

APPROPRIATING PLATH:
RECLAIMING THE ROLE OF AUTHOR IN
TED HUGHES'S BIRTHDAY LETTERS

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by

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ABSTRACT

The 1998 publication of *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes marked the first time the poet had publicly addressed his marriage to American poet Sylvia Plath. In writing *Birthday Letters*, Hughes drew on the breadth of his poetic career, from the nature imagery of his early work to the shamanistic methods of poetic creation of his middle career to the translation of existing works that dominated the last decade of his life. Elements of each of these areas of interest can be found in the collection which functions as a creative translation of Plath's work. In particular, by openly borrowing material from Plath's *Ariel*, Hughes is able to enter into a dialogue with the source text and regain some measure of authorship over the story of his own life.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Roy A. MacNeil.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis traces British poet Ted Hughes's development as a poet, leading to the creation of *Birthday Letters* (1998). This project argues that in borrowing material from another writer, particularly from the work of his late wife Sylvia Plath, Hughes opened a dialogue with the source text to have a voice in determining how the story of his own life is read. I argue that reclaiming the role of author is one of the main aims of Hughes's collection. Contrary to the assertions of some critics, Hughes does not attempt to silence Plath or have his voice heard as the ultimate authority on her work. *Birthday Letters* opens with Hughes questioning himself and the details of his memories. In writing these poems Hughes is able to re-affirm his own perspective on his life with Plath and through their publication assert his voice within his own story.

The poetic career of Ted Hughes spanned five decades and saw the publication of over a dozen collections of poetry, as well as numerous translations, children's books and prose works. His early work in the 1950s and 1960s is dominated by images of the natural world; these poems often recount the brutal struggle between life and death faced by animals in the wild. Although criticized by some as excessively violent, these early poems approach the world from a "biocentric" rather than an anthropocentric view. For Hughes, the hawk boasting of its killing ability in the poem "Hawk Roosting" is free from the moral constraints that civilization places on such an act; the hawk's actions are neither moral nor amoral, they are instinctual. This biocentric view was a consistent and

defining theme throughout Hughes's career, continuing into the 1970s when he began to explore a shamanistic approach to creating poems. His fascination with the figure of the shaman grew out of his interest in nature. The shaman, for Hughes, was someone who could commune with the natural world on a deep, spiritual level. Hughes believed that, much like the poet, the shaman looked within to find a connection to the natural world. The implementation of shamanic practice was to have an important influence on Hughes's approach to writing poetry, causing him to shift his focus from external inspiration to internal exploration of the unconscious as a method of finding new subject matter. Many of the collections that followed, such as *Crow* (1970), *Gaudete* (1977), and *Cave Birds* (1978), owe a great deal to this approach and mark a turning point in Hughes's development as a poet in that the characters contained within these works are entirely original creations rather than the representation of externally perceived figures and events.

Throughout his career Hughes also maintained an interest in the translation of poetic works and published many of his own translations, from Seneca's *Oedipus* (1969) to *Tales from Ovid* (1998). These works were not literal word-for-word translations seeking to remain as consistent with the source text as possible, but rather they were reinterpretations and reinvigorations of the source material. Because *Birthday Letters* was published just a few months after his version of Ovid's poems, it is tempting to read *Birthday Letters* as a kind of translation of Plath's work since the collection borrows so heavily from her words and imagery. Indeed, *Birthday Letters* draws extensively on the work of Sylvia Plath and their life together for its subject matter.

The fateful meeting of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath in 1956 was to produce one of the most widely analyzed literary relationships of the twentieth century, a relationship made famous as much for the turbulent events of the poets' personal lives as for the stunning works they produced. The details of their life together have been explored in a number of critical texts, including biographies, memoirs, articles, and essays. As these works all testify, during their marriage Hughes experienced early success. His first two collections of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960) garnered critical accolades, while Plath's *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) went largely unnoticed by reviewers of the time. Their marriage ended abruptly in February 1963 when Plath committed suicide at the age of thirty following a separation the previous fall. Although Plath had received little critical attention during her lifetime, she left behind a collection of unpublished poems that would spark decades of study and debate. This collection, published posthumously in 1965 under the title *Ariel*, has been heralded as one of the most important works of the twentieth century and has been the catalyst for a large body of critical theory.

Feminist critiques of Plath's work, most notably of the *Ariel* poems, are perhaps the best known interpretations of her work. Many of these critics read the subject matter as an indictment of the conformity of the 1950s, which sought to restrict women's rights and freedoms. This approach perceives the dark, violent imagery of *Ariel* as a forceful rejection of the patriarchal system under which Plath and all women were living. This popular approach to the work resulted in Ted Hughes being cast in the role of the

tormentor figure that appears within the collection. Some feminist critics even began to read the public details of the poetry into the private relationship of Plath and Hughes, in particular due to Hughes's role as both husband and editor. This blurring of the lines between private and public spheres was to have a damaging effect on Hughes, who became the frequent target of harsh criticism concerning his life with Plath. Some critics went so far as to publicly blame Hughes for Plath's death.

Hughes's reaction to these critical attacks was not to engage critics, nor to enter into a public debate over his relationship with Plath, but rather to remain silent. The unexpected result of such silence was the loss of his own poetic voice and, more to the point, his moral authority as a poet. The story of Hughes's life with Plath was retold through what has come to be called the "Plath Myth." This "Myth," which will be explored in depth in the thesis, reinterprets Plath's life through the events recounted in her poetry. The blurring of public and private spheres also blurs the lines between the poetry and the poet. As a result, Plath has been directly read into many of the poems in *Ariel*, becoming the rebellious Lady Lazarus or the mocking daughter in "Daddy." This "Myth" has also blurred the lines between Plath's poetry and Ted Hughes the man. The horrific Daddy figure made famous in her poetry could be interpreted as a representation of Plath's depression. In "Daddy," the father figure is paired with the unfaithful husband, whom many have come to see as a reference to Hughes. In a letter to Al Alvarez, Hughes comments on how he was shocked to see the events of his life continually reinterpreted to fit the evolving story of his life with Plath, a story whose author was, paradoxically enough, no longer Hughes himself.

Despite maintaining a public silence concerning his life with Plath, Hughes wrote a series of poems spanning the time from their initial meeting to decades after her death. In these poems, Hughes examines the events, both positive and negative, of their life together. Many of these poems refer to events that had already been written about by Plath, some quite famously, in *Ariel*. In January 1998, Hughes stunned the literary world by breaking his silence concerning his life with Plath through the release of these poems. The publication of *Birthday Letters* was widely covered in both literary reviews and mainstream media. Almost immediately, critics began examining the poems for autobiographical revelations about the couple. As reviews continued to appear, many began to note not only the appearance of themes and events detailed in Plath's poetry, but also the appearance of directly quoted or paraphrased lines and poem titles. The question of Hughes's motivation and purpose for drawing on Plath's work in *Birthday Letters* emerged. What could he seek to accomplish by taking a line or image made famous by Plath and placing it within the context of a *Birthday Letters* poem?

Interestingly, this use of another's words was a common theme in Hughes's later career, which saw him produce a wide array of translations, from his critically praised *Tales From Ovid* to lesser known works like Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* (1995) and Euripides's *Alcestis* (1999). Reviews of these texts praised Hughes's ability to find inspiration in the source text and translate it into an entirely new and vibrant work. *Tales from Ovid* is appreciated by many critics as much more than a conventional literary translation; it draws on the source but is not bound to it. *Birthday Letters* owes much to this creative approach; any reader familiar with Plath's work can recognize the images

and events taken from her work. As with *Tales from Ovid*, *Birthday Letters* borrows from the source text to produce a retelling of the events. Obviously, to make this connection the reader must first be familiar with Plath's work or the reference would pass unnoticed. With such knowledge, *Birthday Letters* becomes a companion text to Plath's work. For example, in "The Rabbit Catcher," Hughes retells a series of events that were made famous in Plath's poem by the same name. As with much of the translation work that Hughes produced toward the end of his career, his version does not strictly adhere to the original. Hughes's recounting of the events is not intended to be taken as a correction of Plath's version but rather as a companion version that offers his own perspective.

In *Birthday Letters*, two of the many themes that Hughes considers are the cultural differences that existed between him and Plath, and the decoding of the "Daddy" figure. In exploring cultural differences, Hughes examines how their cultural backgrounds influenced their communication, both oral and written, and also contributed to a misreading of signals. In *Birthday Letters* this misreading has a detrimental effect on the marriage since in some way neither is able to interpret and therefore understand the language of the other. Later in his life, then, Hughes attempts to translate what he had initially misread or misunderstood in the hopes of making Plath's source text clearer to himself. Similarly, Hughes attempts to decode the imagery of the "Daddy" figure that appears so dominantly in *Ariel* to help him understand the meaning this figure held for his wife, as well as to come to terms with the effect it has had on his own life. "Daddy," arguably the most famous Plath poem, associates the tormentor figure of the poem with the unfaithful husband whom many have interpreted as Hughes. In *Birthday Letters* the

appearance of the “Daddy” figure coincides with the appearance of Plath’s well-documented depression. It is not with bitterness or a desire to place blame that Hughes approaches this subject matter but rather with the intent of coming to terms with the effect it has had on his own life.

Throughout the collection, Hughes frequently asks rhetorical questions, indicating that he is often uncertain about the specific details of events. This uncertainty is both moving and re-enforces the idea that Hughes, rather than trying to silence Plath as some critics have suggested, is attempting to understand the period of his life with Plath that resulted in the *Ariel* poems. In poems such as “Your Paris,” “Visit,” and “The Rabbit Catcher,” Hughes admits while recounting an event made famous in Plath’s work that at the time he did not understand how differently Plath saw things. The poet makes frequent references to his inability to translate the language of her emotions and actions, acknowledging that it was not until years after her death, when he reread the *Ariel* poems or looked at her journal entries, that he began to realize just how different her perspective had been from his own. This recognition fuels the personal motivation to reconsider memories of his life with Plath and to explore them without the influence of decades of critical analysis. In publishing these private poems, Hughes attempts to reclaim the role of author of his own life, even while knowing the poems will be subjected to intense critical examination.

Chapter One

The Publication of *Birthday Letters*

i. Reviews of *Birthday Letters*

Reviews of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* appeared almost immediately after its publication in January 1998. The surprise release took critics off guard, and many scrambled not only to place the collection within the context of Hughes's literary career but also to assess its significance in relation to the widely public story of his life with Plath. The pervasiveness of reviews in literary magazines and newspapers generated widespread reader interest in the publication. For the most part, readers approached the book to satisfy their curiosity about the biographical details the reviews promised. Literary critics, on the other hand, attempted to assess the poems for their significance within the wider body of Hughes's work.

It is helpful to consider that reviews fell into one of three categories: supportive of Hughes and *Birthday Letters*; hostile toward Hughes and supportive of Plath; and faithful to the poetry itself, avoiding the biographical material. Hughes had always been familiar with the capricious opinions of critics. Many even questioned his place in English literature, a sharp contrast to the earlier praise he had received as "the greatest living English poet" (Maguire 11) and "Britain's poet laureate -- the first major poet to hold the post since Tennyson" (Alvarez, "Story" 58). Hughes's reputation was reviewed and radically revised in light of this new collection of work. Certainly, *Birthday Letters* is a

departure from many of the themes and images that Hughes had established over his poetic career. His traditional subject matter had been the brutal and violent aspects of the natural world. Prior to *Birthday Letters* Hughes's most famous collection of poetry was *Crow* (1970), a macabre version of the story of creation with a crow as protagonist described with crude language and grotesque images. *Birthday Letters* is the first poetry Hughes had written in the first-person, mixing openly known events from his life with the popular mythology surrounding his relationship with Plath. This myth, often referred to by critics such as Sandra Gilbert as "the Plath Myth," was first generated by Plath's poetry itself in which she engaged in *mythopoeia*, "the appropriation and reworking of mythical material, or the creation of a kind of 'private' mythology" (Cuddon 527). This act of mythopoeia incorporated elements of Plath's personal life, most notably her relationships with her husband and her father, into her poetry and established them as central themes within the resulting mythology. Not surprisingly, Hughes's role as victimizer and murderer in the Plath Myth was very difficult for him to tolerate. When *Birthday Letters* won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award three months after Hughes's death, his daughter Frieda read from a letter he had written to a friend about finally breaking his silence on his relationship with Plath:

I think those letters do release the story that everything I have written since the early 1960s has been evading. It was a kind of desperation that I finally did publish them – I had always just thought them unpublishably raw and unguarded, simply too vulnerable. But then I just could not endure being blocked any longer. How strange that we have to make these public declarations of our secrets. But we

do. If only I had done the equivalent 30 years ago, I might have had a more fruitful career – certainly a freer psychological life. Even now the sensation of inner liberation – a huge, sudden possibility of new inner experience. Quite strange. (Wagner, E. 4)

The majority of reviews were kind to Hughes, focusing on his undeniable love for Plath and the suffering that saturates the poems. Reviews appeared in major publications: *New York Times* (Michiko Kakutani), *Guardian* (Jacqueline Rose), *Times Literary Supplement* (Karl Miller), *London Review of Books* (Ian Sansom), and *MacLean's* (John Bemrose). Friends and supporters of Hughes wrote many of the book's first reviews. Of these, the pieces by Seamus Heaney and Andrew Motion clearly show support not only for *Birthday Letters* as a collection but also for Ted Hughes as a poet and a man. Their reviews also openly acknowledge that feminist critics have long been cruel to Hughes by accusing him of exploiting Plath's literary estate for his own financial gain and even of driving his wife to suicide. Heaney and Motion clearly aim at creating sympathy from the reader for a man who "has been under a scrutiny by the media and the academy which has been mostly unsympathetic and on some occasions fiercely vindictive" (Heaney 4). Heaney and Motion recognize that *Birthday Letters* was written out of Hughes's experience of tragedy and backlash. "Anyone who thought Hughes's reticence was proof of his hard heart will immediately see how stony they have been themselves," writes Motion. "This is a book written by someone obsessed, stricken and deeply loving" (A1). These critics stress the tragic and tender moments of Hughes's life with Plath and his troubled private moments in the years following her death. As Motion grandly observed

of the collection. "There is nothing like it in literature. It is, strictly speaking, extraordinary" (A1).

