

## Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes: Layers of Literary Collaboration and the Perpetuation of the Poetic Voice

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The partnership of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath was arguably one of the most mutually productive literary pairings of the twentieth century, and while the work produced during their six-and-a-half year marriage was substantial in its sheer volume and artistic merit, the bulk of the critical discussion regarding their partnership focuses not on their prolific literary production but on the marriage itself and the events that led up to Plath's suicide in February of 1963. While countless books and critical essays have been written, at a distance, about this relationship—their partnership and the tumultuous passion that fueled their creative fires—these texts are inextricably rooted in speculation, cultivated by critical hypotheses and, ultimately, dependent upon the interpretations of outsiders. Even the most in-depth investigations of their marriage and respective works—like the many biographies and essays written by major Plath scholars Susan Van Dyne, Jacqueline Rose, Lynda Bundtzen, and Anne Stevenson, as well as the biography of their marriage written by Diane Middlebrook—still remain mere versions of the truth, individual interpretations of the details that constituted a collaborative life, the work it created, and the eventual culmination in Plath's death. It is not uncommon for artists to gain posthumous notoriety and critical attention, and thus sell more of their work, as was the case with Sylvia Plath. Though her death was undoubtedly a tragic loss of talent and silencing of a powerful poetic voice, it also evoked a conflagration of public and critical interest in her work and created a flurry of activity among the literary community to publish it.

However, Plath's suicide also colored the critical interpretation of the Plath/Hughes collaborative corpus, provoked an outpouring of speculative theories regarding Plath's possible motive, and cast a shadow of suspicion over Ted Hughes. The delicate web of ramification that Plath's death spun throughout the literary community, and the remaining years of Hughes's life, is difficult, if not impossible to trace.

In the months preceding her death in early 1963, Plath had finally found and begun to master her authentic poetic voice—the voice of *Ariel* that modern readers recognize as most distinctly Plathian and that Hughes deemed as "just like her—but permanent" (Middlebrook

xvii). Imbedded within this statement is the crux of the contention regarding the Hughes/Plath collaboration (both their marriage and literary works): the tension between the enduring poetic voice and the ephemeral body from which it emanates. Critics commonly plunder Plath's poems for portents of her impending suicide and simultaneously scavenge the writings of Ted Hughes for evidence of his supposed hand in it, and for the justification of his editorial choices<sup>1</sup> regarding Plath's work; this approach, however, is tragically reductive, for too many vagaries about the nature of poetry exist—among them authorial intent and the blurred lines between fiction and autobiography—to make definitive connections between Plath's death and her work.

Ruminations on death, however, and our attempts to grasp the unfathomable state of the absence of life, are not entirely meaningless or futile, for they remind us that we are alive; they are the very essence of poetry—but not its aim. Poetry serves as a dialogue between the living and the dead; nowhere is this more evident than in the poetic collaboration between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, and most specifically in the poems of Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, published in 1998, only months before his own death.

In the interim between Plath's death and the publication of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes's rare discussions<sup>2</sup> about Plath, her work, and their marriage sparked suspicion about his role in

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<sup>1</sup> Plath's *Ariel* was originally published in the U.K. in 1965. Plath scholars posit that the *Ariel* published in 1965, two years after Plath's death, was not the same manuscript she left behind with the same title (Bernard 2). Immediately after Plath's death, Hughes found in her apartment the manuscript titled *Ariel and other poems*. He would publish it two years later, but not before removing 12 poems from the U.S. edition (published in 1966) and 13 from the U.K. edition, which he replaced with 12 and 10 poems in the respective editions. His selections were drawn from Plath's earlier work, and a few poems that were written in the final weeks before her death. Hughes also edited four editions of Plath's journals; however, two journals that Plath wrote in the last three years of her life have never been published. In his forward to Frances McCullough's edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Hughes claimed that one of these journals "disappeared," and he destroyed the other journal, which had entries written within three days of Plath's death (Kukil ix).

