consumed by her poetry.

"Fever" is a slightly different expression of this same contrast between Hughes and Plath. It describes Hughes's reaction to an illness Plath suffered in Spain. Her extreme reaction is something that, at the time, Ted Hughes cannot accommodate. His response is to become emotionally frozen and distant. In the beginning Plath's fever is a real crisis. It requires a real response. It requires tending and nursing and reassurance that everything will be fine. He feels the need to reassure. He feels powerful and maternal and responsible. He makes soup. He tries to reassure her by telling her that this soup saved Voltaire from the plague. The fever frightens Plath and her fear frightens Hughes. Her reaction is so extreme that he feels himself unable to gauge the illness's gravity. This is when Hughes reaction turns from happiness at being needed, to annoyance at being frightened. He detaches himself from the situation. His unease about doing so, despite his rational tone, is reflected in the image of the planarian worms dying in the light. He withdraws. The anaesthetic he mentions is not one for the patient, but one for the doctor: it is Hughes, not Plath, whose senses are deadened. When the flatworms die, what is dying is feeling. He cannot feel what Plath feels. It is too extreme.

The final lines present a picture from which he seems entirely detached. This is not the detachment of fear this time, but the detachment of time. At last he can see what it would have looked like from outside the situation. As in "The Machine" he reflects on the situation with a knowledge he could not have had at the time, and with some remorse. When he states that he drew back "just a little, / Just for balance, just for symmetry" (lines 41-42), the repetition of the word "just" suggests an over-defensiveness inspired by guilt.

"A Pink Wool Knitted Dress" shows a distinction between emotional extravagance and reserve in the same way as "Fate Playing," "The Machine," and "Fever." During the wedding ceremony described in "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress" it is Sylvia Plath, rather than Ted Hughes, who sees the heavens ready to open. It is Plath who is "ocean depth / Brimming with God" (lines 42-43). Hughes is thinking about his clothes and about his parish church and about the animals in the zoo. He wears the same clothes he always wears. Everything except his umbrella is more than three years old. Plath wears a new dress. But not only that, she is described in terms of flowers, and jewels, and flames which she can hardly contain. Everything about her is excessive and overwhelming. Hughes's description of himself hardly extends further than his clothes. And yet, despite these differences, he is drawn into her world when he finds himself levitating beside her on the strength of her happiness and optimism.

In these four poems there are clear differences between the way Hughes describes himself and the way he describes Plath. In each poem, the parts that refer to Plath are filled with extreme words and images, while the parts that refer to Hughes are not. In "Fever" Hughes withdraws, but in "The Machine", "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress", and "Fate Playing", he is drawn towards this world of extravagant proportions. In "The Machine" he even sees himself consumed by it, as he will be consumed by Plath's poetry later in the collection. Innocence stills reigns, however. Within the poems themselves there is nothing to suggest that the extravagant ambience surrounding Plath is a microcosmic expression of a tendency which becomes so significant later on in the collection.

Among these poems, concerned with memory and an innocent expectation of future happiness, there are two poems that seem to come from another time and another place. "The Shot" and "The Tender Place" concern Sylvia Plath's past experience of psychiatric

treatment and her preoccupation with her father, who died when she was nine. Among these poems that recount the early part of their relationship, only these two make reference to Plath's father. What is also exceptional about "The Tender Place" and "The Shot" is that, in them, Ted Hughes makes references to poems that were included in *Ariel.* In "The Tender Place", he makes references to the Sylvia Plath poems "Medusa" (1962), "The Hanging Man" (1960), and "Lady Lazarus" (1962). In "The Shot," he refers to "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" (1962). The poems from *Ariel* come to dominate Hughes's allusions in the third section of *Birthday Letters*. The next chapter explains why it is significant that references to poems from this collection feature so strongly in *Birthday Letters* in relation to Plath's death.

The intimations of disaster become, in the second section, more than intimations: an atmosphere of menace is evident. In "The Badlands", for example, Hughes and Plath are shown subjected to a vague, but pervasive threat. It seems that almost everything about the Dakota Badlands calls to mind some form of violence. Even its size and its antediluvian quality convey a sense of menace.

In the Badlands it is almost as if Plath and Hughes have stepped out of time. They can sense the beginning of the world in the snake they find under the rock, the Edenic snake which resembles "coils on the great New Grange lintel" (line 29). They can see its end in the collision of the moon with the Earth.

They find themselves alone in the midst of desolation. The whole earth seems dead. Their campsite is beside a "lone tree" (line 72), which is not in itself enough to give any comfort. The panorama is vast and monotonous, as if it goes on forever. Such space gives a dizzying sense of the infinite.

They feel themselves being marked out for oblation and surrendered to the sun. It is as if the Aztec sun god, Uitzilopochtli, denied its priests by history and time, is creating its own sacrifices. There is nothing left where they stand, everything has been taken. Only a bit of bone, a tooth, some hair remain. The human sacrifices of Aztec civilization are not the only ones brought to mind. The Rosenbergs, executed during the Cold War for treason against the United States, are also mentioned. The Badlands are so vast there is no horror they cannot encompass.

The wholesale destruction of nuclear war is also implied by the barren landscape. Plath sees the destruction visited upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hughes sees the "towers of Manhatten" swaying "like curtains of ash" (lines 46-47).

They feel they are in the presence of something "[e]mpty, horrible archaic" (line 86). Hughes feels that the landscape itself is evil. It poses a threat he cannot name or even think, but he knows that "the whole landscape wore it / Like a plated mask" (lines 126-127).

Surrounded by evil they feel themselves to be in Hell. The diabolic spectacle of "[a] fistula of smouldering bitumen" (line 33) erupting from the crust of the earth reinforces this feeling. It is a place dominated by the idea of corruption.

All these things give an overwhelming sense of the vulnerability of Hughes and Plath. They feel themselves constantly watched and constantly appraised as potential sacrifice or prey. The Badlands, so vast, so ancient and so full of death, threatens to engulf them, to inhume their life in its great reserves of death. Death and disaster no longer feature as digressions, they are the whole subject of the poem. "The Badlands" is nothing but the

reiteration of a threat. While it is as yet unnamable, it cannot be ignored. The threat they face comes to be linked specifically to the death of Sylvia Plath.

Allusions to Plath's death also increase in this section. In "The Bird", for example, her death pervades the whole poem. Metonymically represented by the images of ice and snow, it is everywhere. Although set in America, "The Bird" contains allusions to events in England. England is the scene of the beginning of their relationship, but also the scene of the end of Plath's life. "The Bird" uses the idea of a bird in a glass dome to link together different stories and different images. The images form a network, allowing ones with no direct connection to be in close proximity. Erica Wagner describes this as "collaging" them "together in a kind of dream" (105). Amongst the collage of images in "The Bird" are some from England, the Cambridge party, for example. More significantly however, the emphasis on ice evokes the coldness of the winter in which Sylvia Plath died, distributing her death throughout the poem. In his memoir of Plath, A. Alvarez describes that winter as "unspeakable":

> The snow begun just after Christmas and would not let up. By New Year the whole country had ground to a halt. The trains froze on the tracks, the abandoned trucks froze on the roads. The power stations, overloaded by million upon pathetic million of hopeless electric firs, broke down continually. [. . .]Water pipes froze solid. (27-28)

Ice is referred to repeatedly. The debris of the explosion of a tumbler full of coins is described as "A shatter of tiny crystals" (line 52), linking the tumbler of coins at a Cambridge College party to the ship covered in ice, and through that, to the frozen water spilling out of the remains of an apartment block. The crystals of ice from the tumbler breaking, the ice on the ship, and the frozen suds from the apartment fire, convey a particular kind of atmosphere, one of winter coldness. Although the poem starts in

Boston, it ends with Plath's death in London. Every mention of ice and snow helps set the scene for the final lines.

In this middle section the allusions to Plath's father are beginning to increase also. "The Chipmunk", "Isis", "The Earthenware Head", and "Child's Park" all contain references to Otto Plath.

In "Child's Park" these references are particularly evident. The poem begins by describing young girls ripping branches off azalea bushes but its real subject is the bond between daughter and father, enhanced by a ritual in which stepping into the heart of an azalea flower the daughter enters Paradise and is reunited with her father. That undergoing this ritual is dangerous, even fatal, is suggested by the allusion to Plath's poem "Electra on Azalea Path" in which the speaker forsees her own death. Child's Park is the name of a real park in Boston and it was in this park that Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath did indeed one night witness girls stealing arm loads of azaleas. It is coincidence that the flowers the girls chose happened to be one that would feature in Plath's poetry and in *The Bell Jar* as symbolic of a girl's relationship with her dead father.

In this garden, Plath is either very small or the flowers are very large; in any case the normal relation between person and flower is disturbed to the extent that Plath can walk right inside an azalea. Doing so initiates a process of rebirth. Hughes feels himself to be nothing more than a spectator, commenting that "[w]hat happens in the heart simply happens" (line 38).

Although this poems features some of the ideas that are important in later poems (Plath's reunion with her father, Hughes's exclusion, Plath's rebirth), the poem does not emphasise Plath's death and makes little of the disruption Plath's father may cause to their marriage. The consequences of Plath's unnatural relationship with her father (she steps into the flower to be deflowered by him) are only hinted at.