Although *Birthday Letters* found supporters in fellow British poets like Heaney and Motion, it also found its detractors, mainly, though not exclusively, among feminist critics from American universities. These readers have been especially harsh in their criticism of Hughes, his poetry, and his personal life over the past three decades. With the publication of *Birthday Letters*, this fierce debate was reignited. Much of the earlier rhetoric condemning Hughes for his behaviour during his marriage to Plath, as well as his handling of her posthumous literary estate, appears in the reviews of *Birthday Letters*. Moreover, Hughes's motivation for writing the collection is often questioned. Some reviewers feel that *Birthday Letters* was a final way for Hughes to strike out at feminists and other critics who had been so harsh in their treatment of him since Plath's death. *Birthday Letters* is dismissed as a "work of half-conscious vengeance" (Ostriker 9) and "a fightback against the biographers and feminist detractors" (Glover 45). Katha Pollitt perceives *Birthday Letters* as a way for Hughes to shift the blame for his wife's death away from himself. In her review, "Peering into the Bell Jar," Pollitt noted that "Hughes depicts himself as a passive figure, a stand-in for Daddy in Plath's lurid psychodrama" (3). Such passivity in the face of Plath's seemingly fated death is a recurring theme in *Birthday Letters* and one that feminists are quick to dispute because they see Hughes as having played a more active role in her suicide. Questions are also raised as to why Hughes felt free to explore Plath's psyche in great detail while leaving his own "curiously unexplored" (Pollitt 3). The subject of the poems, after all, is not an "I" but a "You." This

focus on the “You” in the poems allowed Hughes to ruminate on his life with Plath from a distance. Hughes rarely made “himself or his own personality traits the subject matter. Instead, his role in the marriage is presented as largely determined by Plath’s depression” (Warn 2). Hughes’s role as spectator deflects attention from his reactions to focus on Plath’s actions. Many of the reviews that tend to openly favour Plath asked similar questions of *Birthday Letters* and Hughes’s motivation for writing it.

The smallest group of reviews take a more neutral approach. The most conscientiously objective of these reviews is Tim Kendall’s “Governing a Life” (*Oxford Poetry*). He begins by assessing the excessive praise *Birthday Letters* had received in other reviews, including accolades from Jacqueline Rose, a well-known Hughes detractor. He considers Hughes’s overall body of work to date, judging that it “has always been uneven.” Kendall’s review focuses on the structure and mechanics of the poetry itself; by dissociating the biographical scandal from the literary value of the poetry, he finds that the collection’s major flaw lay in “its machinery, deafeningly cranked into gear in too many of these poems” (2). Ian Sansom’s piece in the *London Review of Books* approaches the poetry of *Birthday Letters* in a deliberately balanced way, avoiding biographical sensation as much as possible. Sansom reads the collection as public poems, but argues that unlike his public stance in the Laureate poems, Hughes adopted a personal agenda in *Birthday Letters*:

Hughes is addressing not some obscure partner in an obscure partnership, but the great mass of his own and Plath’s readers. There is to be no mystification or flim-flam; we know who he’s writing about, and what he’s writing about. He wants us

to hear his side of the story (4).

In a departure from most other reviewers, Sansom focuses on Hughes's pain and the troubling subject matter of the poetry. Sansom finds the contents of the collection to be "pretty unpleasant" (5), and he applauds Hughes for not "sweetening" the story.

Within the critical debate concerning *Birthday Letters*, it is often possible to detect differences in perspective between American and British critics. Hughes often describes the difference in nationalities between him and Plath as something deeper than could be attributed to mere place of birth. Their backgrounds are a defining aspect of their psychology and a major characteristic of their relationship, an element that helps to shape how each poet perceived the world around him or her and also caused division between them. An example of this difference in viewpoints can be seen in several *Birthday Letters* poems, notably "Your Paris." The poem attempts to illustrate how a trip the couple took to Paris reveals the deeper psychological differences that existed between them. Hughes sees Paris as being "a post-war utility survivor" (THCP 1066), the city having been only recently been liberated from Nazi occupation and still scarred on every street with bullet holes and memories of the war, whereas Plath's Paris "was American" (THCP 1065) and like post-war America carried none of the telltale marks of war that disfigured most of Europe's cities. It was a city alive with excitement and creativity; it was a city of "Hemingway, / Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein" (THCP 1066). This list of American expatriate writers identifies Plath's way of seeing the city, informed by American eyes. This difference of national-cultural perspective is itself a recurring theme of *Birthday Letters*.

The reviews of *Birthday Letters* also tended to compare Hughes's poetic abilities to Plath's talent. In the majority of these examples, Hughes is judged deficient next to his wife. According to Joyce Carol Oates, *Birthday Letters* "lacks the originality and sharpness of Plath's poetry. It's a testament to the power of what we might call contemporary biographical mania, that our interest in this capable, conventional poetry would only be stirred by our collective prurient interest in the poets' mismanaged lives" (28). That Hughes openly adopted images and titles from Plath's poetry, as well as imitated her style, generated a great deal of negative criticism. Reviewers were quick to criticize Hughes for such stylistic appropriation and for what they perceived as his poor execution of that style, claiming that "Plath's verbal genius, the steel needle that flew so unerringly, is dulled by Hughes's big-handed, cuffing, slack paraphrases" (Bedient 25). These reviewers saw *Ariel* as art and *Birthday Letters* as biography masquerading as poetry.

ii. The Plath Myth

When Sylvia Plath committed suicide in 1963, she was a poet of little regard or acclaim in either Britain or the United States. What little literary attention she had received in life was the result of one coolly received book of poetry, *The Colossus* (1960), a semi-autobiographical novel originally published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, *The Bell Jar* (1963), and individual poems that were published in various literary magazines. Little of the fame that Plath was to acquire posthumously was to be derived from these accomplishments; at the time of her death, the collection of poetry that was to

make her famous, *Ariel*, had not yet been published. Despite her obscurity in literary circles at the time of her death forty years ago, she is now praised by most literary critics and scholars as one of the major voices in twentieth century poetry; the legitimacy of her success was made official in 1982 when her *Collected Poems* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, an award that is rarely granted posthumously (Wagner-Martin 11). Plath's literary acclaim largely resulted from the publication of *Ariel* in 1965. The published version of *Ariel* is problematic, though, since the collection that was published in 1965 was not the same manuscript that Plath had left. Her husband, Ted Hughes, had rearranged the poems, omitting the more hurtful personal poems and adding those he thought were too good to leave out (*Winter* 172-3). As a result of this rearrangement, the published version of *Ariel* is a very different collection from the one that Plath had intended.¹ The difference between the two versions of *Ariel* is striking: "The mood of [Plath's] volume is as different as possible to the dark, desperate 1965 version which made Plath more famous for her death than for her life" (Curtis 6). Instead of telling a story of triumph and rebirth by beginning with the word "love" and ending with "spring," as her collection would have, Hughes's version of *Ariel* reads like a long suicide note, ending with her darkest poems: the suicidal "Edge," and the testament to the permanence of poetry, "Words."

The myth-making that marks *Ariel* was meant to transform personal experience into poetry that transcended the personal and held some significance in the public arena

¹ *Ariel: The Restored Edition* was published by HarperCollins in November 2004. This edition reinstates Plath's intended organization of poems and includes facsimiles of some of the poems as well as a new introduction by her daughter Frieda Hughes.

in which it would be read. Plath commented on this in her interview with Peter Orr, stating, "I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured ... with an informed and intelligent mind" (169). For Plath, the manipulation of personal experience was a key element in the creation of poetry, one that led her to mythologize the people and events of her life. An unexpected result of this myth-making was the creation of the myth or story of her life that has come to be taken by many as fact. In her essay "A Fine, White Flying Myth: The Life / Work of Sylvia Plath," Sandra Gilbert explores Plath's myth-making as it applies to women writers in general and finds that the mythologizing of life events in poetry is a common theme in women's literature. She writes, "Women writers, especially when they are writing *as women*, have tended to rely on plots and patterns that suggest the obsessive patterns of myths and fairy tales" (248). This tendency results from the patriarchal character of the literary canon that has for so long devalued the female experience. Myth, then, becomes a way for the female writer to create value for an undervalued experience.

Almost immediately after the publication of *Ariel*, the critical opinion of Plath's life and work began to shift. She was no longer an obscure poet of little importance, but rather a major poet deserving of intense critical attention; in addition, she quickly became an icon to feminists who identified themes of domestic martyrdom and gender inequality in Plath's work, most notably in the *Ariel* poems. These themes were drawn from Plath's use of mythopoeia to create a private mythology populated by characters and events from her personal life. The "Plath Myth," described by Sarah Churchwell in "Secrets and Lies: Plath, Privacy, Publication and Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*," depicts Plath as an

hysterical woman who drew upon madness and domestic tragedy in order to write brilliant poems. Societal pressures on her to be a perfect wife, mother, and housekeeper caused her to rebel against her cheating husband and to immortalize their domestic problems in her poetry. A major reason for Plath's posthumous fame results from the tragic circumstances surrounding her death. In the months following, Hughes stated publicly that Plath had died of viral pneumonia. Although rumors circulated in literary circles that her death had indeed been a suicide, it was not until George Steiner reviewed *Ariel* in *The Reporter* on 7 October 1965 that the public realized the true circumstances surrounding her death (Alexander 341). Hughes was often blamed for abandoning Plath and creating the situation that would eventually lead to her suicide. During this time, one of the central themes of the Plath Myth was to take shape: the role of Hughes as adulterer / murderer and Plath as his victim.

Unfortunately, the Plath Myth has come to dominate readers' perception of the poet. The Plath Myth is now so pervasive that it tends to overshadow the poetry itself, even though it originated from the poetry. This trend distresses scholars like Tim Kendall, who states, "A recent study which devoted more space to an examination of what it called 'The Plath Myth' than to Plath's poetry is worryingly symptomatic of a general trend. It should not be controversial to assert that the most interesting thing about Sylvia Plath is her poetry" (*Sylvia Plath* ii). As problematic as the Plath Myth may be, however, an examination of it is justified since it has become such a huge part of Plath scholarship and is one of the central themes in Hughes's *Birthday Letters*. Before delving into the details of the Plath Myth, it is important to trace its genesis from Plath's first

declared ambition to become a writer to the culmination of her art and life in suicide. Her own creation of myths has contributed to the legend that has grown to define her. Finally, the Plath Myth's effect on Ted Hughes must be explored to understand the significance behind his *Birthday Letters* poems' relationship with Plath's corresponding poems, the main focus of chapter three.

Plath's desire to become a writer was encouraged from a young age. In the documentary *Voices and Visions*, her mother recalls that for Plath's tenth birthday she asked for a diary with blank pages so that she could write as much as she wanted for each day. This desire to record experience and emotion in words took many forms, from poetry to short stories to journal entries, and was a constantly evolving part of Plath's life from childhood until her death. She enjoyed early success, publishing her first poem in the local paper at the age of eight. She began by writing mostly about nature: "birds, bees, spring, fall, all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who doesn't have any interior experience to write about" (Orr 167). Despite her lack of life experience, it is possible to discern glimpses of her future brilliance in these early poems, especially regarding subject matter. "Bitter Strawberries" expresses her concern over the tense political climate of the mid 1950s as well as how those events affected the lives of ordinary people. Several poems depict images or themes that would later play an important role in the creation of the *Ariel* poems. In "To A Jilted Lover," there is a male figure who has grown "until he stood / incandescent as a god; / now there is nowhere I can go to hide from him" (SPCP 309-310). This theme of mythologizing a male figure

until he becomes “godlike” and ultimately oppressive is central to *Ariel* and is explored in *Birthday Letters* as well.

When *The Colossus and Other Poems* was first published in 1960, few readers had any idea who Sylvia Plath was or what to expect from her work. Reviews focused on Plath’s technical skill, matters of geography, and the role of gender in everyday life. Plath was not assumed to be the persona of her poetry, nor was each event described in the poems interpreted as a confession of the poet’s actual life. *The Colossus* was reviewed largely on its own merits, uncontaminated by the lurid details of autobiography. In the initial reviews, *The Colossus* was considered to be a fine first publication for the young poetess. An anonymous review that was published in *Poetry Review* describes the collection as “a revelation suitcase, bulging, always accurate, humor completely unforced, wresting a certain beauty from the perhaps too-often-preferred ugly, but with a control and power of expression unsurpassed in modern poetry” (Brain 4). Another unnamed critic declares from the book’s front dust jacket that Plath possesses “a skill with language that is curiously masculine in its knotted, vigorous quality, combined with an alert, gay, sometimes whimsical sensibility that is wholly feminine” (Brain 3-4). In his review entitled “The Tranquilized Fifties,” E. Lucas Myers comments that there “is not an imperfectly finished poem in Sylvia Plath’s book. She is impressive for control of form and tone, appropriateness of rhythmic variation within the poem, and vocabulary and observation which are often surprising, and always accurate” (Wagner, L. 31).