<sup>2</sup> When discussing his editorial role with Plath's journals, Hughes's states the following in his introduction to Plath's collection of short stories, poetry, and diary excerpts, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*:

The logical thing, no doubt, would be to publish [her journal] complete. It seems probably 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. . . . As an editor of Sylvia Plath's unpublished writings, watching this happen to her, I am more and more inclined to think that any bit of evidence which corrects and clarifies our idea of what she really was is important, insofar as her writings persuade us of her importance. But living people figure everywhere, even in her most private discussions with herself, and—an editor has to face it—some things are more important than revelations about writers. The vivid, cruel words she could use to pin down her acquaintances and even her close friends were nothing she would want published. (8)

For Plath scholars, the problem that creates such suspicion about his editorial choices is not Hughes's explanations regarding Plath's depiction of others, but his reticence regarding Plath's often caustic portrayals of him in her *Ariel* poems and journals.

Plath's suicide and as Plath's literary executor;<sup>3</sup> these suspicions eventually led to the formation of two opposing critical camps: one who backed Plath and the other who supported Hughes. When plumbing the depths of the Hughes/Plath partnership to ascertain any semblance of the definitive in their collaborative work, it is easy to become lost in the cavernous gap between these two opposing schools of thought, disoriented by the commingling voices of Plath/Hughes scholars and fumbling for meaning in their murk of speculation. The truest path out of these depths—and the most direct insight we have into the Hughes/Plath relationship—is by way of the poetry itself, the work created by their literary coupling, and its poetic descendent, Hughes's *Birthday Letters*. In this collection, Hughes offers his perspective, voice, and unique insight from the very heart of his relationship with Plath. He draws from his own imagery, mythologies, and metaphors, and Plath's powerful symbolism and sentiment, to patch together a literary pastiche of their life together. *Birthday Letters* is a collection that only Hughes—and the posthumous poetic Plath—could accurately assemble, and it is a representation of a relationship rich in love and animosity, creation and destruction, tenderness and violence, life and death.

It is only fitting then, that a literary pairing that so enlivened the poetic corpus of the twentieth century would embody the vacillatory nature of poetry itself. Their continual running the gamut from one emotional extreme to the other, though it shook the foundations of their marriage and eventually resulted in its disintegration, nourished their collective creativity and provided fodder for their poetry. The emotional tension that constituted the fabric of their marriage is evident when examining their collaborative works—certainly those that were written during the span of their marriage—but most specifically the poems written by Plath during her last year, poems that serve as the very death rattle of a marriage and of Plath herself, and the poems of Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, written over the 35 years following Plath's death. Plath's suicide in February of 1963, when she was only 30 and on the cusp of mastering her own poetic craft, silenced forever her ephemeral voice, but the editorial efforts of Ted Hughes, though

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Marjorie Perloff, April Bernard, and Frances McCullough posit that Hughes's emendations of Plath's *Ariel* were self-serving since the poems he cut from Plath's original version seemed to depict Hughes negatively. Perloff notes that "the poems he [omitted] were those that expressed, most directly and brutally, Plath's anger, bitterness, and despair over his desertion of her for another woman" (304). In defending his choice to augment Plath's original manuscript (in a conversation with his daughter, Frieda), Hughes claimed he was aware that several of the poems he expurgated ("Barren Woman," "A Secret," "The Jailor," "The Detective," "Magi," "The Other," "Stopped Dead," "The Courage of Shutting-Up," and "Amnesiac") "dismembered those close to her with extreme ferocity," and he wanted to give the book a broader perspective in order to make it more acceptable to readers, rather than alienate them" (F. Hughes, xvi).

