

Review of Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. £56/\$99. 328 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-955819-3.

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The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes, Heather Clark's second book from Oxford University Press, belongs to that small minority of scholarly works on which we bestow the term landmark." But while *The Grief of Influence* signifies a progression in the way we view Plath as well as Hughes, to understand Clark's advance in perception, we must understand as well previous studies—whether written by critics or poets—that constitute her book's foundation.

Perversely, what *The Grief of Influence* seeks to overcome—the first, highly divisive, and rivalrous stage of Plath/Hughes readings—resurfaced within months of its publication, when the British Library announced that letters exchanged over the course of thirty years between Hughes and the ever-faithful but candid Keith Sagar would publish his *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*, issued in America by the University of Chicago Press. No actual reading of this volume seemed necessary for one of the most dynamic poetic partnerships in literary history to become, once again, Plath v. Hughes or vice versa.¹

Part of this division between scholars and readers Plath and Hughes owes less to the marital pain that led—at least in part, to her suicide—than nationality, which the couple recognized long before any of its critics, except A. Alvarez, who championed both from the start. Neither he nor Plath suffered any discomfort in labeling herself an *American* woman living in England, implying "otherness," even though she claimed to be happy with her adopted country's war-sunk and muddling-through gloom, which found a daily objective-correlative in weather; we know from the letters and journals that Plath's feelings about England were far more complex, and

¹ While the press release by the University of Chicago, which will publish *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar* in June, is neutral enough (<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/P/bo13415152.html>), and reports from the BBC Online are intriguing in the accounts of Sagar's candor with the primary subject of his life's work, news of the letters' imminence set off firestorms of angry accusations of self-justification elsewhere, and even with the *Daily Mail's* brief excerpts (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2136796/Ted-Hughes-haunted-Sylvia-Plaths-suicide.html>), it is not difficult to see why. Everything except Hughes was responsible for Plath's death, which is not to aver that he pushed her head into the oven, but rather that her suicide probably wouldn't have occurred had he not abandoned her for another woman.

Clark investigates these thoroughly.

Furthermore, though already beyond "the gentility principle" when Alvarez coined the phrase, Plath famously remarked in the British Council interview with Peter Orr, made only a few months before her death, that contemporary British poetry—i.e., the Movement—interested her very little in comparison to Lowell and Sexton, both of whom wrote about "taboo" subject matter (Plath in Orr ###). If Plath always sensed, and proclaimed, that she would be "the poetess [italics mine] of America," just as Hughes would be "the poet" of his native country, her words also brought gender into the equation whose easy solution = Hughes' desertion of Plath and she committed suicide. Thus, for at least two decades after Plath's death, British and Irish readers have tended to line up behind Hughes; Americans behind Plath, and, given the strong women's movement here, female scholars almost inevitably took Plath's "side."

If pinpointing any particular turn in Britain regarding Plath v. Hughes remains an impossibility; most will recall that Jacqueline Rose's feminist meta-study *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* provoked Hughes to write Rose at least one letter whose contents can only be called threatening: Rose's reading of possible lesbian fantasies in Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher" enraged the Poet Laureate, who viewed Rose's remarks as an accusation and reminded her that such a reading, once in print, could be viewed as valid grounds for murder in other countries. Rose's quoting of Hughes' letter hardly boosted his popularity with Plath readers—perhaps even his own—anywhere.

Following Rose came such scholars as Tracy Brain and Sally Bayley, editors of a new essay collection, *Representing Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), whose authors include the Americans Stephen Gould Axelrod (*Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure for Words*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Anita Helle (editor of the equally transatlantic *The Unraveling Archive*, University of Michigan Press, 2007); and Kathleen Connors, author of "Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath," which provides half of the text for a truly spectacular volume essential to any Plath reader, *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and contributed "Visual Art in the Life of Sylvia Plath: Mining Riches in the Lilly and Smith Archives" to Helle's book.² But insofar as British poets—Clark herself has been honored by her own work by the *Paris Review*—are concerned, James Fenton's

² Diann Blakely, Rev. of *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*. *The Tennessean*. January, 2007 (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/192851064>).

pivotal essay on Plath, originally published in the *New York Review of Books*,³ controverts Seamus Heaney's earlier "Sylvia Plath: The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps."⁴

In America, Janet Malcolm's initial bias towards Hughes dissolves midway through *The Silent Woman* when he is exposed as a real-estate glutton; then the late Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband* turned the tide, one whose currents flow ever more strongly in *The Grief of Influence*. "Looting each others poetry," a phrase from Clark's introduction, aptly describes Plath's and Hughes' practice of writing on the backs of each other's drafts, but no critic has made quite such a well-based and thoroughly researched study proving this "looting"—in all genres and trashed experiments, as was the case with Hughes's early verse dramas—true.