The reviews written in the years well before Plath’s death are of a decidedly different tone from those published after her suicide and subject to reinterpretation based

on the evolving Plath Myth. One review in particular comments directly and tellingly on the effect that the Plath Myth, generated after the publication of *Ariel*, has had on reviews and critics. In “Metamorphosis of a Book,” a review of *The Colossus* published in *The Spectator* in April 1967, M.L. Rosenthal claims that Plath’s first volume of poetry’s “bearing is clearer and more harshly moving now that *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* have illuminated the mind behind them for us. I feel rebuked not to have sensed all these meanings in the first place, for now they seem to call out from nearly every poem” (Wagner, L. 34). Without being completely aware of its significance, Rosenthal identified a major shift in the critical view toward Plath that had taken place in the few short years since her death. With the publication of *Ariel* and its well-known foreword by Robert Lowell in the American edition, the approach to Plath’s work began to undergo a significant change. The focus shifted away from the more technical aspects of the poetry and toward the more sensational moments of Plath’s final days. In his foreword, Lowell declares, “everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever” (vii). He describes Plath herself as being “like a racehorse, galloping relentlessly with risked, outstretched neck, death hurdle after death hurdle topped” (vii). As Tracy Brain observes in *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001), “Few critics or readers would dispute the idea that interpretation is affected by foreknowledge. Of course, readers cannot ‘un-know’ what they know, but the packaging of Plath’s work ensures that they are predisposed to ‘know’ as much as possible about the connection between her life and her writing before they even begin to read” (8). Readers are also predisposed to know the public image of Hughes as presented

by the Plath Myth, an image representing Hughes as Plath's victimizer while ignoring the creative exchange that existed during their marriage.

Plath's marriage brought about a significant turning point in her writing as she began to compose poetry with her new husband. During this time, Plath was often working on writing exercises assigned to her by Hughes. He was instrumental in enabling her to become a professional writer by challenging her to write and freeing her from worrying about financial stability. Struggling to find her own poetic voice, she usually consulted a thesaurus when composing poems. She was not yet able to write with the creative freedom that she would find when writing the *Ariel* poems. "Stillborn" (1960) is a telling example of Plath's awareness that her poems failed to excite her even though they were "proper in shape and number and every part" (*SPCP* 142). The poems she wrote during this time are not as confident as her *Ariel* poems, but they allowed her to explore structure and master the mechanics of poetry that would later enable her to write more skillfully. Her subject matter at this time was steeped in mythology, which she recognized as forced. She described her struggle with her limited subject matter in a journal entry dated 25 February 1959:

My main thing now is to start with real things: real emotions, and leave out the baby gods, the old men of the sea, the thin people, the knights, the moon-mothers, the mad maudlins, the lorelei, the hermits, and get into me, Ted, friends, mother, and brother and father and family. The real world. (*Journals* 471)

Plath was also aware of her overly strict adherence to rules, and she adeptly expressed her divided self in the poem "In Plaster" (1961):

There are two of me now:

This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,

And the white person is certainly the superior one. (*SPCP* 158)

The struggle described in this poem reflects Plath's own inner struggle to shed the dependence on structure and rules that defined her early work and to move toward the more powerful verse that would appear in the *Ariel* poems. During this period Plath also wrote her most successful fiction. *The Bell Jar* was published by Heinemann in January 1963 under a pseudonym. The novel tells the story of Esther Greenwood, an overachiever who suffers from a nervous breakdown following a summer editing a women's fashion magazine in New York City. The details of Esther's life are so close to those of Plath's that there is a tendency to conflate them into the same person; this tendency to see Plath as both author and narrator has strengthened the notion that Plath's work should be read autobiographically. Although the novel received favourable reviews, she was frustrated that the reviewers had "missed the point of the ending, the affirmation of Esther's rebirth" (Wagner-Martin 237).

Near the end of Plath's life, when her marriage to Hughes began to disintegrate, she wrote the poems that would be published in *Ariel*. This period marked a dramatic shift in poetic technique and subject matter. The obsessive obedience to structure that characterized her earlier poems is replaced by a much more experimental style. The subject matter of these late poems is inspired by events from her personal life; Plath relied upon the often painful emotions from her failing marriage as a source of material in their creation. The work she completed in the last six months of her life, especially those

poems written in October 1962, has overshadowed all of her other work. Plath's name has become synonymous with the *Ariel* poems and it is on the work of this period that Hughes most heavily draws in *Birthday Letters*.

One crucial influence on Plath's poetry at this time was the appearance of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), an intensely personal account of the poet's mental breakdown. Plath had been Lowell's student in the summer of 1959 when she audited his poetry seminar at Boston University; it was in his class that she met and befriended the poet Anne Sexton. For Plath, Lowell's poems offered a different approach to the creation of poetry, one that allowed her to draw heavily on the personal experiences of her life in a way that had previously been denied. In writing *Life Studies*, Lowell inspired Plath to explore her own personal experience as subject matter for her poetry. As one reader notes, the poetry that Plath wrote at this time "symbolizes the aggressive return of the repressed through a dramatic poetry of mythic formulas, plots and patterns – in which the stage is set for the poet/woman to introduce her shrieks, her suffering, her anguish, her murderous fury, her disruptive *disorder* into the well-regulated, gendered codes of conventional patriarchy" (Yorke 81). Plath was finally able to write in a way she had only dreamed about before, ignoring popular models and writing what she knew were remarkably strong and original poems. Finally she had grown, and had "outgrown the person who had written in that oblique, reticent way ... she was able to write as from her true center about the forces that really moved her: destructive, volatile, demanding, a world apart from everything she had been trained to admire" (Alvarez, *Savage* 24-25).

When Plath turned directly to the events of her life as subject matter for her poetry, she began with her father, who had died when she was only nine years old. Otto Plath was a distinguished professor of entomology at Boston University. Specializing in the study of bees, he was an imposing figure in the classroom and at home. In class, he would sometimes intimidate a new class of students by cooking and eating a rat before them (Alexander 12); at home, he would capture a bee and make it buzz in his fist without getting stung, much to the fascination of his young daughter (*Voices*). Otto Plath's death, from a misdiagnosed case of diabetes, had a profound effect on his young daughter, which would resurface when a mature Plath would remember the event as a source of material for her poetry. Plath's poems to her father began long before she famously wrote "Daddy" in October 1962. Perhaps her earliest published poem on this subject, the 1955 villanelle "Lament," repeats the line, "The sting of bees took away my father" (*SPCP* 315-16). The father in this poem has been taken away, but he remains a figure of mythic status who "counted the guns of god a bother, / laughed at the ambush of angels' tongues" and "can mangle the grin of kings" (*SPCP* 315-16). This theme was carried over into *The Colossus* when Plath wrote many successful poems that drew on personal experience, the most notable among these being "Full Fathom Five" (1958), "The Colossus" (1959), "The Beekeeper's Daughter" (1959) and "Electra on Azalea Path" (1959). These poems continue to idolize the father figure, but they take a more questioning approach. Consider the blind adoration of early poems such as "Lament":

O ransack the four winds and find another
man who can mangle the grin of kings:

the sting of bees took away my father

who scorned the tick of the falling weather. (*SPCP* 316)

This adoration is replaced by a more mature questioning of the relationship in later poems such as “Little Fugue”:

Great silence of another order.

I was seven, I knew nothing.

The world occurred.

You had one leg, and a Prussian mind. (*SPCP* 188)

In the documentary *Voices and Visions*, feminist literary critic Sandra Gilbert discusses Plath’s development through a consideration of poems regarding her father. Gilbert believes that in her early poetry Plath naively regards her father as a god, but is not sure if she wants to run and hide from him (“To a Jilted Lover”) or try to put him back together again (“The Colossus”).

While Plath’s mythologizing of her father plays an important role in her poetry, it is the mythologizing of herself and Ted Hughes that has contributed most to the creation of the Plath Myth and rests at the thematic core of *Birthday Letters*. Although *Birthday Letters* thoroughly explores the mythical framework that Plath employed when creating such famous poems as “Daddy” and “Fever 103,” the main focus of the collection lies in the exploration of how Plath wrote about their failing marriage and the effect that her poems had on Hughes in the years following her death. Several poems in *Birthday Letters* openly challenge the perceptions created with Plath’s help and the subsequent evolution of that myth in the public arena. The subject matter of Hughes’s “The Dogs Are Eating

Your Mother” particularly explores the fervent devotion that the Plath Myth has inspired in some:

They dug her out. Now they batten
On the cornucopia
Of her body. Even
Bite the face off her gravestone,
Gulp down the grave ornaments,
Swallow the very soil. (*THCP* 1169)

This harsh poem alludes to the obsessive and often intrusive interest of invasive readers. The poem “reveals the poet’s contempt for those who would appropriate their story” (Wagner, E. 192).

Hughes, perhaps more than any other, had to endure the effects of Plath’s myth-making. Two poems from the beginning of their marriage can be seen as early instances of Plath writing about her relationship with him. In “Pursuit” (1956) and “Ode For Ted” (1956), Plath applies a similar technique when writing about the absent father figure. In “Pursuit,” the narrator seeks a relationship with a male figure of mythic stature; she describes him as a wild animal:

There is a panther stalks me down:
One day I’ll have my death of him;
His greed has set the woods aflame,
He prowls more lordly than the sun. (*SPCP* 22)

Plath writes about the seductive yet elusive would-be lover in a manner similar to the absent father figure. However, there is a price to be paid if a union is possible, as is evident further on:

I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
To quench his thirst I squander blood;
He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice. (*SPCP* 22)

In the years since Plath's death, the intermediate poems in which Plath mythologized elements of her relationship with Hughes have been largely overlooked because of the intense focus that has been given to the *Ariel* poems. The early flattering poems, such as "Ode For Ted," remain largely ignored, as are the positive and creatively productive years of Plath's marriage, recorded in the poems and journal entries from this period. When critics such as Joyce Carol Oates and Alicia Ostriker explore the nature of Plath's myth-making, they focus mainly on the more sensational poems in *Ariel* in which the once glorified male figure becomes merged with that of "Daddy" and "The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year" (*SPCP* 224).

As already suggested, arguably the most famous example of Plath's myth-making, and one frequently explored in *Birthday Letters*, is her poem "Daddy." Here Plath brings the figures of the absent father and unfaithful husband together in the same poem, exploring the manner in which one influenced the other. The narrator struggles with the realization that the absent father has been replaced by the unfaithful husband:

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. (SPCP 224)

This blurring of the two figures leads Plath “to confuse her ‘gods,’ to blend Hughes, in the later years of their marriage, with the image of her dead father” (Wagner, E. 44). Hughes explores the same theme in “A Picture of Otto” and “The Shot.” *Birthday Letters* seeks to explore the ways both he and Plath have been represented in the three decades following her death; the poems serve as both public and private explorations of their story. Unavoidably, the Plath Myth changed the world’s perception of Hughes, as well. Instead of being regarded primarily as a talented poet, Hughes became better known as the man who was married to Sylvia Plath. He had to struggle with public denouncements of his life and work, and with deciding how best to treat Plath’s estate which he had inherited at the time of her death.

iii. Translating Sylvia Plath

The echoes of Sylvia Plath’s verse sounding throughout *Birthday Letters* have prompted readers to examine the reasons behind Hughes’s appropriation of her work. In *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Tracy Brain reads the appearance of Plath’s words not as theft but as “cues” for the reader that Hughes’s poetry “speaks both to and from Plath’s” (176). For Brain, *Birthday Letters* is part of a “continuing conversation” between the two poets. The collection engages Plath’s poetry by appropriating a single line or an image, drawing on it as source material for an entirely new poem. This intertextual connection brings

Plath back into play, so to speak, in fresh ways, and complicates earlier readings both of her work and of Hughes's new material. Calvin Bedient sees the collection as Hughes's attempt to have the last word on Plath's poetry: "Hughes's poems ... mirror, in a flyspecked way, several of [Plath's] own stunning poems, exploiting them, competing with them, colluding with the reader over them" (25). Ian Sansom describes *Birthday Letters* as Hughes's "attempt to possess, or re-possess, his own experience. The book has a clear and practical purpose – correcting distortions, setting the record straight, putting right the gossips and the speculators, the detractors and the critics" (2). More pointedly, James Wood and Alicia Ostriker express outrage at what they see as a blatant attempt by Hughes to silence Plath. Despite the often harsh reviews, it is more likely that Hughes was not deliberately silencing his late wife but reanimating her voice in a more complex and troubled conversation. *Birthday Letters* is in some ways a translation of Plath's work, openly appropriating her words to resituate them in a new context. This novel, somewhat risky approach led some readers to question the true authorship of the poems: "Are these Hughes's poems? Or are they somehow still Plath's? Many are so full of her imagery, her dark symbolism, if only because they are replies, that it's hard to read them as anything but collaborations with the (perhaps unwilling) dead" (Barbour 3).

The letter-poems published in *Birthday Letters* speak not only to the poet's deceased wife, but also to the general public. Neil Roberts reads the poems in *Birthday Letters* as "apostrophic elegies" because "someone who is absent is addressed as if she were present" (*Literary* 202). By addressing Plath as though she could respond, Hughes's poems facilitate a "shift from the empirical to the discursive... to bring about a

sublimation of the addressee: she is stripped of empirical characteristics” (Roberts, *Literary* 202). Of course, as poems, the “letters” enter the public realm, inviting us to reconsider our views of both partners in the drama, or myth. Given the harsh criticism that Hughes has constantly faced regarding his treatment of Plath, both during their marriage and posthumously as editor of her literary estate, it is unlikely that Hughes would expect these critics to merely accept *Birthday Letters* as a final word on Plath. In *Ariel’s Gift*, Erica Wagner claims that the purpose of the collection is to “conjure Plath to converse with her, and in doing so make the reader turn again to what she wrote and what she achieved” (5). Wagner goes on to describe *Birthday Letters* as “a kind of conversation, one-sided but a conversation nonetheless. Plath may be gone but her work remains, and so Hughes engages with her work, connecting with the imagery she used, the events she described” (22). *Birthday Letters* acts as a companion text, sharing a reciprocal relationship with Plath’s texts.

The appropriation that occurs throughout *Birthday Letters* can be seen to serve many purposes. In drawing on the source material from Plath’s work, *Birthday Letters* presents poems that “offer fresh opportunities for rereading, counter-reading and misreading of an entirely different order” (Sansom 3). The poems engage, question, expand and ultimately complement Plath’s work. The prevalence of Plath’s lines and imagery in *Birthday Letters* can hardly be seen as accidental. In so obviously appropriating Plath’s work, Hughes is creating a dialogue that is both private and public. It is a dialogue between Hughes and Plath on an intensely private level, and between *Birthday Letters* and the work of Plath on an openly public level. As a creative

translation, *Birthday Letters* performs two functions. On the private level it allows Hughes to express grief concerning the death of his wife. On a public level it allows him to reclaim the role of author. Sarah Churchwell believes that Hughes objected “to becoming an unwilling audience to his ‘own story’ – to becoming reader, rather than author” (116). *Birthday Letters* gives Hughes a voice in the discourse that has shaped how he has been perceived in the public eye.