suspect to some, still made public much of Plath's previously unknown works and provided Plath with a posthumous poetic voice that still resonates. Hughes's own prowess as a poet was certainly evident in the space of time separating Plath's death and the publishing of *Birthday Letters*. Hughes *Collected Poems* is an intimidating volume in its sheer bulk, featuring nearly 20 collections of poetry (and just over 1300 pages) published between 1957 and 1998. Clearly, Hughes's poetic voice did not reflect the reticence that was evident in his discussions (or lack thereof) regarding his relationship with Plath; however, he waited nearly 35 years to overtly feature that relationship as a subject for poetry. In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes speaks to Plath in a kind of psychic correspondence as if she shares his retrospective vantage point on their life together. She simultaneously serves as Hughes's muse, subject, and audience. *Birthday Letters* reveals the true nature—the breadth and depth—of their relationship; and finally, we can begin to see the Hughes/Plath collaboration not just as it is colored by her death, but as it illuminated their life together.

In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes looks back through the expanse of time and shows, with eloquent emotion and a voice steeped in loss, love, and longing, that grief does not forever paralyze the poetic voice or leave one mired in the deeps that death creates for the living. And though he uses *Birthday Letters* as a vehicle for speculating on the cause for Plath's death—what he prescribes as her life-long struggle with depression—he does not remain there. With this collection, Hughes's overarching aim seems to be a poetic examination of life after death. This focus can be explained quiet literally as Hughes's coming to terms with his life, and the lives of his children, after Plath's suicide, but his poems also reflect a more profound conclusion: poetry itself as a form of life after death in its perpetuation of a posthumous poetic voice and service as a forum for correspondence between the living and the dead. As the title indicates, Hughes's poem "Life after Death" encapsulates this thematic focus and aim of *Birthday Letters* and serves as a foundational lens through which to view the other works in the collection.

Hughes begins "Life after Death" with a question directed to Plath: "What can I tell you that you do not know / Of the life after death?" (182). In viewing this question out of context with the rest of the poem—that discusses the state of the Hughes family after Plath's death—it seems that Hughes refers literally to the afterlife, the ethereal land of the dead in which Plath now resides, and about which, Hughes could offer no new insight. However, the poem in its entirety shifts the focus of his initial question from Plath's spiritual afterlife to the literal life that

remains in her surviving family. In his descriptions of himself and his children, Hughes focuses extensively on the corporeal, the visible, the tangible outward manifestations of Plath's death for those who remain. His rendering of the ramifications of death on the living, though it displays absolute depth of grief and visceral emotion, does not sink into hyperbolic reverie about death's ruination of the living; instead, it contributes to the overall effect of *Birthday Letters* in its focus on the perpetuation of life—and the exaltation of it—through poetry. In the way that the chiming of church bells remains unnoticed until their reverberation abruptly stops, Hughes illustrates for Plath, in grief-shadowed portraits of the family she left behind, the ultimate value of her life, a value that is most evident in her absence.

Hughes begins the poem with a depiction of their son, Nicholas, whose needs magnify his rootedness in the land of the living:

Great hands of grief were wringing and wringing  
His wet cloth of face. They wrung out his tears.  
But his mouth betrayed you—it accepted  
The spoon in my disembodied hand  
That reached through from the life that had survived you. (182)

Even in his longing for his mother, whom he does not yet understand will never return to him, Nicholas cannot betray his basic instinct for nourishment and survival; though to Hughes in this recollected moment in time, each act that sustains life is traitorous to the deceased Plath. Nicholas, who is clearly too young to view life and death in such a way, weeps for his mother not yet out of grief but because his still infantile need for his mother's attention is not being met. Here, and later with his subsequent depictions of his daughter and himself, Hughes spotlights their disparate reactions to Plath's death, and through this elucidation, he shows that her absence was felt on varying planes of being and levels of consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

Hughes only briefly visits his daughter, Frieda, in "Life after Death" and renders her emotional state after her mother's death in four succinct lines:

Day by day his sister grew  
Paler with the wound  
She could not see or touch or feel, as I dressed it

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<sup>4</sup> On March 16, 2009, Nicholas Hughes hanged himself at his home in Alaska. Linda Gray Sexton, daughter of poet, and compatriot of Plath, Anne Sexton, who committed suicide in 1974, wrote a poignant essay in the *New York Times* (published April 2, 2009) about Nicholas Hughes's death and the "inheritance" of depression and suicide. Ms. Gray Sexton herself attempted suicide three times, and her article provides a powerful lens through which to consider Nicholas Hughes's emotional and psychological response to his mother's death.