"The Badlands", "The Bird", and "Child's Park" all are partly made up of allusions to Plath's poetry. References to Plath's work are more numerous in this middle section than in the first section and fewer in number than in the third.

The third section of *Birthday Letters* in concerned largely with Plath's death. A generally nightmarish atmosphere predominates. If *Birthday Letters*, as a whole, can be considered a narrative, her death is the climax.

These later poems contain significantly more references to both Plath's father than the poems up until this point. Hughes's obsession with Otto Plath that began to manifest itself first in "The Shot" and "The Tender Place", and later in "Child's Park", shows itself fully in these later poems. Plath's father is everywhere. He is even directly addressed in the poem "A Picture of Otto." The fact that the number of references to her father increases as the number of references to her death increases is not coincidental. Otto Plath's reappearance into Sylvia's life is an important element of Hughes's account of the causes of Plath's death.

It is here that it becomes truly evident that through Hughes's allusions to Plath's poetry, the personae of Plath's poetry have become confused with Plath herself. The two levels of representation blend into one. The events described in her poems become as

significant in the explanation of her death, perhaps more so, than events that take place outside her poems. Her poetry also becomes linked to her father. For example, allusions to her poem "Words" (1963), which make no reference to her father, appear in Hughes's poems "The Bee God" and "A Dream", where the "fixed stars" ("Words", line 19) which "govern a life" ("Words", line 20) are closely associated with the reappearance of Otto Plath in Sylvia's life. Most of the poems alluded to in this part of *Birthday Letters* were written in 1962 or 1963 and appear in *Ariel*. What has changed between the last part of *Birthday Letters* and the earlier parts is not only the number of allusions, but also that the same poems are referred to repeatedly. "Daddy", "Words", "Totem", and "Elm" are all alluded to more than once. Both the number of allusions, and the fact that allusions to the same poems keep appearing in Hughes's poems, give this last part of *Birthday Letters* a dense intertextuality that is unprecedented in the collection. Although these allusions do not threaten to overwhelm Hughes's poems, there is an important shift in the dynamic between his poetry and that of Plath. As Hughes's poetry begins to speak to Plath's poetry, the personae of Plath's poems begin to take over from the poet and consequently Sylvia Plath begins to disappear.

The way *Birthday Letters* is structured reinforces the explanation Hughes gives of Plath's death and, thus, reinforces Hughes's implicit justification of his own actions. The confusion between poet and personae, achieved through numerous references to Plath's poetry, and which becomes more and more evident as *Birthday Letters* progresses, is recognisable from Hughes's discussions of Plath's work. On this confusion Hughes's whole case rests. It explains, in broad terms, Plath's death and makes it inevitable. Her life was shaped by forces much larger than any Hughes could summon. Exactly how this conflation of poet and personae results in the inevitability of Plath's death is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three - Delivered of Yourself

Hughes's prose writings on Plath, which purport to discuss her work, are in themselves explanations of her death. Despite their various stated aims, almost every one has something to say about the cause of Plath's death. It is because Ted Hughes connects her death to her poetry that an explanation of her death becomes part of a discussion of her work. Although in many ways the publication of *Birthday Letters* revealed previously unknown information about the relationship between Hughes and Plath, its overall position regarding her death is familiar from these prose pieces.

Fundamental to the position Hughes takes regarding the genesis of Plath's poetry is the close association he makes between her poetry and her self. In the foreword to Sylvia Plath's *Journals* published in 1982, in the introduction to the collection of Plath's prose writing, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, and in the introduction to her *Collected Poems,* Hughes has stated that the poems Plath wrote for *Ariel* are the truest expression of her personality and her poetry. As they are an expression of her self, they cannot be separated from her. In the introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Hughes treats this theme at length. He contrasts her poetry with her prose in order to demonstrate that poetry, in particular poetry based on her subjective feelings and experiences, was her vocation. He says that although Plath wanted to become "a proficient story writer, of the high-power practical, popular American type", and "a proficient freelance journalist" (12), writing prose was a burden. He quotes from her journals, where she says, "poetry is an evasion from the real job of writing prose" (13), in order to back this up. He contrasts the ease with which she wrote poems with the difficulty she had with stories, saying also that it was only when she gave up trying to "get outside" herself that "she found herself in full possession of her genius" (15-16). He goes on to say that her "real theme" was "her

painful subjectivity" (15). As a focus for her poetry, her subjectivity was not something she freely chose, but, according to Hughes, it was something that sucked her in. He says,

> It seems probable that her real creation was her own image, so that all her writings appear like notes and jottings directing attention towards that central problem – herself. (18)

This close link he establishes between herself and her poetry is one that will cause confusion elsewhere in his writing, particularly in the introduction to her journals.

This confusion between poet and poetry is intensified by the fact that Hughes uses images and ideas from her poetry to describe her self. In describing the process of Plath's development as a writer in the expanded version of his introduction to the 1982 *Journals*, reproduced in *Winter Pollen* as "Sylvia Plath and her Journals", Hughes's use of image and metaphor relies very heavily on Plath's poetry. The idea of Plath forcing herself into an "internal furnace" (182) for the purpose of transformation is, I think not coincidentally, reminiscent of the Plath poem "Fever 103", where the persona burns up in the heat of a fever. The intense heat transmutes her into something else, a new self, which is pure and incorporeal. Ted Hughes's words and images are particularly reminiscent of these lines:

> I am too pure for you or anyone.
> Your body
> Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern –
>
> My head a moon
> Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
> Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.
>
> Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
> All by myself I am a huge camellia

Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

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,

By whatever these pink things mean,

Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him

(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) –

To Paradise.

("Fever 103", lines 34-54)

The heat, the alchemical change to gold, the purity, are all there in Hughes's description. Hughes refers to the Jungian concept of "the alchemical individuation of self", for example, which to his mind is a concept which describes the "silent horrors going on inside a glass crucible" (181-182) of Plath's development.

The other essential element in Hughes's description of the poet Plath is the importance he attaches to the poems collected into *Ariel,* some of the last poems she ever wrote. In the outline of Plath's poetical development in "Sylvia Plath and her Journals", the poems of *Ariel* are considered an endpoint to which, retrospectively, all Plath's poetry can be seen to be heading.

In Hughes's description, her development began in 1953 "with a "death" (179). This death is explicitly named as "that almost successful suicide attempt in the summer of 1953" (179). According to Hughes, following this death was a long gestation or regeneration, which would eventually lead to a birth or rebirth. This is a period of slow transformation. It is described in terms of chemistry and even alchemy, with Sylvia Plath "forcing herself [. . .] into some internal furnace" (182). The outcome of this period of transformation was the poem "The Stones", Part Seven of "Poem for a Birthday". "The Stones", in Hughes's account, is "the birth of her real poetic voice, [. . .] it is the rebirth of herself" (184). Following the rebirth is a lull. The birth is not complete. The real birth, as far as Hughes is concerned, is the birth of *Ariel.* The process of Plath's development as a writer, described in terms of birth and death, and resulting ultimately in the poems of *Ariel*, in fact relies on Plath actual, literal death for its legitimacy: there can be no further poems once the poet is dead.

Putting together these two elements has startling consequences: Plath's death becomes almost a consequence of writing the *Ariel* poems. It is the basis of this thoroughly unreasonable proposition that Sarah Churchwell explores in her article "Ted Hughes and the Corpus of Sylvia Plath." She points out the connection Hughes makes between Plath's death and her poetry, noting that in certain descriptions of Plath's poetical evolution, because he moves from the biological and literal to the figurative in his descriptions, her *literal* suicide becomes intertwined with a *metaphorical* rebirth. Churchwell quotes Hughes:

> There was something about her reminiscent of what one reads of Islamic fanatic lovers of God. [. . .] The negative phase of it, logically, is suicide. But the positive phase (more familiar in religious terms) is the death of the old false self in the birth of the real one. (118)

She points out that although Hughes presents a metaphorical construction of the process of Plath's development, he reverts back to the literal level with the mention of suicide. He claims that Plath did finally achieve the birth of a new self and that "*Ariel* and the associated later poems give us the voice of that self" (xii.) The dialectical movement implied in the metaphor of birth and death achieves synthesis in the poems of *Ariel*. However, there is some basic confusion about what is meant by the real Sylvia Plath and her real self. In this explanation there appears to be a Sylvia Plath who has a physical existence in a specific time and place. But there is also a true self who transcends the limitations of mortality, physicality, and gender. For example, when *Ariel* is described as the direct speech of Plath's real self, Ted Hughes uses a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to this true self: "her real self [. . .] would now speak for *itself*" (xii, emphasis added).

Plath's successful 1963 suicide attempt and its connection to her last poems seem to be the point about which the confusion between Sylvia Plath as a poet, and the personae of her poems ultimately turns. In Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" there are three deaths: the persona has already undergone two. It is not difficult (though not unproblematic) to see the third death as the one Plath underwent in her flat on Monday the eleventh of February 1963. In "Edge" also, the dead "perfected" (line 1) woman with two children could also be seen as Plath, especially since this is the last poem she ever wrote, only days before she killed herself. But Sylvia Plath is separate from the personae of both those poems and the persona of every other poem she wrote. Writing about death and then causing her own, have made it easy for readers, including Hughes, to blur this distinction.