Before it is possible to delve more deeply into specific examples of Hughes’s appropriation of Plath’s work, it is important to consider the process itself. Linda Hutcheon writes that appropriation is necessary in order for a text to make sense to the reader because “it is only [as] part of prior discourse that any text derives meaning and significance” (126). Hutcheon perceives the most radical boundaries as those that are crossed between fiction and non-fiction, essentially between art and life (10). Literary appropriation, in this view, is a legitimate and even unavoidable means to writing; it differs from plagiarism in that “the alluder hopes that the reader will recognize something, the plagiarizer that the reader will not” (Ricks 220). When Hughes borrows a title, line or image from Plath’s work, he is anticipating that the reader will recognize what he is doing. The question some critics ask is, does Hughes have the moral right to borrow from his former wife’s work? Feminist critics like Sarah Churchwell and Alicia Ostriker argue that Hughes’s appropriation of Plath’s work silences her, making his voice the ultimate authority on Plath’s life. However, Susan Bassnett argues that Hughes appropriates Plath’s work in order to create a new text that speaks both from Plath’s

original work and to a new audience; in essence, Hughes is translating Plath in *Birthday Letters* (139).

How can we say that Hughes is translating Plath if they are both writing in the same language? Usually the term translation is applied when a text is rewritten from one language into another language. However, according to critic George Steiner, every act of human communication requires some degree of translation for it to have meaning: “The essential structural and executive means and problems of the act of translation are fully present in acts of speech, of writing, of pictorial encoding inside any given language” (xii). Factors such as gender, social class, age, cultural background, disciplinary boundaries, and historical time can hinder communication even within the same language. Issues that arise when translating between languages continue to exist within a single language:

The schematic model of translation is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor-language via a transformational process...

Exactly the same model – and this is what is rarely stressed – is operative within a single language. But here the barrier or distance between source and receptor is time. (Steiner 29)

The excessive number of questions that recur throughout *Birthday Letters* indicates Hughes’s effort to remember moments that took place in the past and also to make sense of different situations that he did not fully understand at the time they were occurring. His struggle to understand troubling moments, such as Plath’s fury at seeing rabbit snares in “The Rabbit Catcher” and her jealousy of Emily Bronte in “Wuthering Heights,” is

underscored by Steiner's theory of translation: Hughes could not comprehend the significance of these moments at the time of their occurrence. Therefore, he needed to reconsider these events in order to write about them in his poetry.

Although the main source of inspiration for Hughes's *Birthday Letters* is the work of his late wife, he often borrows titles or lines from other writers' works, as well. Throughout the collection, an observant reader will notice borrowings from the works of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Conrad and Hardy, among others. What makes his rummaging through Plath's imagery so very different from his rummaging through these? Obviously, the answer lies in the nature of the charged relationship between the couple, as well as the charged nature of the relationship between Hughes and critics of his life and work. *Birthday Letters* is undoubtedly directed toward Plath's readers, but it is the public versus private provocation of the collection that has garnered so much attention. When Plath wrote her most famous collection, *Ariel*, in the early 1960s, she explored the private difficulties of her relationship with Hughes to create a public work. Ironically, it was Hughes who sought to publish the poems after her death; through this action, he helped to produce the Plath Myth as well as the public debate over his own private life. In his many essays, introductions, and forewords to Plath's posthumously published works, Hughes had always maintained a distance from his former wife, referring to her as "Sylvia Plath" and not "Sylvia" or "my wife" or any other term that would express an emotional connection. "Sylvia Plath" was a poet, not his wife. But in *Birthday Letters* this distance disappears. There is no "Sylvia Plath" in *Birthday Letters*, there is only "you": "You" who were a poet, but was also a friend, wife and mother. And it is this dissolution of the

boundary between private and the public that helped fuel the interest and excitement over *Birthday Letters*. Many critics, such as Erica Wagner and Tracy Brain, have sought to understand Hughes's motivation for openly engaging Plath's writing in his last work. It is likely that Hughes anticipated the critical response from feminist critics and readers. As is the case with this famous literary couple, Susan Crean describes the life story of an icon as "public property... It is taken up by artists, academics and the media (how else does one become an icon?), but the unrelenting attention means the public knows the script by heart and will have decided views on any changes" (D15). But in speaking directly to Plath's themes and images in *Birthday Letters*, and in some cases offering a counter-perspective on how an event occurred, Hughes is directly challenging the Plath Myth by offering a new interpretation of Plath's work.

In the last decade of his life, Hughes's focus often seemed to drift toward the past. This shift is reflected in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), Hughes's book-length study of the unity of Shakespeare's collected works, as well as his translations of the classic texts *Tales From Ovid* (1998) and Euripides' *Alcestis* (1999). His work on these translations is not usually credited with playing a significant role in the creation of *Birthday Letters*, even though he was simultaneously working on both projects. However, many of the dark, tragic themes of the translations found their way into *Birthday Letters*. In his review of *Birthday Letters* and Hughes's *Tales from Ovid*, J.D. McClatchy recognized the overlapping images:

Many myths are conflated and Plath's image superimposed on them. She is Eurydice, Ariadne, or Persephone. Hughes would like to be an Orpheus or

Theseus, but usually portrays himself in an unheroic manner – as someone helpless, patient, wounded, uxurious. (160)

This portrayal of Plath as the dominant figure to Hughes as passive bystander is a recurrent theme in *Birthday Letters*.

The work of this last decade drew heavily on influential writers from the past, but it also saw the publication of Hughes's last original work, *Birthday Letters*. As T.S. Eliot famously said in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," no new text is a text unto itself; each new text owes a debt to the many texts that came before it and influenced the writer in its creation. Following this theory, every text that Hughes created, in fact every literary text, owed a debt to previous texts either directly or indirectly. For example, Hughes was an avid reader of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry in his youth, and the poems that most inspired Hughes "were not the tormented explorations of the poet's psyche but the exact renderings of the natural world" (Feinstein 25). In reading Hopkins, Hughes absorbed ideas and images that would resurface in his later works. Perhaps Hughes was aware that similarities would be drawn between his poems and the work of Hopkins, or perhaps Hughes himself was unaware of how that influence presented itself in his work. In an interview with Ekbert Faas, Hughes commented on the influence of other writers in his development: "I read Lawrence and Thomas at an impressionable age. I also read Hopkins very closely. But there are superficial influences that show and deep influences that maybe are not so visible. It's a mystery how a writer's imagination is influenced and altered" (203). It could be argued, then, that Plath's influence on Hughes is so deep and profound that he could not recognize it until he wrote *Birthday Letters*.

If *Birthday Letters* cannot be read as a text solely unto itself and owes a debt to previous texts that inspired its author, why then is one influential text given priority over all others? The subject matter of the collection is biographical in nature and directs the reader toward the “text” of Hughes’s life with Plath. *Birthday Letters* is a rumination on suffering and loss that seeks a very private dialogue with the intended audience of the poems, as well as a public response to those who have taken from Hughes the role of author. Writing to this theme, Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) argues that the need for each new generation of writers to look to the past for inspiration is often a source of great anxiety. Bloom believes that the anxiety of influence often results from the new writer’s attempt to find his or her place within the established canon. This approach to influence is classically Freudian because it involves an Oedipal struggle in which the only way for the younger poet to feel secure is to assert himself over the poets of the past. One way that new writers attempt to overcome this anxiety of influence is through an act of poetic misreading or “misprision,” a term Bloom borrows from Lucretius that means to swerve in order to make change in the universe (14). Bloom believes misprision happens when “a poet swerves away from his precursor ... as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves” (14).

Although the anxiety of influence is mainly felt toward writers from the past and not one’s contemporaries, Hughes can, in a sense, be interpreted as suffering from an anxiety of influence regarding Plath and her work. This anxiety is the result of the

influence that Plath's texts have had on the text of Hughes's life and his place within the literary canon. The myth that has been created around Plath and her work has continually re-interpreted not only Plath's life but Hughes's life as well. *Birthday Letters* was the first evidence of Hughes removing the distance or silence that had been characteristic of his public persona. In order to succeed, Hughes was compelled to enter into a dialogue with Plath's poetic representation of him by offering his translation of her work alongside of the Plath Myth. The result of this effort was *Birthday Letters*.

Chapter Two

The Poetry of Ted Hughes

i. The Literary Achievement of Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes died on 28 October 1998, just ten months following the publication of his final collection of original poetry, *Birthday Letters*. Matthew Evans, chairman of Hughes's publisher Faber and Faber, told the press that "[*Birthday Letters*] was a piece of work [Hughes] wanted to get out before he died. He regarded it as being of personal importance. It was the nearest thing to an autobiography" (Lyll 2). Hughes's literary reputation was assured before *Birthday Letters*; a prolific writer of poetry, children's literature, literary criticism, and translations, he had written and published poetry for over forty years. His early interest in poetry was rooted in his West Yorkshire childhood. In an interview conducted in 1970, Hughes credits the regional landscape for much of his inspiration, and especially the local dialect for his decision to become a poet: "Whatever other speech you grow up into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. It makes some things more difficult ... since it's your childhood self there inside the dialect and that is possibly your real self or the core of it. Some things it makes easier. Without it, I doubt if I would ever have written verse" (Faas 202). The publication of Hughes's work in the 1960s helped postwar poetry, particularly the Central European poets. These poets appealed to Hughes because they "had brought their poetry down to such precisions, discriminations and humilities that it is a new thing" (*Winter* 221). He encouraged poets to collaborate with artists as he had with illustrator

Leonard Baskin in *Cave Birds* (1978) and photographer Fay Godwin in *Remains of Elmet* (1979). He inspired children to write poetry by publishing a manual, *Poetry in the Making* (1967), as well as other books and recordings appropriate for a younger audience. He also made poetry more accessible to a wider readership by establishing the small independent Rainbow Press, which sold limited edition volumes for reasonable prices. He was the recipient of several major literary awards, most notably the Whitbread Prize for his last two collections. Just weeks before his death, Hughes was honored with the Queen's Order of Merit, the highest distinction possible for a British citizen (Feinstein 241).

Despite the impressive volume of poetry Hughes created throughout his career, there is to date no critical consensus regarding what is his single best work. The majority of critics value his first three publications, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1960), and *Wodwo* (1967), as well as his last two works, *Tales from Ovid* (1997) and *Birthday Letters* (1998). Hughes's most anthologized works are the animal poems of his early career while the most popular in terms of sales have been his last two publications. An unsigned obituary published in *The Times* on 30 October 1998 emphasizes the popularity of Hughes's early and late achievements:

It has been said that all great works of literature either found a new style or dissolve an old one; that they are, in other words, special cases. The poetry of Ted Hughes is such a special case; its forcefulness and animal vitality injected new life into English poetry. He will be remembered most particularly for the strength of his early work, and for his final, remarkable two books.

This defining comment notwithstanding, according to critics Neil Roberts (*Narrative* 57-69), Keith Sagar (*Laughter* 151-61), and Craig Robinson (1-2), it is the work of the middle period of Hughes's career that will ensure his reputation as a major poet, most notably *Crow* (1970), *Cave Birds* (1975), *Gaudete* (1977), *Moortown* (1979), and *River* (1983). According to Sagar, this period is Hughes's "equivalent of what Shakespeare got into his plays," and these are the works upon which "Hughes's reputation should stand.... These books contain inestimable healing gifts which are Hughes's legacy to us all" (*Laughter* xi).

Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), won a major American poetry award that suddenly propelled him into the literary spotlight. This publication was a dramatic departure from contemporary mainstream poetry largely dominated by the so-called Movement, a group of poets including Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, D.J. Enright, and Philip Larkin. These writers were first anthologized in Robert Conquest's trend-setting collection, *New Lines* (1956). In his introduction, Conquest describes their poems as "free from both mystical and logical compulsions" and their tone as "empirical in its attitude" (xv). The Movement poets sought to remove spiritual or mythological elements from their poetry, elements associated with the early Moderns, and instead focused on everyday events. In an interview with Ekbert Faas, Hughes remarked upon the central Movement poets as having had

enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods,
enough of the id, enough of the Angelic Powers and the heroic efforts to make

new worlds. They'd seen it all turn into death-camps and atomic bombs. All they wanted was to get back into civvies and get home to the wife and kids and for the rest of their lives, not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park. (201)

When comparing Hughes's poetry, the critic Robert B. Shaw described the Movement poets as being careful "not to risk much" whereas Hughes "marshaled a language of nearly Shakespearean resonance to explore themes which were mythic and elemental" (260). The two approaches could not be any more different from one another, yet both belong to the broad category of postwar poetry.

Growing up in England in the 1930s and 1940s, Hughes was obviously influenced by the horror of wartime and by its threatened reappearance during the Cold War. His father had served in the First World War, and Hughes had witnessed firsthand the lasting psychological damage resulting from military service. The reality of Nazi air raids, concentration camps, and the fearsome atomic bomb were defining themes of a generation of poets. In the works of the Movement poets, there is often an ephemeral glimpse of a dark and deadly world that the poet does not wish to explore. A typical Movement poem, hinting at some unseen threat, is Philip Larkin's "At thirty-one, when some are rich":

At thirty-one, when some are rich
And others dead,
I, being neither, have a job instead,
But come each evening back to a high room

Above deep gardenfuls of air, on which

Already has been laid an autumn bloom. (*PLCP* 69)

Larkin's poem seemingly rejects the irrational and unpredictable in favor of the safe and familiar. The speaker comes home each night to a room that protects him from potential danger, but he becomes so engulfed by his sanctuary that he is afraid to let anyone into his life:

...my letters plot no change;

They carry nothing dutiable; they won't

Aspire, astound, establish or estrange. (*PLCP* 69)

No attempt is made to stray from established routines and the poet is defiantly content with the status quo. The letters that "plot no change" hold the promise of predictability in a world that is rational, civilized, and comfortable to the point of being stifling. This poem does not deny the existence of the unpredictable and irrational, but rather it attempts to impose order and caution upon all aspects of life so that the violence of the world can be contained; chaos exists in the world below but not in the "high room / Above..." (*PLCP* 69). In a way, the high room has become a prison for the speaker.