Each day with her blue Breton jacket. (182)

Frieda, who was six weeks away from her third birthday when Plath died, grows gradually waned from the wound inflicted by her mother's death, the levity of which still remains beyond her capability to grasp. Yet this unnamable loss lives in her very skin. Unlike Nicholas, who "betrays" Plath through his capability to thrive even in her absence, Frieda wilts from the wound that she cannot yet name as grief. Though neither child can yet comprehend the gravity of the death of their mother, Frieda's outward manifestation of internalized loss and grief saves her from the same assignation of betrayal that befell her brother. Frieda is not able to thrive without her mother, a feat that Nicholas, through no fault of his own, accomplishes, at least during his infancy when his physical requirements dominate his existence and his emotional consciousness is almost wholly rooted in them. As Hughes describes it, Frieda feels her mother's death on an inner, emotional plane that she cannot, as a two-year-old child, understand or name. Frieda's grief is much more akin to Hughes's own grief in its ineffability and physical symptoms. However, to Hughes, Plath's death permeates his being—his physical body and consciousness—in ways that his children are blessedly spared:

By night I lay awake in my body  
 The Hanged Man  
 My neck-nerve uprooted and the tendon  
 Which fastened the base of my skull  
 To my left shoulder  
 Torn from its shoulder-root and cramped into knots—  
 I fancied the pain could be explained  
 If I were hanging in the spirit  
 From a hook under my neck-muscle. (182)

Hughes's assessment of his own reaction to Plath's death focuses first on the physical manifestations of grief that he, like Frieda, cannot explain rationally. But unlike Frieda, who faded visibly yet painlessly after Plath's death, Hughes feels the agony of her absence like an impalement of the body, a rupture of the spirit. Hughes is, in his grief, the "Hanged Man," but his self-directed moniker is not self-created; in 1960, Plath penned a powerful, nihilistic poem titled "The Hanging Man" (*Ariel*, 70). Plath's poem, penned three years before her own self-inflicted death, implicitly features suicide, and it is often referenced in critical attempts to connect Plath's death to her work. Hughes himself, however, refers to this poem not as an attempt to explicate

Plath's death through her poetry but to show that even "hanged men" can survive in the presence of death.

In his "Life after Death," Hughes spotlights Plath's absence in the days immediately following her death; however, his illumination of the void does nothing to shed light on the nature of it, for this is not his intention. Hughes does illumine, through his portrayal of the reverberations of Plath's death throughout multiple emotional levels and planes of consciousness, Plath's profoundly-felt presence when she was alive. This recognition of and appreciation for life through its inverse, death, is the approach that is missing from many critical readings and explications of the Hughes/Plath collaborative works and is the keynote theme in *Birthday Letters*.

Though Hughes privileges life over death in *Birthday Letters* and does not linger on the subject of Plath's death itself, he does mention Plath's eventual suicide and his perceived reason for it: her life-long battle with depression. It becomes clear through the poems of *Birthday Letters* that Hughes viewed Plath's suicide as the inevitable culmination of her life, the unavoidable terminus of her depression, which Hughes represents, in poems like "The Rag Rug," "Minotaur," "Setebos," and "Error," as metaphoric labyrinths from which Plath could not escape. Her suicide was the minotaur waiting to devour her. Throughout *Birthday Letters*, Plath's pathology becomes interchangeable with her writing that served as a way to express her inner conflict, turmoil, and pain, but also threatened to engulf her in the flames of its intensity. To Hughes, Plath's depression and her writing were equally inescapable: her depression was a journey that inevitably ended in her destruction, and her writing was a paradox in which she often could not separate her sense of self from her artistic rendering of it.