Sylvia Plath did die, literally, and literally there is no new self. The new self of which Hughes speaks is metaphorical. It is the poetry of *Ariel*. In the introduction to her published journals, Ted Hughes describes the process of her development as a writer as "alchemy" (xi). Sylvia Plath is lead; the *Ariel* poems are gold. Plath, with her worldly ambitions, has disappeared: she has been transmuted into pure poetry. What is left after her death are her poems, or, as in the last poem of *Ariel*: "Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps" ("Words", lines 16-17).

This teleological structure imposed on Plath's writing is not only central to Hughes's prose writing, it also permeates the structure of *Birthday Letters*. Poetry becomes more and more significant in describing the relationship between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath as *Birthday Letters* progresses. Allusions to Plath's poetry increase. But it is not just to any poem that Hughes now refers. Most of the poems to which he refers are poems from *Ariel*. As Hughes repeatedly refers to her poetry, the personae of Plath's poems become confused with Sylvia Plath herself. The death Plath wrote about becomes the one she acts out in the poetry of *Birthday Letters*. They are so thoroughly intertwined that they cannot be separated. Through allusions to "Lady Lazarus", in particular, Ted Hughes conflates the deaths of the personae with the eventual death of his wife.

"Lady Lazarus" is about the spectacle of the persona's repeated returns from the dead. The speaker begins by enumerating the household objects into which she has been transformed through her death. On the one hand this objectification deflates the importance of her death: on the other hand, the allusions to Nazism elevate her death to the status of having historical significance. Her skin is "bright as a Nazi Lampshade" (line 5), her face "a featureless fine / Jew linen" (lines 8-9). She has suffered one death each decade. There have been two, from which she has returned. The third is imminent. Each

return from the dead, although presumably divinely miraculous, is described as something as sordid as a freak show. Her return from the dead is a show for an audience. She is no more dignified than the magician's assistant who, having just been sawn into thirds, steps whole out of the box. It is a "theatrical comeback" (line 51). It is not the death that exhausts the persona in "Lady Lazarus"; it is these returns where she is on display.

She is literally objectified in the first section of the poem, that is made into objects, a lampshade, a paper weight. Further on she is described as the work of another person, an "opus" (line 67). That person is an undifferentiated blend of male authority figures: God, Lucifer, a professor, a doctor, a Nazi. The return she will make from this imminent third death is for the purpose of taking revenge on this person. The fire the persona will be consumed in does yield miscellaneous objects – "a cake of soap, / A wedding ring" (line 76-77) – echoing those objects described at the beginning of the poem, but there is something more. In the alchemy of the fire the persona has been transformed into a red-haired devourer of men.

In addition to the overall similarities between Hughes's prose writings on Plath and *Birthday Letters*, there are two poems which reproduce in specific details the content of these prose pieces. They are "Suttee" and "The God." "Suttee" begins with a description of a myth, the "myth of your first death" (line 1). This myth involves the deification of Plath as a consequence of her return from the dead. The myth is based on a combination of Plath's poetry and her life. Hughes blends the poetical deaths of "The Stones" and "Lady Lazarus" with Plath's suicide attempt and recovery.

The first death in "Suttee" has engendered something to which Sylvia Plath must give birth. They wait for the product of this death which is also a conception. When she is in labour, Ted Hughes takes the role of midwife. Sylvia Plath is afraid of what is within her, but also desperate for it to come. When it does come, Hughes describes it as a "new myth" (line 45). It comes with violence, not gentleness. It is a rebirth furthermore that is intimately bound up with death. Sylvia Plath's "labour cries" (line 48) become a scream of mourning. Plath is annihilated by the mythic fires attending the creation of her poetry. The new self she gives birth to is already sacrificing itself on her husband-father's funeral pyre. The images and ideas of death, resurrection, the birth of a new self are reproduced in the poetry.

As the image of fire occurs in Hughes's prose descriptions of Plath's writing, it also appears in "Suttee" and "The God." The fire Hughes describes in "The God" consumes everything – her mother, her father, finally even herself – transforming all of them, at the same time, into myth, making them immortal.

In order to write, according to "The God", Sylvia Plath is sacrificing "handfuls of blood" (line 56) at a god's instruction. The blood is largely her own, but it is also that of Ted Hughes. Hughes may have had a particular story in mind when he says their blood is "[w]rapped in a tissue of story" (line 58). Maybe it is Plath's story "The 59th Bear", where husband and wife are confronted by a bear that kills the husband. In Hughes's "The God", Plath also goes back to the objects of her childhood, shells from Winthrop, a Lutheran bible, taking whatever she can for her writing. Striking a match to see in the darkness, Hughes starts a fire which Sylvia Plath feeds with objects associated with her mother and her father. The "fatty reek" (line 89) suggests it is their bodies that have gone up in flames. Ted Hughes is not burning, although he cannot hear for the roar of the

flames which is also the roar of the god, and he cannot see because of the smoke in his eyes. The fire catches Sylvia Plath alight, and she disappears.

In "The God" Hughes also refers to poems he has used in his prose writings on Plath's work to mark important moments in the development of her writing. One of these poems is "The Hanging Man". While discussing her poetry in the essay "Publishing Sylvia Plath", Hughes says that he included "The Hanging Man" in *Ariel*, although it had been written much earlier than the other poems, because "it describes with only thin disguise the experience that made *Ariel* possible" (167). "The Hanging Man" is a short poem, only six lines long. It describes the total barrenness of a desert glimpsed by the speaker as a result of a blast of electricity sent through her body. Restrained from escape by a god who holds her by the hair, she must suffer this experience. Influenced no doubt by the images of "The Hanging Man", in his poem "The God", Hughes uses images reminiscent of the "desert prophet" (line 2) and conjures up a "world of bald white days in a shadeless socket" (line 4) to describe Plath's frustration at her inability to write.

In the foreword to the *Journals* Hughes cites "Poem for a Birthday" as a turning point in Plath's poetry. He describes "The Stones", Part Seven of this poem, as "the thing itself" (183), and "unlike anything that had gone before in her work" (183). In "The Stones" the speaker suffers some kind of diminishment and disintegration. She becomes still and unobtrusive, hidden, until betrayed by her voice. She is taken to hospital and reconstructed. Hughes uses images from "The Stones" in "The God." By referring to the "mouth-hole" (line 48) of the moon, he brings to mind the "mouthhole" (line 16) of the head-stone which appears in the fourth stanza of "The Stones."

Keith Sagar also discusses the similarity in the images between Hughes's prose and the poems of *Birthday Letters*, noting that

> [w]here the very same images that constituted his positives in the prose (the pregnancy, the 'internal furnace') now constitute (particularly in 'Suttee' and 'The God') the most irredeemably destructive and horrific elements of his vision. (69)

This is certainly true of also "The Blue Flannel Suit" where the furnace is not the instrument of near miraculous transmutation, but the apparatus of harsh judgement. This poem alludes to the fact that Plath's education at Smith College was largely funded by scholarships. The money spent by other people on her education is seen, in this poem, as an investment which must show dividends. Like other more tangible investments, like the ocean liner of the first few lines, with its trembling engines and new gleam, Plath must perform to satisfy the "[f]inanciers and committees and consultants" (line 5) and their expectations of a good return. Their scrutiny is like a "furnace" (line 15). Her knowledge (the result of her education) is "metal" to be tested in it (line 16).

Plath has become deformed. Her transformation is not into something stronger, more beautiful and more valuable. She has become less than she was before. The blue flannel suit she wears to help her blend in is stiff and uneasy. She looks at once grotesquely deformed and vulnerable. The poem dwells on her appearance, describing the scar on her cheek as "lumpish" (line 23), her head as "pathetically tiny" (line 24), the colour of her face as tinged with green, and the face itself as "[s]hrunk to its wick" (line 23). In other parts of the poem, she is an insect, a mental patient, a convict about to be put to death. However, despite the differences in tone, again, as in the *Journal* foreword, she heads inexorably towards self-destruction.

Doubling is an important concept in relation to *Birthday Letters* because it describes the relationship between Sylvia Plath and her poems' personae and it describes the relationship between Ted Hughes and Otto Plath. In Hughes's poems, when Plath's poetry overwhelms them, Plath's biological and poetical selves become confused and Hughes becomes confused with Otto Plath. The poem "The Earthenware Head", in its theme of the doubling of Sylvia Plath in particular, can be read ironically as a statement about the way Hughes has used Plath's doubles, the speakers of her poems, to explain her fate. Sylvia Plath's unease about her double, described in "The Earthenware Head", seems well justified since in *Birthday Letters* the fate of herself and her doubles is ultimately the same.

"The Earthenware Head" concerns a model head. As in the Plath poem "The Lady and the Earthenware Head", of which this poem itself is a kind of double, the head has a strange power based on its likeness to the person after whom it was modeled. The model head is Sylvia Plath's immortal double. It inspires unease in both Hughes and Plath, so much so that it must be disposed of. They go to the river and lodge the head in a willow tree. Still, the head continues to haunt Plath. She writes a poem about it as a way of dealing with its unsettling power. The head, now abandoned, is considered to be an orphan. Believing that its fate is also hers, Plath is trying to escape by putting distance between herself and the head. They never see the head again. Ted Hughes suggests that it fell into the river.