Another example of hinting at danger can be found in Larkin's poem, "At Grass," which shares a similar subject with Hughes's "The Horses." Both poems depict a field of horses and describe the different feelings that the horses evoke in the speaker. For Larkin, the animals conjure an image of a disciplined, ordered world:

... faint afternoons

Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,

Whereby their names were artified

To inlay faded, classic Junes – (*PLCP* 29)

The horses are set “against the sky / Numbers and parasols: outside, / Squadrons of empty cars” (*PLCP* 29). There is a sense of order being imposed on the natural world. Like Larkin’s “room above,” the race organizes and compartmentalizes the external world: “Almanacked, their names live.” The horses “stand at ease, / Or gallop for what must be joy” (*PLCP* 30). The horses behave as part of a regulated army of animals, even in “joy.”

The theme of “At Grass” is quite different from Hughes’s “The Horses,” even though both poems describe a similar scene. Hughes’s poem evokes an immediate sense of distance from the animals. Unlike the horses in Larkin’s poem, these horses are described as impulsive and potentially dangerous. The animals are intimidating in their size and their behaviour:

Huge in the dense grey – ten together –

Megalith-still. They breathed, making no move,

With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,

Making no sound.

I passed: not one snorted or jerked its head.

Grey silent fragments

Of a grey silent world. (*THCP* 22)

The horses are large, imposing animals that intimidate the speaker. They cannot be clearly seen “in the dense grey”; their “tilted hind-hooves” suggest that they could explode into action at any moment. Hughes creates a sense of danger and suspense in his poem by hinting at a barely contained violence. Further, the time of day, “the hour-before-dawn dark” (*THCP* 22), creates a much darker mood than the bright summer afternoon of Larkin’s poem. Each poet also marshals a different application of descriptive language. Larkin’s horses are familiar and their actions follow a militaristic and predictable pattern; order is imposed on the natural world and the horses “stand at ease / Or gallop for what must be joy” (*PLCP* 69). Hughes’s poem, on the other hand, centers on the “huge,” “megalith-still” horses that “[make] no sound.” His descriptive verse creates an image of foreign, hostile animals, “grey silent fragments / Of a grey silent world” (*THCP* 22).

Throughout his career, Hughes explored a range of interests and experimented with various narrative structures. Most relevant for this discussion was his preoccupation with nature, shamanism, and acts of translation. In the early works (*Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal*, and *Wodwo*) nature dominates as theme and metaphor. Many of the poems from these collections contain the vivid animal/nature imagery that first garnered him critical attention. Typical of his generation, Hughes was also taken with the subject of myth-making. Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* was a seminal text in the development of postwar poetry; its emphasis on language and the spiritual nature of its poetic exercises profoundly affected Hughes’s work and a generation of poets disenchanted by the Second World War. Hughes was particularly fascinated by the evolution of myths in human

culture and the possibility of exploring the unconscious through shamanic practice in order to create new myths. A third major theme of Hughes's poetic career is what we might conveniently call translation. As mentioned in chapter one, from the beginning of his career, Hughes was fond of reinterpreting the works of other writers, writing them back into his own words. To him, translation was not simply a rewriting of the original source but an engagement with the source text in a dialogue, "not breaking open a sealed artifact to 'improve' it but participating in what is conceived from the outset as a dialogic process" (Roberts, *Literary* 185). He received much critical acclaim for his last two works for this very reason. *Tales from Ovid* contemporized the work of Ovid, and *Birthday Letters* revisited the very public story of his complex relationship with Sylvia Plath.

ii. Hughes and Nature Poetry

Hughes's first three published books, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1960), and *Wodwo* (1967), share a common interest in the natural world. Although none of these collections exclusively deals with nature, his explorations draw a sharp contrast between wilderness and civilization; at times, he writes from the perspective of the animal in nature, free of any human moral judgments or decision-making dilemmas. Readers like Anthony Thwaite regard Hughes primarily as a nature or pastoral poet (63), seeing his animal imagery and use of landscape as continuing in the tradition of poets such as George Crabbe and William Wordsworth. According to Paul Alpers, pastoral poetry is often misunderstood as an escape to an idyllic past whereas it actually concerns

the lives of common people “and their intensification in situations of separation and loss that can and must be dealt with, but are not to be denied or overcome” (93). Terry Gifford believes that to regard Hughes solely as a pastoral poet would be to deny his philosophy that “culture, human life, animal life, the workings of weather and landscape are parts of an interactive whole” (136). No matter how Hughes’s poetry is labeled, there is no questioning the central role that nature plays in his work.

In “Ted Hughes and Ecology: A Biocentric Vision,” Leonard M. Scigaj argues that Hughes’s poetry held a *biocentric* view since the early years of his career. According to Scigaj, this biocentric vision is “the result of a shift away from the anthropocentrism that dominates most poetry. Hughes does not expect moments of joy and exaltation always to relate to *human* elements of Nature themselves, quite apart from human designs” (164). An effective example of this tendency can be seen in “Hawk Roosting” from *Lupercal*, in which the hawk lists the many tools that nature has given it to hunt its prey. The voice of the hawk boasts,

I kill where I please because it is all mine.

There is no sophistry in my body:

My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death. (*THCP* 69)

The poem rejects the optimism of humanism. The hawk is the result of millennia of evolution: “It took the whole of Creation / To produce my foot, my each feather” (*THCP* 68-69). In this poem, Hughes is attempting to explore the essence of the hawk without

ascribing anthropocentric meaning to its nature or its actions. In the poem, the hawk is designed by nature to kill, not to serve the morality of the human world. Its violent behaviour is neither moral nor amoral; rather, it is the result of the evolutionary processes of nature. Forces that are unavoidable in the natural world, particularly struggle and violent death, run counter to the rational order that humanity seeks to impose on nature. The graphic “tearing off heads” behaviour of the hawk partakes of a larger, more complex biocentric view of the world.

A second example of Hughes’s approach to describing animals can be found in *Lupercal*’s “The Bull Moses.” The speaker of the poem, who had been watching the bull for some time, realizes that the animal

Hadn’t heard of the world, too deep in itself to be called to,
Stood in sleep. He would swing his muzzle at a fly
But the square of sky where I hung, shouting, waving,
Was nothing to him; nothing of our light
Found any reflection in him. (THCP 74)

Clearly, the poet recognizes that the bull’s existence is independent of his own humanity. As much as the speaker of the poem may try to attract its attention or expect it to react to a stimulus in a predictable manner, the bull remains elusive, unresponsive, and profoundly indifferent to the human. The speaker is mildly bewildered by the way the bull neither pauses nor looks to the side, but yet he notices there is “something / Deliberate in his leisure” (THCP 75). The “deliberate” nature of the bull suggests an intent that is unknown to the speaker, an intent that also hints at the speaker’s inability to

understand the animal on its own terms. Even though the bull has the “weight of the sun and the moon and the world hammered / To a ring of brass through his nostrils” (*THCP* 75), there is part of it that cannot be tamed. Despite the “weight” of human order and domestication, the bull’s resistance supports an alternative view of the world.

Hughes never really relaxes this biocentric view of the world. His descriptions of non-human and non-rational characteristics have led some to criticize his poetry for being too violent. Sandie Byrne defends the violence in his poetry, arguing that those “aspects of animal behavior which we might find distasteful or disturbing, or even horrific, are celebrated for their rightness; their truthfulness to the animals’ nature, and to the truth of Nature in its endless drama of struggle, death and rebirth” (85). Hughes has responded to the allegation of excessive violence in his poetry by describing the differing degrees of violence, “One can use the word ‘violence’ to describe a passion, or a cavorting horse, or a dancer, and be perfectly well understood to mean something positive and exciting admiration.... The real negative vigour of the word now comes to the fore in the idea of *violation*” (*Winter* 253-254). Many critics have linked the violence found within Hughes’s poetry with the image of him created by the Plath Myth but according to Hughes, the violence in his poetry is not excessive or offensive because his poetry describes the “sacred law” of survival: “Under this law [the animals] are not ‘violent,’ in the negative sense that their physical vehemence incurs guilt and blame and unacceptably endangers the rule of law. On the contrary, [the animals] are innocent, obedient, and their energy reaffirms the divine law that created them as they are” (*Winter* 259). Exploring three poems spanning the length of his career, we can see evidence of Hughes’s complex

understanding of the natural world. The treatment of the subject may change, but his essential philosophy remains. In *Lupercal's* "Thrushes" (1960), *River's* "October Salmon" (1983), and "Epiphany" from *Birthday Letters* (1998), each published at least fifteen years apart, we can fruitfully trace the poet's approach to this subject.

In "Thrushes," Hughes focuses on the actions of these birds during a hunt. The thrushes display,

No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares,

No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab

And a ravening second. (*THCP* 82)

The thrush is described in terms similar to the hawk in "Hawk Roosting." It is designed by nature to hunt and kill with "efficiency which / Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it / Or obstruction deflect" (*THCP* 82). The thrushes are "terrifying" in the manner in which they hunt their prey. Their movements dramatize the struggle between life and death, a struggle that would be quickly lost in the natural world if the thrushes were to hesitate or become engaged in "head-scratching." In the last stanza, Hughes contrasts the instinctual actions of the birds with the careful actions of humanity:

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,

Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,

Carving at a tiny ivory ornament

For years: his act worships itself— (*THCP* 83)

The man's actions lack the feverish immediacy of the thrushes as he sits "outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk." The man fantasizes about killing in an act that "worships

itself.” He does not need to kill for survival like the birds do; instead, he glorifies the act. By premeditating the death of another, the man violates the “sacred law” according to Hughes, whereas the birds “kill within the law and their killing is a sacrament in this sense. It is not an act of violence but of law” (*Winter* 262).

Another useful example of Hughes’s view of the animal world is *River*’s “October Salmon,” a meditation on aging. The subject of the poem is a salmon that has reached the end of its life after fulfilling the role nature had intended for it. Its youthful energy has been spent, and now

In the October light

He hangs there, patched with leper-cloths.

Death has already dressed him

In her clownish regimentals, her badges and decorations,

Mapping the completion of his service,

His face a ghoul-mask, a dinosaur of senility, and his whole body

A fungoid anemone of canker – (*THCP* 678)

The detailed description of the dying salmon as a war hero embodies the violent energy that is typical of Hughes. However, it does not die violently; it has lived through its “April power” to the “completion of his service” (*THCP* 678). Like the birds in “Thrushes” or “Hawk Roosting,” the salmon has lived according to the sacred law that governs the natural world. In a review of *River*, Helen Vendler pays special attention to “October Salmon”: “The tonality of ‘epic poise’ is new in Hughes. ‘October Salmon’ was

first published in Hughes's *New Selected Poems* (1982), but the tonality it embodies recurs throughout *River*, struggling for its poise against Hughes's equally recurring, and more typical, violence and victimization" (207). The violence that often appears in Hughes's work is tempered by calm in this poem; although violence continues to play a major role in his work, there is now also room for peace and reflection.

A late appearance of nature imagery occurs in *Birthday Letters*. In "Epiphany" Hughes unexpectedly places a fox cub² in an urban setting. The speaker is surprised and delighted to see the animal for sale in the city, and he is tempted to buy it. The poem's main focus is the speaker's struggle over whether or not to purchase a wild animal; the fox in this case represents the full wildness of the natural world:

What would we do with an unpredictable,
Powerful, bounding fox?
The long-mouthed, flashing temperament?
That necessary nightly twenty miles
And that vast hunger for everything beyond us?
How could we cope with its cosmic derangements
Whenever we moved? (THCP 1116)

The speaker is engaged in an internal struggle, but he is aware that the "otherness" of the fox would cause problems in his domestic life. The focus of the poem is not so much the fox cub itself as it is the relationship between the speaker and his wife, and the role that

² It is no coincidence that Hughes chose a fox cub to represent a failed test that destroys his marriage: "An animal I never succeeded in keeping alive is the fox. I was always frustrated..." (Hughes, *Making* 19).

something as wild and unpredictable as a fox cub would play in an already busy life. The speaker wonders only of his wife's reaction if he were to bring home a cub:

... what would you think? How would we fit it

Into our crate of space? With the baby? (*THCP* 1116)

By deciding against his instinct to bring the fox cub home, the speaker feels as though he has failed a major test in his marriage. Erica Wagner sees a pattern running throughout *Birthday Letters* in which “an animal appear[s] out of context, out of nowhere, like the owl of ‘The Owl’ or the bat of ‘Child’s Park’ or the snake of ‘Portraits’... ‘Epiphany’ explores the mysterious turning point in a relationship ... that something has changed, something is over” (126). Rhetorical questions signal the speaker’s uncertainty concerning his domestic responsibilities and reveal his feelings of imprisonment within the marriage. The fox cub offers him the opportunity to validate the marriage, but instead he “walked on / As if out of my own life” (*THCP* 1117). At the time the speaker does not realize the significance of the moment:

If I had grasped that whatever comes with a fox

Is what tests a marriage and proves it a marriage –

I would not have failed the test. Would you have failed it?

But I failed. Our marriage had failed. (*THCP* 1117)

The speaker’s refusal to purchase the fox cub and his rhetorical questions suggest that neither he nor his wife realize the underlying tensions that exist within the marriage. The fox cub is not the cause of the marriage’s failure; rather, it foreshadows its dissolution.