While *The Grief of Influence* takes its title from a phrase by Harold Bloom, Clark sees the

³ Later collected in *The Strength of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, 2001. See also Paul Muldoon's "'The Literary Life' by Ted Hughes" in *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures*, 2006. Brilliantly interconnected with the book's initial essay, on Yeats's "All Souls' Night," Muldoon delivers a casually erudite and elegant reading of one of *Birthday Letters'* best poems, which, we agree, weren't written in the way Hughes stated but during a far shorter period. Muldoon's legendary wit, his linguistic and intellectual dazzle, also his self-deprecating manner have brought criticism of an underlying emotional shallowness in both his poetry and essays, but I have never found these to obscure either the "blood-jet" in his best work—whether ostensibly based on family, history, or cultural disaster—is primarily elegiac, making him a perfect interpreter of "All Souls' Night" and "The Literary Life." (Though Muldoon's very ingenuity, which covers every opportunity for word-play, allusion, or pun, lapses once: "fare"/"fair.")

"Interconnected" applies here to four other items: Fenton writes about both Moore and Plath in *The Strength of Poetry*; Clark's first book concerns the poetic renaissance in Northern Ireland, Muldoon's birthplace; he too sees Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* as a germinal text for understanding the relationship between the older and famously prim "Miss Moore" and Plath; last, Muldoon concludes with a connection between Hughes and Macbeth, calling the poem "a spell against Marianne Moore." This may well be true, but I think of Plath, Macbeth, and Toni Saldivar's *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self* (Peter Lang, 1992), and its appendix of letters from Plath to an American in England studying to be a Jesuit priest. Her pleas for blessing are so eerily like Macbeth's that the reader, if not spell-cast, is thoroughly enthralled.

⁴ While Heaney's virtuosity as a critic is as well-known and justly admired as his verse, "Sylvia Plath: The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps" (*The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978-1987*, FSG, 1989) is marred both by his friendship with Hughes and his own deeply Wordsworthian relationship to nature. Clark uses the term "Emersonian," but here these are interchangeable and refer to only a sliver of Plath's canon, in which she attempts a more "cheerful" view of nature than Hughes as a means of constructing an autonomous poetic self. Heaney admired Hughes's *closeness* to nature, even if the former's poems are "cheerful" and the latter's "savage," but when it comes to Plath, Heaney's unable to see—despite the beautiful elegies for his mother, endearing uxoriousness, and even his typical empathy for women—how frightening primal landscape can appear to the opposite gender. While Plath's "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor" and other poems that indicate a *relational*, rather than *negational*, view of the world, pass muster in "The Indefatigable Hooftaps," Heaney disapproves of Plath's use of imagery drawn from the *Shoah*. Many have agreed with his position, including Bloom, perversely enough, considering the origins of Clark's title. (See Janet Cameron's essay "Sylvia Plath's Use of Holocaust Imagery"—<http://janetcameron.suite101.com/sylvia-plaths-use-of-holocaust-imagery-a312647>—for an unevenly written but succinct summation of various points of view on this topic.) Fenton's oft-quoted rejoinder that "a great deal of art is made from the history of other people's sorrows" always remains worth keeping in mind when reading criticisms of Plath that echo Irving Howe's "A Partial Dissent," as does the British Council/Peter Orr interview in which Plath discusses her German/Viennese origins.

largely and unfortunately forgotten Margaret Dickie Uroff as the aforementioned critics'/biographers' best scholarly predecessor, calling her the "author of the only previous full-length study of poetic influence between Plath and Hughes," and quoting Uroff's insistence that the poems of each must be read "as parts of a continuing debate about the nature of the universe," not the products of "two writers as figures isolated from one another, responsive only to the inner compulsions of their independent spirits." Clark's announcement of Uroff's thesis as her own starting point hardly surprises; however, in her overview of writers who have chosen to support one poet and disparage the other, Clark offers a "shock of recognition": "Such positions help explain why there have been so few studies of mutual influence between Plath and Hughes: in a sense the critics are replicating the same rivalry that existed between the poets themselves" (4).

Does this mean that Plath's suicide should be viewed as her trump card in this competition? How could Hughes have outdone his estranged wife except for killing himself as well? A self-defeating measure at best, he must have thought at the time; and, of course, there were the children and Assia Guttman Wevill, who had seduced Plath's husband with purpose and intent, as we have learned through recent memoirs, with their remarks about Wevill claiming to have put on "her warpaint" when she and her own husband, David, made their fateful visit to Devon.