The head's connection to Sylvia Plath is described in various ways. It is a "double" (18), a mirror, a substitute. The head represents Plath, but it is frozen in time, making the Sylvia Plath to which it corresponds equally fixed and unchanging. The head is like the personae of Plath's poems, not only can it be seen to represent her, but is a version of her which

never changes: the Sylvia Plath of the critical, autobiographical interpretations of her poetry is fixed forever. This interpretation of the head's significance is borne out by the allusion to some of Plath's father poems. The head, for example, once drowned, rejoins the dead father:

Surely

Your deathless head, fired in a furnace,

Face to face at last, kisses the Father

Mudded at the bottom of the Cam.

(lines 39-42)

This is what the persona wishes in the Sylvia Plath poem "Full Fathom Five." The head in Hughes's poem, like the speaker of "Full Fathom Five," wishes to be reunited with a drowned father.

This poem has added significance when considered in relation to *Birthday Letters* as a whole. The idea of a double for Sylvia Plath, one that is powerful, not just because it is permanent, but also because its fate is confused with and inseparable from the fate of Sylvia Plath herself, is crucial to an understanding of the particular way Ted Hughes represents Plath over the course of the collection. The power of the model head, as it is described in "The Earthenware Head," is the power of the speakers of Sylvia Plath's poems to represent her. The model head can be seen as analogous to the personae of Plath's poetry. They are like her, but they are not her. Most importantly, in *Birthday Letters*, the fates of Plath and her personae are intertwined as they become each other and cannot be told apart.

In common with what has previously been published, in *Birthday Letters* there are two Sylvia Plaths. One is the poet, the other is the persona of the poetry. They are intertwined so thoroughly in Hughes's prose and in the poetry of *Birthday Letters* that in the end, the poet disappears. The personae of Plath's poems become her doubles, eventually overtaking her. While the overwhelming power of her poetry is explored by Hughes in individual poems, such as "The God" and "Suttee", it is also expressed through the structure of the collection.

The way Hughes presents Plath's death has repercussions for his self-representation. If the timing of Plath's death was inevitable, being so closely connected to the development of her poetry, then Hughes and his actions as a husband cannot reasonably be brought into question. Hughes's lack of culpability is heightened by the feeling he conveys of being made into a substitute or a double for Otto Plath.

Chapter Four – The Man in Black

Although, considered in relation to her total works, Sylvia Plath wrote relatively few poems involving father figures, Hughes relies heavily on these poems in his representation of the relationship between Plath and himself.

Of all the Plath poems, it is "Daddy" above all that resonates through *Birthday Letters.* Hughes uses this poem to give shape to the story he tells. In a dual movement, Sylvia Plath becomes the poem's persona, and Ted Hughes becomes the model of the persona's father. "Daddy", written by Plath in 1962, has a rhyme scheme and a metrical pattern which make it reminiscent of a nursery rhyme, and give it an "incantatory" quality (Walder 51). The subject of the poem is a God-like father, who is also the devil. The father is everywhere and he is nowhere. He is everywhere because he is so large. He seems to stretch right across the continent of America. He lies with his feet in the Pacific and his head in the Atlantic. He has a toe that is "[b]ig as a Frisco seal" (line 10), and "a head in the freakish Atlantic" (line 11). He covers the sky so it cannot "squeak through" (line 47). The father is everywhere because he is nowhere. There is no escaping his potential presence, but only because the persona does not know enough to locate him precisely. He has left traces all over Europe; there are many towns from where he might have come.

The speaker has been having a love affair with her father based on dominance and submission. She has reproduced her relationship with her father by marrying a man who is cruel and authoritarian. In an allegory of the Holocaust, the father is a Nazi and she is a Jew. He belongs to the Aryan super race, as evidenced by his "bright blue" eye (line 44). They have lived until this time as oppressor and oppressed. Although the father is a man of great cruelty, "a brute" (line 50), the persona has loved her subjection. However,

having been seduced for a time, the poem achieves utterance at the point at which the speaker will tolerate it no longer, and seeks to break all ties with this father, one who has ruled her life, even though (or because) she cannot locate him. Jacqueline Rose notes that within the poem the father progressively becomes a Nazi. As the characterisation of her relationship both with her father and her husband (since he is a model of the father) becomes more like that of Jew and Nazi, her subjection becomes more intolerable. She must act.

Although, of Plath's father poems (by this I mean poems that involve *a* father, not necessarily *her* father), "Daddy" is the most significant for an understanding of *Birthday Letters*, the others do also have a place. When Hughes refers to Plath's father, these poems are brought to mind. Sylvia Plath's poem "The Colossus" describes the ruins, after a catastrophic collapse, of something large and important. The speaker of the poem wants this ruin to speak, but can get nothing from it. It represents the speaker's father. The images used in this poem are similar to those in "Daddy" in that the father is large and ubiquitous. He is "littered [. . .] to the horizon line" (lines 20-21). The speaker wants to put the pieces back together with glue. This is a familiar Plathian trope. It makes up a part of "Daddy"; it is there in "The Stones." The speaker must rescue her father from the sea. However, his throat, once full of silt, does not issue wisdom, but "[m]ule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy-cackles" instead (line 3). The decades of work have not resulted in wisdom at all.

The father is dead. His brow is like an overgrown head stone. The daughter joins him. Her father has become a whole world. She shelters in his ear, the sun rises from behind his tongue. She no longer waits for any boat, one that would bring others, or one that

would take her away. The use of the word "married" –"My hours are married to shadow" (line 28) – suggests an eternal commitment. It is a commitment to death.

The reference to Oresteia in "The Colossus", "A blue sky out of Oresteia / Arches above us" (lines 16-17), provides a link with another Plath poem, "Electra on Azalea Path." As in "Daddy" and "The Colossus", the speaker is very small in relation to the father. At first she is like a bee, then she is described as "[s]mall as a doll" (line 11). For twenty years she has hibernated in the ground. Her hibernation ends when she sees the gravestone of her father. Twenty years of hibernation have produced an idea of father that the site of his untended grave undermines. He is not a God; he is a dead man buried in the cemetery equivalent of the "charity ward" (line 19). It is a bleak place where nothing grows but weeds, and nothing God-like is evoked through the presence of artificial flowers and greenery.

According to Dennis Walder, this poem expresses "the child's guilt that it has in some way killed the dead parent" (40n). At the speaker's birth

> A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;
> My mother dreamed you face down in the sea.
> (lines 35-36)

At her birth, her father's death was determined. However, this poem concerns not only the death of the father. The last line – "It was my love that did us both to death" (line 46) – suggests the child's death also. As in "The Colossus", the death of the daughter is linked to that of the father.

In "The Bee Keeper's Daughter", the description of huge flowers with which the poem opens suggests the speaker is very small. In her smallness she identifies with the bees. When she bends down to look closely at the bees, her eye meets another eye. In comparison the beekeeper is large. Everything is brightly, sumptuously coloured, and larger than life. The air itself "is rich" (line 12). Eileen Aird writes:

> The great profusion and fertility of the garden menaces the girl with a suffocating and encroaching richness, concentrated in her awareness of the strong colours of the flowers – purple, scarlet, orange, red – and their scents which are "almost too dense to breathe in." (28)

The flowers await bees and birds. They are offering up their pollen. Only the male parts of the flowers are described. In contrast to the female parts, limited in their reproductive capacity by their number of ovaries, the male parts have on their anthers enough pollen to fertilise almost endlessly. This gives them power. This makes them Kings. The Queen bee is their counterpart in the poem. Fertilised once, she will produce eggs unceasingly until she dies. However, although they are counterparts, they are not equals. The bees are manipulated like a cabaret act by the "maestro of the bees" (line 5). The stamens of the flowers know no such interference. As one of the bees, the beekeeper's daughter finds herself subject to her father. The image of the speaker's heart under the foot of the beekeeper suggests he has the speaker's love and, if necessary, her life.

"Full Fathom Five" concerns a dead father. He is drowned and at the bottom of the sea. The title itself is an allusion to *The Tempest,* referring "to Ariel's song which tells Ferdinand of his father's supposed death" (Aird 24). The speaker feels the father is dangerous. Because his location is uncertain, his presence hidden, he is as dangerous as a submerged iceberg. He is to be avoided rather than understood. She cannot see him without his form dissolving. She has no lasting or clear picture of him. Only those who

have drowned know what he looks like because only they have seen beneath the surface. The speaker wishes to join him. Alive, and on dry land, she is in exile. As in "Daddy", he is everywhere and nowhere. It is almost as if the father is the sea itself. His white beard is the breaking waves. The relation of the speaker to the father is one of both "fear and desire"(Aird 24).