These three poetic examples show how representations of the natural world may change, but Hughes's biocentric vision remains constant. The thrushes, the salmon, and the fox cub all serve to reinforce the idea that humanity is one part of the larger and more complex systems of the natural world. The animals in Hughes's poems often move or act with a purpose quite removed from the human social order. From *The Hawk in the Rain* to *Birthday Letters*, Hughes has consistently looked to nature for inspiration. In his early career, his primary focus was external, drawing on nature to create poetic works, but in the 1970s a change occurred in his approach to writing poetry. This change resulted from a new interest in shamanism. His great respect for Shakespeare, Keats, Yeats and Eliot inspired him to try his hand at shamanism, and so in turn it ended up having a profound effect on his development as a poet. Hughes believed that all great poems were the result of shamanic experience: "In a shamanizing society, *Venus and Adonis*, some of Keats's longer poems, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, *Ash Wednesday*, would all qualify their authors for the magic drum" (*Winter* 58). The major collections of the middle period, *Crow*, *Cave Birds*, and *Gaudete*, likely would not have been possible without his new interest in shamanism; as well, later collections such as *River*, *Moortown Diary*, and *Birthday Letters* also benefit from this interest.

iii. Ted Hughes and Shamanism

Shamanism is an ancient, spiritual practice shared by many societies in the world. Anthropologist Joan Halifax defines it as "an ecstatic religious complex of particular and fixed elements with a specific ideology that has persisted through millennia and is found

in many different cultural settings” (3). The shaman must maintain “balance in the human community as well as in the relationships between the community and the gods or divine forces that direct the life of the culture” (Halifax 21). The shaman must travel to the spirit world of the unconscious and return with something necessary for the survival of the society. In an essay on the subject, Hughes describes how a shaman is called to his vocation: “the most common form of election [to the role of shaman] comes from the spirits themselves: they approach the man in a dream” (*Winter* 57). This comment immediately brings to mind the famous story told by Hughes of a burnt fox appearing to him in a dream and advising him to change his life path (*Winter* 8-9). The story of an animal or spirit choosing Hughes reflects his interest in a shamanic calling to poetry; in effect, the spirits chose him. Sandie Byrne states that Hughes “does not present himself as a shaman, nor are his poems ventriloquial shamanic utterances from the other world, but they do share something of the archetypes and forms of shamanic belief and ritual” (125). The poems descend into an inner world populated by mythical creatures and beings that the poet must confront in order to create.

Hughes continued to rely on the natural world for inspiration when he began to implement shamanic practices in the 1970s, beginning with the publication of *Crow* (1970), *Cave Birds* (1975), and *Gaudete* (1977). The poems from this period onward are not strictly speaking descriptions of animal behaviour, but rather a dramatic retelling of foundational stories found in many cultures. Creation myths and metaphysical journeys of self-discovery are two dominant themes of these collections. In their critical writings,

Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts helpfully explore the unexpected development in Hughes's poetry that occurred early in his middle period:

A distinguishing characteristic of shamanic experience is the exceptionally vivid, coherent and shared forms taken by the unconscious life. The shaman can thus be seen as a man who, having experienced and overcome terrifying inward experience, is no longer at the mercy of death, of his animal self, of his unconscious in general and who through a kind of artistic performance, shares this mastery with the community. (20)

Images of animals and the violent struggle of the natural world still have a central role in these middle-period collections, but they are not the poetic manifestations of the detached observer; they are poetic expressions of Hughes's psyche.

One of Hughes's most notable works from this period, *Crow*, figures an animal as its protagonist. However, the character of Crow is not a bird like the ones found in "The Hawk in the Rain," "Hawk Roosting," or "Thrushes." With *Crow*, Hughes is able to "deepen the inward exploration far enough that it begins to take on the structural hardness of a mythology" (Bishop 109). Crow is an archetype drawn heavily from the popular trickster figure, found in native cultures in particular, whose role it is to bring chaos and disorder to humanity. The trickster figure often meddles with creation and behaves in a manner that challenges the authority of the Creator. In his seminal work *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956), Paul Radin explains, "Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function in an archaic society or rather the function of his mythology, of the tales told about him, is to add

disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted" (185). Throughout *Crow*, Hughes positions Crow as the trickster who is meddling with God's creation, causing chaos. In "A Childish Prank," for example, Hughes places Crow in the Garden of Eden while God is creating humanity:

Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls,

Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert

On the flowers of Eden.

God pondered.

The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep.

Crow laughed. (*THCP* 215-216)

Crow then interferes with the creation of humanity by introducing irrational impulses into the human body.

Man awoke being dragged across the grass.

Woman awoke to see him coming.

Neither knew what had happened.

God went on sleeping.

Crow went on laughing. (*THCP* 216)

That “God went on sleeping” suggests a grand, cosmic indifference, permitting the trickster to affect human life. Indeed, Crow’s laughter at the end of the poem is a regular occurrence in the *Crow* collection. Often, Crow is described as laughing, smiling or eating, seemingly oblivious to or perhaps mocking the seriousness of his chaotic surroundings. This attitude indicates that the collection’s “key note is one of dissonance rather than of harmony” (Bentley 44).

For critics such as Keith Sagar, this exploration of the unconscious through poetry establishes a link to an earlier mode of communication, one that has not been dulled by the separation of late humanity from the natural world. This new approach for Hughes does not mean that he abandons the imagery that has come to be associated with his work, but rather his poetry continues to develop “from an early reliance on external nature to a greater metaphysical assurance and the creation of a distinctive imaginative world” (Gifford and Roberts 11). While the early poems describe the natural world and may be interpreted as describing the inner world of humanity, *Crow* and subsequent works depict an entirely imaginary world (Gifford and Roberts 11-26).

Unlike *Crow*, which focuses on the chaotic actions of the trickster figure, or *Gaudete*, which describes an incomplete shaman’s journey, *Cave Birds* explores a complete shamanic experience, including a journey to the underworld, a confrontation with often terrifying spirits, and an eventual return or rebirth in a new form. The original publication of the collection included drawings of mythological birds by American sculptor and artist Leonard Baskin on the facing page, which contributed to each poem’s meaning. In discussing the subject of *Cave Birds*, Hughes explains that “the poems plot

the course of a symbolic drama, concerning disintegration and re-integration, with contrapuntal roles played by birds and humans" (THCP 1199). *Cave Birds* is generally regarded as Hughes's most dense and complex poetry because it borrows images from various mythological sources such as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Johann Valentin Andreae's *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*, Plato's *Phaedo*, Jung's writings on alchemy, Farud Ud-din Attar's Persian epic *Conference of Birds*, and Orphic rituals (Roberts, *Literary* 114). However, although a familiarity with these texts would enhance a reading of *Cave Birds*, it is not a prerequisite to an understanding of the larger story of judgment and redemption.

The protagonist of the collection is forced to stand trial twice for crimes he committed, first in the real world and then in the underworld. In the real world he is found guilty and sentenced to death, but instead of dying he finds himself in the underworld. An important aspect of the shaman's journey is accepting death and allowing oneself to be overtaken by spirits, which can also be interpreted as Hughes's reconciliation with Plath's death. The same is true of the unnamed hero of *Cave Birds*; the protagonist's death is "analogous to the 'fundamental poetic event' that Hughes finds at the heart of shamanistic practice, a practice that in turn informs the pattern of imaginative death, disintegration and resurrection mapped in *Cave Birds*" (Bentley 90). Following his guilty verdict and subsequent execution, the protagonist accepts death and disintegration in an act that requires letting go of both rationality and ego. In "The Knight" he must willingly release himself, both in body and in mind, to begin the shamanic journey:

He has surrendered everything.

Now he kneels. He is offering up his victory.

Unlacing his steel.

In front of him are the common wild stones of the earth—

The first and last altar... (*THCP* 426)

This physical death then leads to a journey through the underworld where he must confront not only the beings that inhabit it but also his own past transgressions. The hero is held accountable for his mistakes in life, while the journey through the underworld symbolizes an eventual acceptance of guilt for those wrongdoings. Acknowledgment of guilt is a necessary step for the hero's reintegration.

In "The Risen" the movement towards resurrection begins. Hughes chooses "the full-fledged emergence of a Horus" (*THCP* 1199), the falcon god of Egyptian mythology, to represent the completion of the shamanic journey through the underworld and the hero's resurrection. The falcon

... stands, filling the doorway

In the shell of earth.

He lifts wings, he leaves the remains of something,

A mess of offal, muddled as an afterbirth. (*THCP* 439)

In this new form, the protagonist is difficult to see. He is described as slipping “behind the world’s brow / As music escapes its skull, its clock and its skyline” and “[w]hen he soars, his shape / Is a cross, eaten by light, / On the Creator’s face” (*THCP* 439). The elusive nature of the falcon signifies that it is somehow different and separate from the physical world as a result of undergoing the transformation from man to bird. The impurities that had been a part of the man are stripped away and what remains, in resurrected form, is something that transcends the normal boundaries of the world; the hero has successfully completed the “alchemical experiment in which Matter is transformed into Spirit” (Bishop 201). The resurrection in a new form is analogous to the emergence of the shaman from a journey into the spirit world. Unlike *Crow, Cave Birds* ends on a note of optimism for which “Hughes mutes the elements of pure Tricksterism and survival and concentrates on that of personal transformation, making his protagonist set out in mental error and undergo correction” (Robinson 56).

Keith Sagar also associates Hughes’s work during the middle period with shamanic rituals. By drawing upon his unconscious in so profound and specific a manner, Hughes “performs a function essential to the race, a function analogous to that performed in more ‘primitive’ culture by the shaman, whose function is to make the dangerous journey, on behalf of his society, into the spirit world, which is to say into his unconscious” (*Art* 3). Gifford and Roberts map out the progression of this shamanic approach:

In *Crow* Hughes uses the poem sequence ... and some of the imaginative strategies of primitive myth to develop his metaphysical inquiry. In *Gaudete*,

through the experience of a somewhat paranormal human being, he extends his investigation into the relations between the animal self and the rest of the natural world. In both works the mother-goddess who has always been a part of his imaginative world becomes part of the expression. In the third and greatest of his “mythical” works, *Cave Birds*, he finds a form to embody the “drama of unconsciousness.” (80-81)

For Hughes, the exploration of myth is expressed through the persona of the shaman, who represents a link to a more biocentric world in which humanity is not at the center. In this alternative view, the shaman maintains humanity’s connection with the natural world by acting as medicine-man or storyteller, and by journeying into the realm of the unconscious, a realm often populated with frightening images, where “the altered, shamanic self that results from this [journey] had radically altered perceptions and is regarded as open to, or entering, the world of spirits and / or the world of animals” (Byrne 125). As we have seen, Hughes chooses “a Horus,” part animal and part human, to characterize his resurrected hero in *Cave Birds*. In Egyptian mythology, Horus is represented as being both man and falcon. This combination of animal and human traits accords with with shamanistic ideals of the integration of the human with the animal/spirit worlds. Horus transcends both the physical and spiritual realms. He is not bound to either; this is also the goal of the shaman, to be able to move freely between the physical and the spiritual and yet to be bound to neither.

Hughes’s shift of focus from the external or physical world to the psychic or internal is a critical step in his development as a poet, and one essential to the creation of

Birthday Letters. Although Hughes never labels himself as a shaman, it is tempting to see him assuming this role. Images of animals and violence carry over from the earlier collections, but Hughes's thematic and philosophical focus clearly shifts. The collection is an example of Hughes's shamanic approach to writing poetry in so far as it attempts to open a dialogue with Plath, to communicate with her spirit. Like the shaman, whose spiritual communications are often performed for the benefit of the community, Hughes presents his spiritual communications in a very public manner in the publication of *Birthday Letters*. By combining his examination of violence in his nature poetry with explorations of disorder unlocked by shamanic practice, Hughes is able to write about the emotional story of his life with Plath. To engage with her on both a private and public level, since their relationship existed in both realms, he in effect performs a translation of her work by openly borrowing images and lines from her poetry to create his new, vivid text, *Birthday Letters*.

iv. Hughes and Translation

The act of translation, by its nature, is an act of interpretation or, more accurately, reinterpretation. The most common understanding of translation is "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text" (Newmark 5). The quality of the translation depends heavily on the interpreter's ability to understand the source text in both its basic syntactic language as well as idioms common to that language. The translator not only must know the mechanics of how the language functions, but also must be "competent to write [his or her] own language dexterously,

clearly, economically and resourcefully” (Newmark 3). Throughout his career Hughes had been an enthusiast of translating poetry from one language to another, even though he was not always fluent in the source language he was translating. Neil Roberts has studied Hughes’s translations and he noticed that Hughes’s faithfulness to the original source text varied according to what he was translating: “Hughes ‘translated’ from Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, German, Hungarian, Hebrew, Russian, and Latin. I put the word in quotation marks here to indicate that Hughes’s relationship to the original texts that he rendered varied considerably. He was not a polyglot” (Roberts, *Literary* 179). When translating classical texts he wrote “versions” that were more liberal with word choice and structure; when translating contemporary works, Hughes strictly “adhered to a principle of literalness” (180).

In 1964, Hughes co-founded the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation* with Daniel Weissbort, hoping to introduce new and exciting international poets, such as Janos Pilinszky, Misoslav Holub, Vosko Popa, and Martin Soresca, into the English poetry scene. Most of these poets were Eastern Europeans who were struggling in their life and poetry to recover from the aftermath of war. In his introduction to Vosko Popa’s *Collected Poems* (1969), Hughes congratulates “the attempt these poets have made to record man’s awareness of what is being done to him, by his own institutions and by history, and to record along with the suffering their inner creative transcendence of it” (*Winter* 220-21). These poets sparked a lifelong interest in Hughes to translate the work of other writers, both classical to contemporary.