Before the publication of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes's representation of Plath's death and her work in this way—her depression as ultimately inescapable and leading to her death, and her writing as inextricably enmeshed with her life-long struggle with that depression—seemed to merely and conveniently dissociate him from any responsibility in Plath's demise. However, when placing Hughes's poetic handling of Plath's depression and its manifestation in her work within the context of the eloquent and evident emotion of *Birthday Letters*, and his privileging of Plath's life over her death, Hughes's intentions seem far from self-serving, for while this representation does remove the shroud of suspicion for his supposed part in Plath's death, it also absolves Plath of responsibility, as well.

The poem that culminates the collection is also its climax. "Red" serves as Hughes's final word on a subject that had, for 35 years, remained veiled in speculation and obscured from public view through his own reticence. Hughes reflects on the true nature of Sylvia Plath, and most importantly, how she should be remembered: not for her tragic suicide but for "her kindly spirit." Plath is "not a ghoul / But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful" (198). Through this portrayal of Plath, Hughes reaffirms his purpose in publishing *Birthday Letters*: poetry itself as a form of life after death, as a forum in which the voice of the living can commingle with the voice of the dead. The title, "Red," speaks to the mistranslation of Plath's character by outsiders and even Plath herself. In his intimacy with Plath, Hughes was privy to insights about her character that remained hidden from the public that only had Plath's work—her poems and prose, and later her journals and letters—to form judgments about her life. However, as Hughes indicates throughout *Birthday Letters*, Plath's emotionally-charged poetry, its visceral imagery and serrated satire, was not evidence of an innate propensity for violence or hyperbole but her vacillations in and out of the throes of depression. In the poem, Hughes discusses Plath's own connection to the color red; she was drawn to it, "revelled" in it, and viewed it as a fitting complement to her inner conflict and passionate temerity of spirit:

Red was your colour.  
 If not red, then white. But red  
 Was what you wrapped around you.  
 Blood-red. Was it blood?...  
 You revelled in red.  
 I felt it raw—like the crisp gauze edges  
 Of a stiffening wound. I could touch  
 The open vein in it, the crusted gleam. (196-197)

Hughes explicitly associates violence and viscera with the color red and evinces, though his ghastly imagery, the way in which Plath was most commonly perceived: through a crimson-tinted lens. However, Hughes concludes the poem, and the collection, with a corrective that not only clarifies the way in which Plath should be remembered but shifts his focus once again, and for the final time, from images allied with death to representations of life:

Blue was better for you. Blue was wings.  
 Kingfisher blue silks from San Francisco  
 Folded your pregnancy  
 In crucible caresses.  
 Blue was your kindly spirit—not a ghoul  
 But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful.

In the pit of red  
You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.  
But the jewel you lost was blue. (198)

Though the nature of her suicide, and the often violent, sharp-edged, and caustic nature of her poetry, connoted an inherently macabre aspect to her character, Hughes reveals, through his intimate knowledge and unparalleled perspective, the Plath, *his* Plath, that should be remembered.

In his article about the collection in the *New Yorker*, Al Alvarez encapsulates Hughes's *Birthday Letters*: "[It is] an extraordinary book...[Hughes's] subject is Plath herself—how she looked and moved and talked, her pleasures, rages, uncanny dreams and many terrors, what was good between them and where it went wrong" (58). As inferred by Alvarez, and as is evident through Hughes's poetic recollections and renderings of the minutiae of his marriage, Ted Hughes exemplifies the spirit of poetry: reflections of the infinite in the rendering of the infinitesimal. Hughes shows that even in the shadow of death, or sometimes because of it, we can begin to comprehend the significance of life, and he ensures, through his portraits of Plath and dialogues with her, with an intensity of emotion no less heightened by love as it is by grief, that Plath, *his* Plath, will live on. As the collaborative effort of *Birthday Letters* indicates, the perpetuation of Plath's poetic voice is inextricably linked with that of his own.

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