In "Little Fugue", deafness, dumbness, and blindness combine to prevent communication and recognition. Consequently, vast, blank spaces predominate amongst the images. These spaces are either black or white. According to Hall,

> The black yew stands for senseless, "deaf and dumb" tyranny and oppression in its manifestations of death, Nazi father and Christ's executioners; and the subject, the white cloud, stands for the innocent "blind" victim in its manifestations of featurelessness, emptiness, and pallor. (92)

The black and white also refers to the keys on a piano keyboard. The poem mentions Beethoven, who wrote music he could not hear. He is perhaps like the father who gives orders that cannot be understood because he is the speaker of an incomprehensible, authoritarian German. The father and Beethoven are linked by their German nationality. The father, represented by a yew hedge, is likened to Christ. The father and the yew do not share Christ's qualities; they merely have the potential to serve the same function, which is as a focus of worship.

The image of the father's amputated leg is mirrored in the image of the sausages in the delicatessen. Absences are a strong feature of the poem. The white spaces suggest an endless surface on which no imprint is made. The black suggests a total absence. This

idea of the blackness signifying infinite lack is reinforced by the image of the "dark funnel" (line 22).

In "Sheep in Fog", there is one reference to a father, or rather to the absence of a father. The speaker contemplates a heaven which is "starless and fatherless" (line 15). As in "Little Fugue," the poem describes a huge expanse of white. This time it is the countryside covered in mist. This is contrasted with blackness. The morning, despite the white blankness of the fog, is growing black like a frosted flower. In this poem, there is not so much a desire to enter this blackness as a feeling that the speaker will not be strong enough to resist. Earlier descriptions of death have involved a reunion with the father. This time there is nothing.

"On the Decline of Oracles", an earlier poem, is about a father who died. It has less in common with the other father poems than they have with each other. Nevertheless, the association of the father with the sea is made. He has a shell and a book. Holding the shell to her ear the speaker can hear the sea. Although these objects disappear, they continue to exert an influence on the speaker. In particular, they connect the speaker to the sea.

There are quite striking similarities between these Sylvia Plath poems in terms of their images and their themes. The father is associated with the sea. He is paradoxically everywhere and nowhere. He is disproportionately large in comparison to the speaker: he dwarfs her. With the exception of "On the Decline of Oracles", the persona's death is closely associated with efforts to be with, or to please, the father.

If one were to grant these poems a biographical interpretation, it could be argued that only in one specific instance, is Ted Hughes identified with Plath's father, that is, in "Daddy" where the persona rhymes:

> I made a model of you,
>
> A man in black with a Meinkampf look
>
> And a love of the rack and the screw.
>
> And I said I do, I do.
>
> (lines 64-67)

By contrast, as *Birthday Letters* progresses, the idea of Hughes taking the role or identity of Plath's father is more and more frequently repeated. Hughes, finding himself in this role, is connected to the development of Plath's poetry and to a feeling of helpless passivity. In claiming that Plath confused him with Otto Plath, he is able to show himself as a helpless puppet: he is playing a part and cannot act of his own volition. It is ironic that in insisting on Sylvia Plath's obsession with her father, Hughes has written twice as many father poems in one collection as she ever did.

There are hints of Hughes's preoccupation with taking the role of Plath's father early in *Birthday Letters*. In "The Shot", he describes himself as an inadequate father substitute. He cannot stop Sylvia Plath's death. Maybe someone or something could have stopped it, but not Hughes. He claims that he was not enough for Sylvia Plath. She is a bullet which goes right through him. He could not deflect her. Her worship was of a god that was her father. Her path was back to him. Before he died "[y]our Daddy had been aiming you at God' (line 7), says Hughes. In the instant that he died the trigger was pulled, the shot was taken. Sylvia Plath is both the bullet and the one who dies. Hughes manages to hold onto "[a] wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your nightgown" (line 40), as in their first

meeting when he managed a hairband and an earring, but nothing more. His efforts to prevent her death only yield miscellaneous objects. As in "Lady Lazarus", her death produces souvenirs in the form of her clothes and her hair. He is like those college jocks Sylvia Plath passed right through. They were not solid enough; Hughes is "[v]ague as mist" (line 33), like the other boyfriends who were "mere auras" (line 17). He is in front of her father and so insubstantial that the man behind shows through. Sylvia Plath's path back to her father is through Ted Hughes.

"Visit" not only shows Plath asking Hughes to play the role of her father, but hints at Hughes's consequent impotence. He sees himself as being secretly auditioned for the role of Plath's father in "Visit." Although he does not yet know it, he is trying out for "the male lead" (line 26) in her drama. This poem describes both an incident that happened when Sylvia Plath was at Cambridge, and Ted Hughes reading about that incident in Sylvia Plath's journal ten years after her death. The journal entry describes how she felt when she learnt that their mutual friend E. Lucas Meyers had brought Hughes to her window one night when they were drunk and she was out.

Ted Hughes describes his actions that night as being those of "a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes" (line 30) or those of a puppet. These two images give a sense of him not being able to control his own actions. It is this aspect of the poem that is taken up in later poems in *Birthday Letters,* where it is linked to both Sylvia Plath's poetry and her death. The link between Plath's father and her poetry is not made in either "The Shot" or "Visit", except implicitly. The very idea of Ted Hughes standing in for Sylvia Plath's father recalls the lines from "Daddy" that are quoted on the preceding page.

The link between Plath's poetry and Hughes's confused identity is implicit in the Ted Hughes poem "Black Coat." In this poem Hughes feels that the image of himself and that of Otto Plath have merged. Aware that he is being asked to play a role, to be someone that he is not, he insists on being simply himself, on being completely alone, without the presence of the ghost of her father. The poem opens with a description of Hughes's sea edge walk. The periodic concentration of *s* sounds, like the waves breaking near his feet, emphasizes the emptiness of the beach and his solitude:

My *sole* memory

Of my black overcoat. Padding the wet *sandspit.*

I was *staring* at the *sea*, I *suppose.*

Trying to feel thoroughly alone,

Simply myself, with *sharp* edges.

(lines 5-9, emphasis added)

All the reader hears are Hughes's words and the hiss of the sea. The tide is far out leaving an expanse of empty sand. He yearns for a "tabula rasa" (line 10). He yearns for "sharp edges" (line 9) with the icy wind blowing away anything except what is essential. Hughes describes himself giving his remarks to the sea like "feeding a wild deer / With potato crisps" (lines 23-24). His relationship with the sea is fragile. If his remarks are to be taken, they have to be gently offered.

In this poem Hughes mentions a photograph he took of Plath. Now the situation is reversed: it is she who frames him in her eye. Two views emerge. But it is not only him whom she sees. She also sees her father. Hughes's sharp edges blur. He is no longer simply himself. The images of Ted Hughes and Otto Plath merge into one. There is no "tabula rasa" (line 10). Hughes is not the beginning; he is never just himself. He is always, already connected with Plath's father.

In Sylvia Plath's poetry a father figure is often associated with the sea. In Ted Hughes's poem "Black Coat" this association is continued; the father has come out of the sea to inhabit him. Hughes is a "decoy" (line 43), a means of capturing the father. There is a sniper nestled in Sylvia Plath's eye. The shot taken is a camera shot, rather than a gun shot, but the implied violence remains. Something fatal has happened in the moment that Plath's father and Hughes merge.

"Black Coat" seems to describe the same incident as the Sylvia Plath poem "Man in Black." This poem by Plath describes a man dressed in black walking out by the water's edge. This is how the link between Plath's poetry and her father is made in "Black Coat." Both poems share the description of the man dressed in black, walking by the edge of the sea. "Man in Black" also has the same alliterative pattern of initial *s* sounds, which suggest the sound of small waves breaking on a beach:

> *Snuff*-colored *sand* cliffs rise
>
> Over a great *stone spit*
> Bared by each falling tide,
> And you, across those white
>
> *Stones, strode* out in your
> Black coat, black *shoes,* and your
> Black hair till there you *stood.*
>
> ("Man in Black", lines 12-18, emphasis added)

"Black Coat" reverses the point of view of "Man in Black", so that the scene is described largely from the perspective of the Hughes figure instead of Plath. Most importantly, Plath's father appears in Hughes's poem. There is nothing in "Man in Black" that implies the presence of Otto Plath. Hughes retrospectively adds something to "Man in Black"

that was not there; perhaps it is the "man in black with a Meinkampf look" (line 65) of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy." This reinforces the feeling that Hughes's preoccupation with Plath's father, as far as it can be judged from their respective poetry, was greater than hers, and also retrospectively reinforces Plath's preoccupation with her father.

Hughes also links the source of Sylvia Plath's poetic inspiration and her dead father explicitly. In "Dream Life", for example, they are linked by her dreams. When Plath dreams, Hughes says to her, it is, "[a]s if you descended in each night's sleep /Into your father's grave" (lines 1-2.) Her father's grave contains things which are there in her poems as images: "death camp atrocities" ("Dream Life", line 6) from "Daddy"; "the sleepless electrodes" ("Dream Life", line 37) from "The Hanging Man"; and her "father's gangrenous cut-off leg" ("Dream Life", line 9) from "Little Fugue". According to Hughes it is as if Sylvia Plath needed her dead father present in her life in some way, at least in her dreams, for her poetry to be written.