Hughes's first major published translation was his version of Seneca's *Oedipus* in 1969. He had a gift for translating by rejuvenating texts "into a powerful language of his own, marked by stylized repetitions and a deliberate avoidance of syntactic connections" (Feinstein 167). He had translated the Eastern European poets for *Modern Poetry in Translation*, but this was the first time that he translated an established and widely read text in which he modified the language to create his new version of the story, exploring characters that were "more primitive than aboriginals ... a spider people, scuttling among hot stones" (quoted in Shaw 268). These characters, and the environment into which Hughes placed them, were "in contrast to the more rationally distanced approach to the myth in Sophocles, to the Greek's conception of a 'radiant moral world'" (Shaw 268). Even at the earliest stages in his lifelong work with translation, Hughes was not only translating a source text, but also reinterpreting it through his own poetic vision. The new text, while derived from the source, does not repeat the source; rather it expresses the source narrative in a completely different fashion. When considering the late example of Hughes's translation of a fragment of the Middle English poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Clive Wilmer observes that "Hughes was not so much translating as modernizing a work in his own language, though doing so with such concentration and sympathy, that the result is little less than a major modern poem" (2). This revitalization of the existing source text is characteristic of Hughes's approach to translation.

Interestingly, as his health declined in the 1990s, Hughes's poetic translations increased dramatically. The late 1990s saw the publication of his versions of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* (1995), Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1996),

Tales from Ovid (1997), Racine's *Phèdre* (1998), and posthumously *The Oresteia of Aeschylus* (1999) and Euripides's *Alcestis* (1999). The bestknown of these volumes is his version of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, *Tales from Ovid*. This work was well received by critics and praised not only as an excellent translation but also as a reinterpretation and reinvigoration of the existing text. In her review of the collection, Phoebe Pettingell describes *Tales from Ovid* as a work that "hovers between translation and adaptation. Certain passages – such as the horrific ride of the boy Phaethon across the heavens, unable to control Apollo's chariot of the sun – make the ancient cosmology come alive for contemporary readers" (14). She goes on to praise the collection, writing that "the Ovid tales have drawn from Hughes some of his best writing thus far" (15).

This skill of both translating and essentially reinterpreting an established text marks one of Hughes's major achievements. Susan Bassnett reads *Birthday Letters* as a companion text to Plath's poetry. She interprets the collection "not only as an instrument that furthers understanding of the life and work of Sylvia Plath, but also as a kind of translation of Plath's own writing" (Bassnett 139). By drawing on the words of Plath's poems and memories of his life with her, Hughes transforms these experiences into a new collection of poems. Indeed, *Birthday Letters* transmutes Plath's words into new poems in which Hughes is able to express both his great love for his wife and the difficulties they experienced in their life together. Bassnett describes *Birthday Letters* as "both an original collection of startlingly personal works, and a translation of the work of another poet, a translation that, as all good translations must, reconstructs and reexamines the texts that provide the point of departure" (139-40). It is this reexamination of Plath's

texts, this translation of her works in the creation of a new text that has led to the widespread interest surrounding *Birthday Letters*.

The three key elements discussed in this chapter, nature imagery, shamanism, and translation, are frequent and important aspects of Hughes's published work. His final accomplishment, *Birthday Letters*, incorporates all three to produce a work that marries animal/nature imagery to explorations of myth and mythological frameworks to provide a translation, or retelling, of his life with Plath and of Plath's poems. It follows, then, that an awareness of these three elements and their development throughout Hughes's career is essential to understanding the full context of *Birthday Letters*, which draws heavily from each to form its thematic and narrative structure. Largely, *Birthday Letters* functions as a translation of Plath's work, borrowing lines and images from her texts. It fuses the nature imagery that has been an integral component of Hughes's poetic work with a shamanic approach that allows Hughes to explore themes drawn from his unconscious. The shamanic approach to the creation of *Birthday Letters* facilitates a connection with Plath and creates a "point of departure" (Bassnett 140) from which the shamanic interaction with Plath's spirit can begin. This interaction results in a reinterpretation or translation of the source text and in the creation of a new text that enables Hughes to open a dialogue not only with the text but with Plath herself.

Chapter 3

Translating Sylvia Plath in *Birthday Letters*

i. Reclaiming the Role of Author

For thirty-five years Ted Hughes maintained a stoic silence regarding his life with Plath, but on 29 January 1998 he stunned the literary world by publishing *Birthday Letters* in which, for the first time, he openly drew upon his life with Plath for poetic material. The collection functions as both a private and public text in that it addresses two distinct, yet very different, audiences. On a private level it addresses Plath not as the famous poet but as Hughes's wife, and the subject matter is drawn from their private experiences. Many of these experiences, however, were first described by Plath in her writings, most notably in her journals and the *Ariel* poems. While the collection allows Hughes to enter into a dialogue with Plath on a private level, it also addresses the widely public discourse that has arisen surrounding Plath in the decades since her death. This discourse, already identified in this thesis as the Plath Myth, has reinterpreted Plath's poetry through the biographical details of her life and subsequently reinterpreted Hughes's life as well. To engage the Plath Myth on a public level, Hughes had to look to the original source of the myth – Plath's poetry.

Hughes revealed his reasons for maintaining his silence about Plath over the years in letters written to Plath biographer Anne Stevenson and well-known poetry critic Al Alvarez. These comments also speak to his reasons for writing and publishing *Birthday*

Letters, and, much like the collection itself, they reflect both private and public motivations. In the letter to Stevenson, Hughes expresses his desire to “recapture for myself, if I can, the privacy of my own feelings and conclusions about Sylvia, and to remove them from contamination by anybody else’s” (Malcolm 142). The reference to “contamination” indicates Hughes’s belief that the evolving Plath Myth had become so pervasive in the public domain that it had even altered his own private memories. The letter to Alvarez continues this discussion, as Hughes states: “it is infuriating for me to see my private experiences and feelings re-invented for me, in that crude, bland, unanswerable way, and interpreted and published as official history” (Malcolm 125). It is clear from these letters that Hughes feels as if he has lost even the right to be the author of his own life. Hughes comments further on his frustration in a letter to Jacqueline Rose:

Critics established the right to say whatever they pleased about the dead. It is an absolute power, and the corruption that comes with it, very often, is an atrophy of the moral imagination. They move onto the living because they can no longer feel the difference between the living and the dead. They extend over the living that licence to say whatever they please, to ransack their psyche and reinvent them however they please. (Malcolm 46-47)

Effectively, Hughes had become the reader of his life rather than its author. *Birthday Letters* is an attempt to regain control of the story of his life from the hands of critics by “reinscribing himself as author, not audience” (Churchwell 132). Hughes admits that he bears some responsibility for losing the role of authorship. By refusing to write about or speak openly of his life with Plath, he granted critics the freedom to interpret the evolving

Plath Myth without input from him; by remaining silent he became part of the audience.

In a letter to Anne Stevenson, Hughes comments on this reversal of roles:

I know too that the alternative – remaining silent – makes me a projection post for every worst suspicion. That my silence seems to confirm every accusation and fantasy. I preferred it, on the whole, to allowing myself to be dragged out into the bull-ring and teased and pricked and goaded into vomiting up every detail of my life with Sylvia. (Malcolm 141)

With *Birthday Letters*, Hughes is finally able to break his silence concerning his life with Plath by revisiting her work. As I have indicated, when Hughes takes a line or image from Plath and creates an entirely new text he is essentially performing an act of translation. Although they both spoke the same language, Hughes has made it clear in *Birthday Letters* that communication between the couple was often strained because signals were missed or misread. To understand, now, his wife's intended meaning, Hughes must attempt to decode these signals through the reexamination of private experiences and the exploration of Plath's textual legacy. Throughout the collection, Hughes frequently asks rhetorical questions such as "What had I done?" (THCP 1136) and "Was that a happy day?" (THCP 1084). His memories had assigned a certain significance to an event, but after carefully reading where Plath had described the same scene, he realizes that for her the event held an entirely different meaning. To understand her work and her perspective, he must attempt to translate Plath's language into one he can comprehend.

In the collection, Hughes confesses that it was not until years after Plath's death that he began to decode her writing. In "Visit" he is stunned, while reading Plath's journals, to see how differently his wife's thoughts and emotions were from what he believed them to be at the time:

Ten years after your death
I meet on a page of your journal, as never before,
The shock of your joy
When you heard of that. Then the shock
Of your prayers. And under those prayers your panic ... (THCP 1048)

The surprise that Hughes describes is the realization that much of what Plath thought and felt remained unknown to him during their marriage, the very thoughts and emotions that gave rise to *Ariel*. This poem also reveals that because Hughes did not fully understand the subject matter of *Ariel*, he allowed the work to be published without foreseeing the effect that the collection would have on his life. The language, while unmistakably dark and violent, contained coded meanings that Hughes did not understand. In the short essay, "Publishing Sylvia Plath" (1971), Hughes comments directly on Plath's coded language: "I would have cut out 'Daddy' if I'd been in time (there are quite a few things more important than giving the world great poems). I would have cut out others if I thought they would ever be decoded" (*Winter* 167). The reference to "decoding" the meaning of the poems suggests that Hughes was aware of the presence of coded language that went into their creation; however, it is clear from "Visit" that he had not fully deciphered Plath's work. He ends the poem by stating:

I look up – as if to meet your voice
With all its urgent future
That has burst in on me. Then look back
At the book of printed words.
You are ten years dead. It is only a story.
Your story. My story. (THCP 1049)

“My story” indicates Hughes’s belief that Plath’s work has given rise to a story that has come to be accepted by many as *the* story of not only her life but his as well. The many images that she created are not always inspired by reality, but those images have become more than memorable lines of verse; now they are “Your story. My Story” (THCP 1049).

As a translation, *Birthday Letters* examines many aspects of Hughes’s life with Plath; issues of gender, politics, economics, cultural identity, depression, and various other topics are explored to some extent in the collection. Two areas examined closely in this chapter are the cultural differences that existed between Hughes and Plath and the representation of Plath’s depression in the figure of “Daddy.” This discussion does not focus on the much-traveled theme of depression in Plath’s poetry as such, but rather how *Birthday Letters* reinterprets this theme. As mentioned in my introduction, the cultural differences that existed between them have become a metaphor for the communication barrier. Throughout *Birthday Letters*, Hughes makes frequent reference to Plath’s “Americanness,” which he continually places in opposition to his own “Britishness.” Another frequently examined aspect of Plath’s work is the image of the Daddy figure in *Ariel*. This figure has been interpreted in many different ways by critics, but in *Birthday*

Letters the appearance of the Daddy figure coincides with the appearance of Plath's well-documented depression which predates her relationship with Hughes. He paints Daddy as both tempting and terrifying, much the way Plath found her depression. Hughes constructs the character of "Daddy" to personify what he sees as the emergence of Plath's depression in her texts and their life together. Although many critics have written on cultural difference or depression in Plath's work, Hughes attempts to recapture his own private reminiscence of his life with her. This reinterpretation not only produces a new text but it also directs the reader to reread and reconsider Plath's source text.

The question still remains how or, perhaps more accurately, to what end is Hughes reclaiming the role of author through *Birthday Letters*? In taking a line, image or event and using it as a catalyst in the creation of a new poem, he is creating a "point of departure" (Bassnett 140) from which he can modify the role he plays within "the story." His goal is not to silence Plath or to correct inaccuracies in her texts, but rather to have a voice in determining how his own life is interpreted. Sarah Churchwell believes that Hughes is seeking to "re-master his own public identity, which was mastered in Plath's always antecedent poetic representation of (what has been interpreted as) him. However, he must accept the terms set by her writing in order to do so" (124). He must accept the representation of himself generated by Plath's writings first in order to confront it and rewrite himself into the story. What Hughes accomplishes in *Birthday Letters* is the creation of a new version of the story in which he is not the "man in black with a Meinkampf look" (SPCP 224), and not so closely bound with the Daddy figure that they have become inseparable. What Hughes successfully creates is an image of himself that is

flawed and imperfect, but above all human. He “lets go of blame and rage” (Wagner, E. 193) at losing authorship of his life and admits to making mistakes during his marriage to Plath. But the tone of the collection is neither self-effacing nor accusatory; it does not accept blame nor place it, but rather it attempts to explore what in their relationship gave rise to the subject matter of Plath’s texts.

ii. Cultural Differences

The theme of cultural identity plays a significant role in *Birthday Letters*. Throughout the collection, Hughes makes frequent reference to Plath’s American heritage and often interprets aspects of her behavior as resulting from this difference. From the very first poem, we are introduced to Plath’s “exaggerated American / Grin for the cameras” (THCP 1045). This description of Plath as showy and loud at Cambridge reverberates in *Birthday Letters* poems “Caryatids (2),” “Your Paris,” and “The Rabbit Catcher.” Plath herself is often described physically as American; she has an “American grin” (THCP 1045), “long, perfect, American legs” (THCP 1052), and her body itself becomes the American continent in “18 Rugby Street”:

You were a new world. My new world.

So this is America, I marvelled.

Beautiful, beautiful America! (THCP 1058)

By emphasizing Plath’s Americanness throughout *Birthday Letters*, Hughes reminds us of the distance between them. At first this difference was attractive, exotic, and appealing. In hindsight, however, he sees that it is also an unbridgeable gap. Ultimately,

of course, the distance between them was never bridged and their relationship eventually dissolved.

In her writing, Plath places less overt emphasis on cultural identity than Hughes in his writing, although it does arise as a topic of conversation occasionally. When asked in an interview by Peter Orr about “straddling the Atlantic,” Plath describes herself in this way:

Well I think that as far as language goes I'm an American. I'm afraid I'm an American. My accent's American. My way of talk is an American way of talk. I'm an old fashioned American. (168)

Orr himself disputes Plath's response a few moments later in the interview, when he argues that “when we listen to a poem like ‘Daddy,’ which talks about Dachau and Auschwitz and *Mein Kampf*, I have the impression that this is the sort of poem that a real American could not have written, because it doesn't mean so much, these names don't mean so much, on the other side of the Atlantic, do they?” (Orr 169). Plath does not seem to appreciate her complicated position as an American woman married to a British man in the 1950s. The time she spent in England had certainly changed her view of the world and also enriched her vocabulary and language: “What Plath seems to have been experiencing was the realization of the vast differences between American and English culture. Ostensibly similar, in view of the common language, the two cultures are distanced by vast unbridgeable differences” (Bassnett 10). Both Plath and Hughes held strong beliefs that resulted from their respective cultural experiences. Plath remained as faithful as she could to the America she grew up in and to the “Horatio Alger ethic of the

era: happiness is the right of everyone, to be achieved through hard work; success is the reward for work; and fame and money are the measure of success" (Stevenson 7).