Clark extends her title by quoting Bloom's full sentence—"influence involves grief, and, by extension, mourning"—then continues the thesis that informs the book's entirety, if from the shadows: "Although Plath and Hughes both described *Ariel* and *Birthday Letters* as attempts to free themselves from the other's hold, these books might also be read as failures to achieve this break, or even Freudian melancholic failures of mourning. Both sought to cultivate these voices without recourse to the other's during their marriage, yet when they were left alone, it was the other's voice each could not forget" (9).

Voices. From whose did Hughes's and Plath's originally arise? Clark's initial answer is D. H. Lawrence, or, rather his notions of "blood-consciousness." It is difficult to understand precisely how Lawrence spoke to poets in the 1950s: of course the tidy, "I will be truth to the wife," etc. ethos of the Movement seemed dull to the subjects of Clark's book, but today invoking Lawrence's name means over-written yet often cryptic, even risible scenes of sexual rapture, whether homoerotic wrestling or flower-garlanded pubic hair or outright danger, though

the impotent Lawrence was a strong proponent of marriage, not "free love." A term originating with the 1960s, we now associate promiscuity with rampant campus STDs, the continuing AIDS pandemic, internet porn use, and *50 Shades of Grey*—an amped-up romance novel with plenty of S & M, as if rebelling against the general rules for most married couples' lives: *l'enfant, c'est roi*—currently ranking first on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In other words, we have been forced back into an era much like Hughes's and Plath's, but not without reason: the world has become an even more dangerous place, or so we think, given 24/7 infotainment, i.e. news. Our times are not tidy but, in addition to sexual dangers, bloodied and smutted with continuous governmental attacks on civilians; use/abuse of psychopharmaceuticals, alcohol, and illicit drugs; global warming; late-capitalist *angst*; too often treated identically in poems through the safe distance of irony or unintelligible free association, an update of Alvarez's same "gentility principle" which Hughes condemned in no uncertain terms through his absorption of not only Lawrence, but also Nietzsche, writers whom Plath read with fascination before she ever met her own *übermensch*, as Clark reminds us. To put the matter somewhat differently, Plath and Hughes shared a literary and philosophical vocabulary before she ever left toothmarks on his cheek.

When criticized for the "violence" in his early work, Hughes drew a distinction between the positive and negative types in words which could have been written yesterday. Clark, quoting from *Winter Pollen*, a selection of Hughes's prose, rightly claims that Hughes "mocked the notion of 'humanitarian' (259) values," believing these adopted as a form of cultural self-protection that had historically proven disastrous. We must not refuse to face "our extraordinary readiness to exploit, oppress, torture and kill our own kind" (256). Hughes describes his work ultimately as a means of bearing witness; again, surely the same can be said of some of Plath's most "notorious" poems, in which she allowed the violence of her time to permeate every line.

The Grief of Influence goes on to extricate meaning with similar depth and insight from seemingly every scrap of paper exchanged between the two, exposing each others' anxieties and senses of rivalry and competition. If Clark's introduction—as does that to *Representing Sylvia Plath*—closes with a "tidy" summary of the points she will proceed to discuss, do not be put off by the usual scholarly deployment of outline and summary: Clark synthesizes available poems, prose, and bits of correspondence between the principals here, as well as her seemingly encyclopedic scholarly knowledge; but at each chapter's end, she pushes into a discovery or

statement that seems fresh and also—somehow—simultaneously obvious and shocking. For example, in Chapter Three, "Secret Anxieties," Clark states that while "not all of Hughes's poems about violence"—if to be human is to be animal, that violence can take place in the woods or on the battleground without necessary distinctions:

 speak to his rivalry with Plath, this theme has been insufficiently explored.... Hughes worried that underneath her Lawrentian exterior, his wife wanted the same things Aurelia Plath expected from her son-in-law: financial security and professional stability. He was concerned that by giving in to these demands, he would sever his link with the primal instincts that compelled him to write poetry.... Beyond his fears of suburban remaking, however, lurked what was perhaps a greater, secret anxiety: that Plath really was—or had the potential to be—the better poet. (64)

If Clark's almost preternatural insight allows her to drive her final point as if into the sun's red eye, the "cauldron of morning," her critical testimony makes reviewing *The Grief of Influence* no easy task. Who expects that reviewing any such study to be a packed with potential "spoilers"? Indeed, what reader has the right to deny any newcomer the pleasure of allowing Clark to lead her on a slow but irrevocable journey without once making demands or whamming her over the head with a preconceived set of arguments? Clark's persuasive abilities are not any *fiat lux* but grounded on close intertextual reading, an ability obviously gained by writing poems herself, poems good enough to be honored by the *Paris Review*.

The result is a revisionist work of the highest order. One looks forward to her critical biography of Plath, already under contract with Knopf, the first to be published with full access to the Hughes archives at Emory University.

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