In "Suttee" and "The God" these tendencies – the confusion of the identities of Otto Plath and Ted Hughes, the ability of Plath's father to provide a catalyst to her poetry writing, Hughes's paralysis – reach a climax. "The God", for example, shows the connection among Plath's creative inspiration, her father and Hughes's loss of identity. Ted Hughes finds himself to be no longer himself. He has limbs and a voice that are not his. His sense of being someone else is connected to this awakening of Plath's poetic talent, which in turn is connected to her rediscovery of her father through the shell and Lutheran bible from her childhood home.

In this poem Hughes alludes to the Sylvia Plath poem "On the Decline of Oracles." The "Winthrop shells" (line 70) and the "Lutheran Bible" (line 70) in Hughes's poem are suggestive of the Father's books and shell "willed away" (line 10) in the poem by Plath. In Plath's poem, although these objects are gone, and the persona cannot lift up the shell to hear the sea, she still has "the voices he / Set in my ear" (lines 12-13) and can see "[t]he sight of those blue, unseen waves" (line 14). By alluding to this poem, Hughes reinforces the connection between Plath's father and her poetry. It is not only that the discovery of the book and shell directly precede the awakening of her poetic talent in "The God", it is also that these lines, as they suggest the presence of Plath's father, simultaneously refer to a Sylvia Plath poem.

"Suttee" strongly conveys a sense of Hughes's inadequacy in the face of danger, but this inadequacy has been suggested before. In "The Badlands" the mouse in the thorn bush tellingly represents his position in relation to the threat posed to Plath and Hughes by Plath's poetry. The mouse's small size and its incongruous vitality render it irrelevant to the exercise of forces in the Badlands, which are on a timeless and planetary scale. Amongst the frightening images of the destruction of civilization, of sacrifice, and of giant snakes oozing into the twilight, the stanza describing a mouse rattling a thorn bush is unexpected to the point of bathos. The mouse is so small compared to what has been described before, and of so little significance compared to the moon colliding with the earth and the beginning and the end of the world. Yet Hughes identifies more strongly with the mouse than with anything else in the poem. It is perhaps the only ordinary thing in an extraordinary landscape. The mouse does not fit in. It is too small; its eyes are too moist for a landscape which is so dry. Furthermore it is not at ease. It is in a fever, protecting the moistness of its eyes "with an energy / More like torturing poison / Than what could be found in food" (lines 105-107). It seems agitated, or manic, suffering either

from "fury" (line 114) or "joy" (line 115). It must protect itself from the harshness of the landscape. Hughes describes its thorn bush as a "[c]astle of spines" (line 117), but it is a "flimsy" (line 116) one, this description reinforcing his own vulnerability.

In the final lines of the poem Hughes wonders why the place they are in is so evil. It may be an aspect of the place, "[o]r maybe it's ourselves" (line 132). He wonders if it is because they are so alive in a place so dead that there is this atmosphere of fear. But despite the reassurance of his thought that it is "the life / in us / Frightening the earth, and frightening us" (lines 134-136), something does not ring true. Although it makes sense that their lives are at risk in a landscape where death is so pervasive, this thought of Hughes's does not address the different relationship each of them has to this landscape, which is quite clearly associated with Plath. The earth and her body mirror each other. Her body is like a cast from which she has escaped, leaving nothing but a lifeless surface: the Badlands are nothing but the empty shell of the creature which once animated them. As Plath knows sacrifice – her shock treatment making her hair burn like Ethel Rosenberg's – the Badlands know what it is to give up everything to the sun. Hughes is like a little mouse in a "flimsy" (line 116) castle. In the final lines he suppresses the difference between them, avoiding the awkward conclusion that they both feel threatened by some aspect of Sylvia Plath. As they are both threatened by the American landscape, later in their relationship they are both threatened by Plath's poetry and Hughes finds himself, like the mouse in the thorn bush, feeling very small in the face of something overwhelmingly powerful.

In "Suttee" Hughes is rendered helpless by the convergence of Plath's father and her poetry. Hughes and Plath wait for Plath to give birth to a new self. When this self is born Hughes is "engulfed / In a flood, a dam-burst thunder / of new myth" (lines 43-45),

where he is performing the part of the father. It is at this precise point in the poem, where Hughes performs the part of Plath's father, that he becomes helpless. A fire starts. He begins to catch alight. His helplessness is shown in his bathetically inadequate response. About to be annihilated in a "torching gusher" (line 68), he goes to run his hands under cold water.

Despite the intertwining of Plath's father and husband and its crippling effects, there is still an opportunity for reflection and reconciliation for Hughes. "A Picture of Otto", one of the final poems in the collection, opens with the same image of Otto Plath as Sylvia Plath uses in "Daddy", the photo of him standing in front of a blackboard. Hughes finds Otto Plath in the entrance to the family vault. Hughes has come to look for Sylvia. She has gone underground to find her father and stays there because it is "her heart's home" (line 19). Otto Plath and Ted Hughes's shared situation, their subjection to a will greater than their own, their former existence as enemies, are all expressed in the allusion to Wilfrid Owen's "Strange Meeting." The persona of Owen's poem finds himself "[d]own some profound dull tunnel" (line 2). It is the way to a place filled with dead people. He says it is Hell. He is addressed by one of these people, who talks of a wasted life and a pointless death. The persona is in fact addressed by the man he killed. He is recognized in the dark because he wears the same expression on his face now as when he killed his enemy. Now it means nothing that they were foes. Hughes also finds himself in a kind of tunnel, the horizontal entrance to a mineshaft. He encounters Otto Plath, presumably once his enemy in the sense that he was a rival for the attention of Sylvia Plath. Now, as in Owen, their enmity is pointless, redundant. It is what they have in common that is important.

The horror of Plath and Hughes's situation is dependent upon the confusion of father and husband. When Plath dies, Ted Hughes and Otto Plath resume their former identities and hostility between them ceases. Equally, before they are intertwined each is capable of the civilized behaviour of gentlemen. In "The Chipmunk" Hughes takes Otto Plath's role as the result of an agreement reached between them. Husband and father come to an understanding, like adults making a decision for a child too young to do it herself. Camping in America, Hughes sees a chipmunk which momentarily holds his gaze. In this moment a bond is forged between them. In the chipmunk Hughes sees a kind of America he has never before associated with Sylvia Plath. It is only when Plath herself makes a face like a chipmunk that he realizes this. He has imagined her as a kind of "superproduct" (line 20), but the childishness of the gesture reminds him that in America her father died and Hughes sees the ghost of the chipmunk asking him to protect his orphan.

On the one hand, Hughes shows himself as completely entwined with the ghost of Plath's father, just as Plath is completely entwined with her poetical doubles. On the other hand, Hughes also sees himself as sufficiently separate from Otto Plath as to be his enemy. Hughes is ultimately able to extract his self from that of Otto Plath, but Plath disappears forever into her own poems.

Because Hughes repeatedly alludes to the idea that Plath confused her husband with her father, it becomes clear that Hughes and Plath's marriage breakdown, in the narrative the *Birthday Letters* poems, was not only a matter between himself and Plath, but between himself, Plath, and her past. Because Plath's feelings about her father were part of their marriage and part of its disintegration, Hughes only had limited power: he was only one out of three. Hughes was not there when Sylvia Plath committed suicide. According to

the impression given by the poems, it was not because he abandoned Plath, but because he found himself without a place in their marriage. In some poems, Hughes is merely replaced by Plath's father, in others, Otto Plath drives him out. It is to those poems this thesis now turns.

Chapter Five – Daddy Coming Up From Out of the Well

The state of the Plath-Hughes relationship and the fact of their separation are often considered pertinent to any contemplation of the causes of Plath's death. Hughes implies in poems such as "The Table" and especially "The Rag Rug" that Otto Plath was a disruptive presence in their marriage. In "The Bee God" he goes even further contesting popular readings of Plath's poem "Stings", those in which Plath is construed as lamenting her former domestic drudgery and calling Hughes a liar. Hughes seems to be saying that if Plath was indeed angry, as is assumed by readers, that it was not on account of any thing he had done (such as having an affair with Assia Wevill). Otto Plath was responsible for Plath's hostility. Hughes attempts to discredit the reliability of this poem as evidence in his *de facto* trial, but his explanation for the hostility the poem expresses towards him relies on acceptance of the influence of Plath's dead father.

Certain similarities with "The Bee God" where Otto Plath emerges from out of a well, and "The Table", where he comes up from underground and takes his daughter from Hughes, suggest that the disruption to Plath and Hughes's marriage comes from the presence of Plath's father. Hughes's poem "The Rag Rug" makes one of the clearest references to the growing distance between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, shown in the increasing diameter of the rug that Plath is making. Hughes describes how, at first, the act of making the rug creates a still space that allows him to read Conrad to her. As the rug grows bigger this space becomes more threatening. The tone changes. Instead of a magic carpet and a snake charmed by *Heart of Darkness*, the rug is something to be expelled from the body. The rug is earlier described as a "motley viper" (line 13). Since vipers appear to give birth to live young, the eggs hatching inside the mother snake, images of birth and of something snake-like drawn out from the body merge. The rag rug is not only like entrails, but also like an umbilical cord. The umbilical cord is not a symbol of connection,

but of expulsion. The viper turns into a mamba, a large, dangerous snake with a reputation for unprovoked attacks on people. The effect of the rug becomes "fatal" (line 64). It alters Sylvia Plath's blood. It alters Ted Hughes "nerves and brain" (line 67), producing a prophetic dream of the house they would one day live in. From a well in the centre of the house a huge snake emerges. This house is the mirror house that has swung to the surface when the real house capsized.

In *The Bell Jar* Plath writes about a rag rug made by a character called Mrs Willard. Mrs Willard spends her time and her creativity making rugs, only to put them on the floor to be walked on by her husband and family. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, comments that if she made such a rug, she would display it on the wall. Mrs Willard's abuse of her rag rug signals to Esther the life of feminine self-saçrifice that she cannot bear to contemplate for herself. In Hughes's poem he does not stand on the rug Sylvia Plath has made, he steps over it, but the distance between them as husband and wife has already been made. The final image of the snake coming up from the well in the replica of their house suggests that the distance is created by Sylvia Plath's father.

In "The Table" Otto Plath insinuates himself into the marriage bed: "While I slept he snuggled / Shivering between us" (lines 28-29). Plath's father has come back into her life, and has come into her marriage with Ted Hughes. Although he departs again, this gives Hughes no comfort because he takes Plath with him. He enters their lives through a writing table Hughes makes for Plath. Made out of coffin elm it becomes a door to the dead. Traffic goes both ways. It is a way for the dead to rejoin the world of the living, but equally it ushers the living into the world of the dead.

But it is not even enough for Otto Plath to take his daughter, as he does in "The Table." He turns Sylvia Plath against Hughes. In "The Bee God" Otto Plath is shown as acting aggressively towards Hughes and causing his daughter to do the same. While "The Table" merely shows Otto Plath supplanting Hughes in the marriage bed and taking Sylvia Plath away, "The Bee God" shows Otto Plath's outright hostility towards Hughes and, furthermore, his power over Plath. In this poem Sylvia Plath is going to keep bees. They get an old hive, and Plath paints it with hearts and birds and flowers. Hughes describes her great attention to the bees as a feature of her obsession with her father. Otto Plath was an entomologist, kept bees, and wrote a book called *Bumblebees and Their Ways.* Keeping bees connects her to him. Although the chestnuts are in bloom, and seem to be offering something, Sylvia Plath ignores them in favour of the bees. She also ignores Hughes. Hughes is excluded from his wife's bee-keeping, not by her, but by her father, who is able to control the bees. The veil she wears is multi-purpose. It not only provides protection from the bees, but also from the ghost of her father. This is protection Hughes lacks. The bees attack him despite Plath's distress, and he runs away. Hughes's exclusion is the outcome of a competition over Sylvia. In relation to her father, the Bee God, Sylvia Plath is a bride, as well as an abbess, perhaps in the same way that nuns are brides of Christ. In whatever way she is married to this God, that marriage is in competition with her marriage to Hughes. He has no place here. The bees sting him. Hughes says that they do so at the command of Otto Plath.

The subject matter of "The Bee God" alludes to Sylvia Plath's bee poems in general: "The Bee Meeting", "The Arrival of the Bee Box", "The Swarm", "Wintering", and "The Bee Keeper's Daughter", and one poem in particular, "Stings". The suggestion, contained in "The Bee God", that it was her father who made the bees attack Hughes is particularly interesting in relation to this poem. Ian Sansom, in the *London Review of Books*, notes the

way some of the poems in *Birthday Letters* engage with Plath's poetry, noting that "many of the poems function as replies" (8). Plath describes the bees attacking Hughes in a poem, "Stings", that is itself arguably an attack on him. Hughes's response to "Stings", his poem "The Bee God", makes the connection between the bees and her poetry, but shows Sylvia Plath wanting, but unable, to stop the attack.

The association between bee keeping and poetry is made in "The Bee God" through the image of "a dark swarm" (line 15). In Hughes's poem the "dark swarm' is both the words on the Sylvia Plath's page and the bees under blossom:

> Your page a dark swarm
>
> Clinging under the lit blossom.
>
> (lines 15-16)

She wants something beautiful from the bees, in effect she wants poetry. The price is very high. The price she pays, for the poem "Stings" perhaps, is an attack on Ted Hughes. She is not in control. Plath is only a servant to the God. That is why she is powerless to stop the bees attacking Hughes. There is a hierarchy of power, at the top of which is her father. Sylvia Plath is almost incidental. The bees have their target and their god to serve. They are fanatics.

The similarities between "The Bee God" and "Stings" imply that they are descriptions of the same incident. Hughes describes the painted hearts of the hives in "The Bee God" as Plath does in "Stings": he describes the honey from the hive, and the attack by the bees. In "The Bee God" Hughes has a central place, narrating the events. In Plath's poem, supposing it is read autobiographically, he has no part until over half way through. He is introduced as "A third person" (line 38), one who has nothing to do with her. And while in "The Bee God" Hughes describes the look on her face as one that wanted to save him

from the bees, in "Stings" there is no will to save him. Sylvia Plath's pretence of indifference is compounded by the strong insinuation that he is a liar:

> The bees found him out,
>
> Molding onto his lips like lies.
>
> ("Stings," lines 48-9)

"Stings" is an incredibly hostile poem. In "The Bee God", what appears to be the same incident is described in a way that shows no hostility between them, only an inevitable rent in their relationship by forces beyond their control. Not only is Plath's father responsible for the bees attacking Hughes in "The Bee God", he can also be considered responsible for Sylvia Plath attacking Hughes in her poem "Stings".

Critics' interpretations the poem "Stings" see it as giving an impression of Hughes and Plath's relationship at the time of their separation. Read autobiographically this poem shows Sylvia Plath as having a great deal of anger towards Ted Hughes. Through allusions to "Stings" in "The Bee God", Hughes subtly provides the necessary materials for its reinterpretation. It becomes possible to see Otto Plath as ultimately responsible for the attack on Hughes that "Stings" arguably contains, and indeed as responsible for the domestic disharmony which ended their marriage. Although Hughes, at times, represents himself as thoroughly entangled with Otto Plath, he is able also to be separate enough to be in opposition to Plath's father. Either way Hughes excuses himself from blame.

Hughes does not always need to explain specifically how his helpless passivity was produced, that is, he does not always need to describe Plath's fixation with her father, because he conveys a strong sense of his helplessness by the idea of large impersonal forces, such as Fate.

Chapter Six – Fixed Stars Govern a Life

As *Birthday Letters* progresses, more and more is revealed about Sylvia Plath's death. The fullest explanation, the one that involves Plath's poetry and Plath's father, is held off until those poems in which Plath is represented as Hughes supposed her to be at the time of her writing the *Ariel* poems. Hughes manages to convey not only the fact of Plath's death, but also a sense of its inevitability, through the idea of Fate, and through images of puppets and of sleepwalking.

The message of *Birthday Letters* seems to be that what happened was no one's fault. Subject to forces beyond their control, neither Plath nor Hughes could do anything that would really make any difference. A force, which they could not entirely harness, was making them puppets. This force came through Sylvia Plath, and while it affected Ted Hughes, it destroyed Plath completely. The concept of Fate allows Hughes to evoke a feeling of helplessness with regard to his present and future. In the absence of a more specific explanation, one that involves Plath's poetry, Fate provides a general explanation for Plath's death and Hughes's inability to stop it.

Death and disaster are almost always present in the *Birthday Letters* poems, even those set at the beginning of their relationship. As Keith Sagar points out, "the tragic end of the story colours everything leading up to it, like a Hardy novel" (72). From reading *Birthday Letters* it seems that Sylvia Plath's death was always going to happen. In "The Blue Flannel Suit", Hughes is able to see that Plath is going to die. There seems to be no question, even in 1957, that it was going to happen. There is no question that Hughes should have been able to see her death when he looked at her the morning she started her first teaching job. In this poem, her death is the end of a sequence which begins with the "flayed nerve" (line 27) of shock treatment and the "unhealable face-wound" (line 27),

which is the cheek scar from a suicide attempt. The wound has never healed and the connection with death is not broken. Hughes finds himself, at the end, looking at her dead body, even though she died years after the other events described in the poem. Her death is made part of the past as if it was always going to happen. Furthermore, Hughes repeatedly alludes to Plath's poem "Words." The last lines of "Words" – "From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life" (lines 19-20) – suggest a life whose end is known and waiting.

Neither Sylvia Plath nor Ted Hughes is in control. "Fidelity" is the first of many poems which show them subject to a force outside themselves. This poem's tone of optimism is tainted by fear of the future and the chilling image of a slaughtered child. The slaughter of the child is a sacrifice meant to appease Fate, which is not presumed to be kind. The future cannot be left to itself. To do so would be hazardous. Hughes tells of a time during his courtship with Plath when he nakedly, but chastely, shared a bed with another woman at the place where he lived. He emphasizes not only the innocence of this arrangement, but also the sacred aspect of this innocence. The poem is full of images of asceticism, for example the "bare / Mattress, on bare boards, in a bare room" (lines 16-17) on which he slept. The sexless relationship with the woman who shared his bed, and her more aggressive friend, is part of obedience to a "holy law" (line 33) that "[h]ad invented itself" (line 34). In this religion the woman is a priestess. She is also the sacrificial victim. Hughes refers to an ancient custom of killing "a sinless child" (line 65), and laying the body under the threshold of a new home for "protection" (line 63). The woman who shares his bed serves this function, her temporary innocence providing protection for Hughes and Plath's future. The need for protection is assumed but not explained. Hughes fears "[s]omething might abandon us" (line 59) if it is angered and not appeased. Their future depends not on themselves, but on something outside them.

The force that controls them is in evidence in "Ouija." Somewhere, the future is already known. Through the ouija board Plath has found out what it is. The time and circumstances of her death have already been decided. While she receives bad news from the ouija board, Hughes can only watch and speculate about her distress. He imagines that she can see a terrible future that he cannot:

> Fame will come. Fame especially for you.
> Fame cannot be avoided. And when it comes
> You will have paid for it with your happiness,
> Your husband and your life.
> (lines 104-107)

When Hughes questions the ouija board about their future fame, Plath reacts violently. He cannot explain her "shock and crying" (line 101) except by imagining that she heard something that he did not.

Hughes likens their forays into the spirit world to catching fish. He describes how they "called down / Into the well of Ouija" (lines 32-33) and "hooked a fish right there at the surface" (line 39). He also says that calling up a spirit is "as easy as fishing for eels" (line 9). He also contrasts their ouija sessions with actual angling, imagining an alternative life for himself fishing off an Australian rock. The references to fishing in "Ouija" connect this poem with "Flounders" and "Fishing Bridge." In both these poems, and in "Ouija", being under the control of forces more powerful than any natural one is a strong feature.

"Flounders" describes Plath and Hughes taking a boat out fishing. Although they become stranded, they do catch a lot of fish. Their success at catching fish is a hint of a future which is happy and bountiful. This hint of "easy plenty" (line 31) in the future is undercut by the presence of a force which controls them. The name of this force is Poetry. Poetry

leads them away from this life of fishing and nature. In "Fishing Bridge" again Plath and Hughes's happiness is circumscribed by a disembodied, inexplicable force; this time it is a voice on a tape. "Fishing Bridge" begins by describing the natural scenery and people fishing off a bridge. Quite suddenly this scenery disappears and Plath and Hughes find themselves in a labyrinth. They have trouble finding their way. The voice that is leading them leads to a dead end and finally holds Hughes over Plath's dead face. There is nothing to suggest as the poem begins that anything like this is going to happen. The lake, alive with movement and fish and the effect of sun on the water, is abruptly replaced with the face of Sylvia Plath in an unlit maze, "[u]nmoving and dead" (line 52), with "dry, pale" (line 49) lips. The force that controls them in "Fishing Bridge" is never named. But in "Flounders" it is Poetry. The similarity between "Fishing Bridge" and "Flounders" provides a clue to the meaning of Sylvia Plath's death in "Fishing Bridge": it is caused by poetry. As in "The God" and "Suttee", as Sylvia Plath dies, Ted Hughes can only watch.

"Dreamers" clearly puts the workings of Fate in control of their lives. None of the actors in this drama is responsible for what happened. "Dreamers" describes the beginning of Hughes's affair, which ended their marriage. Hughes recounts a meeting between himself, Plath, and a woman who was to become his lover. As the woman recounts a dream, Hughes realizes that they are destined to be lovers. It implies that he had no choice in the matter. Fate determined his infidelity. He begins in fact by describing himself and Plath as "inert ingredients" (line 4) and "puppets" (line 7). They are all "helpless" (line 34) and asleep.

Puppets and dreams are frequently referred to in *Birthday Letters*. Fate is sometimes invoked by name. Sometimes its presence is implied and never stated. As the collection progresses, it is clear that although Fate may be ultimately responsible, its workings are of

a particular nature. What begins in "Fidelity" as a general fear, becomes more precise as the collection continues. Plath's dead body begins to show up. Sometimes even, as in "Fishing Bridge", it appears without introduction or warning. The details of her death become apparent when her dead father reappears. His presence facilitates the writing of Plath's poems, but disrupts her marriage. It is her father and her poetry that lead to her death. This is what is feared in "Fidelity." The dead body in "Fishing Bridge" is the result of Sylvia Plath's poetically productive, but ultimately fatal, entanglement with her father.

Pervasive in *Birthday Letters* is the theme of Hughes's lack of influence over Sylvia Plath's death. Although it is most explicit in those poems where poetry and Otto Plath conspire to disable him, it is obviously implied in Hughes's invocations of Fate and his references to an unnamed force which controls his actions.

The idea of the inevitability of Plath's death, coming form Ted Hughes, is surely not to everyone's liking. Carol Bere states in a review of *Birthday Letters* that:

> Probably one of the more controversial aspects of the book is Hughes's apparent belief that regardless of his effort to either assuage or understand Plath's turmoil, he was ultimately a helpless witness ...that his relationship with Plath was fated, preordained – whether by the stars, an inevitable disjunction between two highly creative people, Plath's uncontained demons, or her obsession with her father's death ...this has the effect...of absolving Hughes unnecesarily for any responsibility for the relationship. (558)

Although Ronald Hayman has himself has expressed the idea that Plath's death was fated in *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, he also insisted that Hughes's actions should come under scrutiny.:

> In my view it is impossible to understand Sylvia Plath's life without understanding the long relationship with death which was eventually consummated in suicide. (xii)

He is critical of the Stevenson biography, for example, because of the way

> in the last two chapters of the book it seems that the main effect of Olwyn Hughes's interventions was to exculpate her brother from any share in the responsibility for the death (209)

It is not so much what is said, but by whom, that matters. Many readers may be looking in the poems of *Birthday Letters* for an admission of guilt from Ted Hughes. He strenuously avoids this. There is no avoiding the fact of Plath's death, but its deep causes are open to speculation.

Conclusion

It may be the case that the literary world eagerly awaited *Birthday Letters* in order that some light would be shed on the connection between Plath's death and her marriage to Hughes. However, Hughes's account of her death stays close to the one he has already given when discussing her poetry in the various introductions and prefaces to her work. In such pieces Hughes has conflated Plath with the personae of her poems. He does so again in *Birthday Letters.*

More and more is revealed about the circumstances of Plath's death as *Birthday Letters* progresses. All of the elements that make up Hughes's explanation of her death appear in the poems in some way, but they do not come together until the final third of the collection when it becomes apparent, not only that Plath died and that Hughes was powerless to stop her, but that the presence of Plath's father was responsible for both these things. Ever mindful that Plath was a poet, Hughes includes this fact in the explanation he gives for her death as an intervening variable. It was her father who was responsible for her death because he facilitated the writing of her later poems, particularly those Hughes collected into *Ariel.*

An impersonal force controlling Hughes's actions may have indeed been a feature of his marriage to Sylvia Plath; it is certainly a feature of Hughes's life after her death. His frequent characterisation of himself as overwhelmed is unsurprising given the context into which *Birthday Letters* was received. The idea of a large impersonal force serves as a figurative representation of the judgements and counter-judgements Hughes has been subject to since Plath's death. Hughes life, his personality, his actions as Plath's literary executor (until his sister Olwyn took over) have been scrutinised and damned. This attention has been strong enough and long-lasting enough to shape his life.

If *Birthday Letters* can be considered Ted Hughes's belated defence, it is the charge of murder that Hughes most clearly answers. Of all the accusations about the way he handled Plath's literary estate, he has little to say directly. However, once it is clear that there was nothing he could do to prevent Plath's death, perhaps those who believed he killed her (if indirectly), supposing they are convinced of his innocence, will think more kindly of him overall, and judge his subsequent actions less harshly.

On the whole the *Birthday Letters* poems do not engage with the criticisms of his handling of Plath's work because the powerful accusations, those that find fault with his character most significantly, are those that relate to his actions as a husband. For example, among the faults Hayman enumerates in the final pages of his biography is the accusation that Hughes has made life difficult for actual and potential biographers of Plath. In itself this is not so damning. What is damning is the implication that Hughes has done this because he has something to hide. And despite Hayman's list of faults, it is the few passages throughout the biography where Hayman questions Hughes's attitude towards women, his violence and his infidelity, that truly give the work an anti-Hughes flavour.

Hughes was, in some sense, in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is not the only unfaithful husband in the world, and he is not the only estranged husband to have his wife commit suicide. The unfortunate thing for Hughes's privacy is the convergence between these events and the social and historical context. Second Wave feminism's questioning of the split between public and private, and its subsequent revelation that the personal was political was one of the catalysts for the exposure of Hughes, as a husband, to the outside world. Robin Morgan's poem "Arraignment" is a particularly striking example of Hughes's exposure through the conceptual framework of Second Wave feminism. However, to

characterise an important moment in politics and social theory Morgan's poem is far too unsophisticated.

The overriding impression given by *Birthday Letters* is that Hughes cannot be blamed in any way for the death of his wife. Contrary to the statements on protesters' placards in Australia, Hughes claims, he is not a wife-murderer. He did not kill Plath: he did not contribute to her death. He tried to stop it but he was unable to. He repeatedly asserts that he became mixed up with her father, resulting in a situation where Hughes was, at best, helpless, and at worst the actual victim of Plath's father obsession.

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