Tensions between America and England recur throughout Plath's adult life. The political climate of the Cold War is usually ignored when considering her writing; however, Robin Peel has conducted a full-length study entitled *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (2002), which highlights this very political reality. In his book, Peel carefully reexamines Plath's poems, letters, journals, visual art, and even the media sources, such as newspapers and films, she would have consumed. Peel describes the distressing effect that the imminent threat of a nuclear fall-out had on Plath and "any sensitive, intelligent human being, any man or woman with young children, [was] likely to feel anxious about the damage being done to the environment and ... by a rise in international tension" (24). Plath claims to be a "rather political person" (Orr 169) in an interview from October 1962, and Peel convincingly demonstrates the appearance of "the textual environment, the physical and cultural environments, and the global political environment" (24) in Plath's writing. Plath's "transatlanticism," as Tracy Brain labels her loyalty to both American and British policies, is revised by Peel to be actually a "twin alienation":

Plath's most powerful writing was produced in England in an environment that seemed extraordinarily alien to her. But, not only did England appear alien, as we know from her own remarks and Hughes's recently published *Birthday Letters* poems, America itself became defamiliarized. Plath came to see her own country

differently as she absorbed some of the pacifist dissent of English liberal political activism. (22)

Stranded between two cultures, Plath's vision of herself became even more internalized. By feeling alienated from her native America as well as from her adoptive England, she became increasingly obsessed with her own personal experience. Interestingly, Plath has revealed her thoughts on writing about one's own experiences: "I think that personal experience is very important, but it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (Orr 169-170). Plath's complex, variable view of the world enabled her to write from multiple perspectives.

When translating Plath's work, Hughes had to take into account the many differences that existed between them. Hughes was an Englishman who held very strong beliefs about the natural world and humanity's place in it. He had lived in England during the Second World War and experienced firsthand its effects on both people and the natural world. Plath came from a very different cultural background. Postwar America surely suffered from lasting psychological scars on those who had fought; however, the country itself bore few visible remnants and experienced a time of postwar economic prosperity. Since Plath's formative years occurred during this period, the prosperity and optimism of America at the time clearly had an impact on her development as a writer. Although Hughes makes frequent references to Plath's "Americanness" in *Birthday Letters*, he does not focus as much on his own "Britishness," implying that he is setting

Plath's socioeconomic background in opposition to his own. Two *Birthday Letters* poems that examine such differences are "Your Paris" and "The Rabbit Catcher."

In "Your Paris," Hughes explores the role cultural perspective played in their relationship. The poem's opening line, "Your Paris, I thought, was American" (*THCP* 1065), immediately places cultural identity as a central theme within the poem and creates division between the newlyweds. It draws attention not only to Plath's American heritage, but also to Hughes's awareness and presumptions about the cultural differences that existed between them. The poem begins with the image of Hughes, who, like Paris, is "a post-war utility survivor" (*THCP* 1065), distancing himself from Plath, who is little more than a tourist. Hughes had lived with the visible aftermath of war and had witnessed its effect on the national identity of England. The scars and bullet holes of Paris are a clear reminder of what his nation endured, something Hughes believed Plath could not appreciate because of her American upbringing. Hughes confesses

I kept my Paris from you. My Paris

Was only just not German. The capital

Of the Occupation and old nightmare. (*THCP* 1066)

The poem creates an opposition between Plath's and Hughes's views of the city which differed largely because of history and their different experiences of it. Hughes sees the obvious scars of the Second World War, whereas he believes Plath sees the romantic idea of Paris that was created by American writers. "Your Paris" emphasizes not only their differing cultural perspectives but also the surprising fact that these differences were largely unrecognized by both Plath and Hughes at the time of their visit to the city.

Because Hughes was interpreting Plath's behavior at the time of their visit to Paris through his own cultural preconceptions, he was unable to realize the true meaning of her actions until years later when he encountered her impressions in journal entries and letters. Hughes directly refers to this cultural barrier between them when he states:

Your practised lips
Translated the spasms to what you excused
As your gushy burblings – which I decoded
Into a language, utterly new to me
With conjectural, hopelessly wrong meanings –
You gave me no hint how, at every corner,
My fingers linked in yours, you expected
The final face-to-face revelation
To grab your whole body. (*THCP* 1067)

Although Hughes's understanding of Plath's language is complicated by "conjectural, hopelessly wrong meanings" (*THCP* 1067), he admits that he was also viewing Paris through cultural signifiers. As he walks the city's streets he sees "each bullet scar in the Quai stonework / With an eerie familiar feeling" (*THCP* 1066); Hughes continues: "I had rehearsed / Carefully, over and over, just those moments -- / Most of my life, it seemed" (*THCP* 1066). Much of England, like Paris, had suffered the devastation of war, and as a result Hughes expected to see the signs of war on each street.

He ends the poem by again contrasting what he now believes to be the difference in their views of the city; his view of Paris as “a post-war utility survivor” has remained but Plath’s has changed considerably. As they walk the streets

Those walls,
Raggy with posters, were your own flayed skin –
Stretched on your stone god.
What walked beside me was flayed,
One walking wound that the air
Coming against kept in a fever, wincing
To agonies. (*THCP* 1067)

This description of Plath’s Paris differs dramatically from the romantic vision of the city that Hughes initially assigns to her. Paris is now a “labyrinth” of Plath’s own creation where she is tormented by the memory of her former lover Richard Sassoon, whom Plath had wanted to marry. Plath had rushed, alone, to Paris to try to win back Sassoon in March 1956, only three months before marrying Hughes. This event is recounted in “18 Rugby Street”:

I guessed you were off to whirl through some euphoric
American Europe. Years after your death
I learned the desperation of that search
Through those following days, scattering your tears... (*THCP* 1056)

As in “Your Paris,” Hughes’s assumptions prevent him from comprehending the significance of the trip for Plath until years later when “Your journal told me the story of

your torture” (*THCP* 1056). The journal entry, dated 26 March 1956, describes Plath’s unannounced arrival at Sassoon’s flat in Paris only to find that he was not there: “But he had left no address, no messages, and my letters begging him to return in time were lying there blue and unread” (*Journals* 553). Only after reading Plath’s journal does Hughes realize that he had completely misinterpreted Plath’s view of Paris because of his cultural prejudice at the time. With this realization, Plath’s Paris becomes

... a desk in a *pension*

Where your letters

Waited for him unopened. Was a labyrinth

Where you still hurtled, scattering tears. (*THCP* 1067)

By consulting her private writings as well as her public poems, Hughes is able to better understand his wife’s experiences. Hughes admits that in viewing Plath’s Paris as American, he missed the true meaning of her words and actions. It is his own cultural bias that leads him, years later, to wonder

What searching miles

Did you drag your pain

That were for me plain paving, albeit

Pecked by the odd, stray, historic bullet. (*THCP* 1067)

Another *Birthday Letters* poem that describes differences in cultural identity is “The Rabbit Catcher.” The poem shares its title with one of Plath’s most notorious poems, which caused Hughes much distress in the 1990s, following Jacqueline Rose’s interpretation of sexual imagery in Plath’s poem. By repeating the title for his own work,

Hughes is not only establishing a firm link between the two poems but also trying to understand Plath's own source work by exploring the cultural divide between them. Hughes makes it clear that at the time he did not fully grasp what was occurring between them. Her actions were foreign to him and he was unable to get at the source of her anger. To emphasize this distance, he focuses again on how their different cultural backgrounds led them to perceive the rabbit snares differently. Hughes attempts to connect with Plath by engaging the content of her poetry and translating the events into his own words. In particular, the image of a trap line symbolizes not only a difference in cultural perspective, but it also highlights the fact that neither understood the magnitude of these differences within their relationship, and as such they were unable to work through them.

Plath had intended to publish "The Rabbit Catcher" in the manuscript of *Ariel*; at one time she had named the collection after this poem, as is evident in facsimiles of Plath's suggested arrangement as reproduced in *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004). Most critics agree that the poem's main focus is the dissolution and disintegration of their marriage. In *The Other Ariel* (2001), Lynda K. Bundtzen broadly claims, "All interpreters of 'The Rabbit Catcher' regard the poem as an indictment of marriage in general, and more specifically, Plath's own" (46).

"The Rabbit Catcher" begins with the ominous line, "It was a place of force" (*SPCP* 193), and goes on to describe a violently constricted space. The wind gags the speaker with her own hair, tears off her voice, and the sea blinds her with light. The speaker is led in one direction: "There was only one place to get to" (*SPCP* 193), a hollow sabotaged with snares for catching rabbits. Bundtzen and Rose have both

interpreted this place of force as the institution of marriage, which inhibits intellectual and physical freedom for women. The images of the traps, meant to capture and kill, are read as deliberate metaphors of marriage. The poem distances the speaker from an unnamed male figure with whom she was once connected: "We, too, had a relationship" (*SPCP* 194). The speaker and the male hunter feel differently about the snares. While she feels the urge to remove them, the hunter is excited by the suffering and death they cause. "The absence of shrieks" in the seventeenth line suggests that the poet has triggered the snares, preventing the deaths, and this has created a "vacancy" or empty space between herself and the male. The "glassy light was a clear wall" in the nineteenth line emphasizes that the disconnect between them is emotional, not geographic. Plath ends the poem by connecting the image of a "mind like a ring" with a wedding ring. She then connects the wedding ring to the snares. The wedding ring then becomes something that the poet is struggling to free herself from—notably the snare of marriage: "The constriction killing me also" (*SPCP* 194).

Tellingly, the opening lines of Hughes's "The Rabbit Catcher" conveys uncertainty: "How had it started?" and "What had I done?" (*THCP* 1136). These plaintive questions sound in stark contrast to the angry certainty of Plath's poem where "there was only one place to get to" (*SPCP* 193). Hughes's poem explores the same subject matter as Plath's, but it focuses on context, as if attempting to explain the rage in the original. Again, the cultural differences between the couple as well as Hughes's inability to recognize these differences surface: "What had I done? I had / Somehow misunderstood" (*THCP* 1136). Hughes is attempting to understand the cause of Plath's anger, but it

“would not translate itself. I sat baffled” (*THCP* 1137). This reference to translation again indicates that there is a barrier that is preventing Hughes from fully understanding the meaning and root causes of Plath’s anger. This anger had led Plath to a place “where I could not find you, or really hear you, / Let alone understand you” (*THCP* 1138). The breakdown in communication is associated with the underlying stresses that existed, and were left unaddressed, within the relationship. Hughes does not claim sole responsibility for this failure in communication, nor does he place blame squarely on Plath. Instead he emphasizes that neither understood the depth of this failure to communicate. And so to engage Plath, to enter into a dialogue with her, he must begin with the source material, a source that Hughes admits at the time of their marriage “would not translate itself” (*THCP* 1137). Through the poem, he is attempting to translate what had been “utterly new” into something he could understand and use to create new poems.

The major structuring device of Hughes’s “The Rabbit Catcher” is a comparison of views of England. In his version, Plath, the American, is upset when she sees the rabbit snares and pulls them out of the ground, calling the hunters “murderers.” Hughes’s poem acknowledges his wife’s anger, even before they come upon the rabbit snares. The poem figures him a bystander, a “fly on the window pane,” a “dog,” a “feeder of babies.” There are details from Plath’s poem throughout: a “gorse cliff,” hands encircling a mug, the sea in the background, the female struggling to breathe. At the time, the speaker thinks that Plath is furious with being in England, with “its grubby edges” and “English private greed” (*THCP* 1137), but by the end of the poem he realizes that she is not angry with the country. In the second stanza, Hughes writes of the snares that feminist critics have

famously referred to as marriage and sexuality: here the poet believes that the snares represent a fundamental difference between himself and Plath.

In the second half of the poem, Hughes sets up a series of “I saw” / “You saw” counterpoints in order to redress an imbalance in views. In tearing the snares from the ground, Hughes “saw / The sanctity of a trapline desecrated”; Plath “saw blunt fingers, blood in the cuticles / Clamped round a blue mug” (*THCP* 1138). Hughes “saw / Country poverty raising a penny, / Filling a Sunday stewpot”; Plath “saw baby-eyed / Strangled innocents” (*THCP* 1138). To Hughes, the snares partake of the tradition of poor country life. To Plath, they are simply evil instruments designed to torture and kill small animals. Hughes invokes the image that Plath used in her poem of a clear wall separating them when he writes,

I sat baffled.

I was a fly outside on the window-pane

Of my own domestic drama. (*THCP* 1137)

The poem ends with the image of Plath catching “something” in “those snares.” Bundtzen writes that Hughes is transforming “the episode from a domestic dispute to a moment of poetic revelation for Plath. At the same time, however, Hughes transforms her into the Rabbit Catcher, and makes her poetry – this new verse she would write – the snares” (44). He does not focus on what has been interpreted by critics like Jacqueline Rose as an indictment of his marriage to Plath, but rather transforms the event into a “poetic revelation” from which she draws subject matter.

In several of these poems, Hughes acknowledges that the communication barrier between them was not only cultural, as he had thought at the time. But it is because of differences in cultural background that Hughes explores his inability to comprehend Plath's "language." The theme of a barrier in communication that Hughes cannot overcome also comes into play when Hughes considers the role that depression played in their marriage. Unlike Plath's American heritage, about which Hughes admits to holding preconceptions, her depression is something that by its very nature is incomprehensible to him. In *Birthday Letters* it is personified in Daddy, an image found throughout the collection.

iii. Decoding "Daddy"

In the decades since her death, Plath has come to be idolized as a doomed poet. From the first published version of *Ariel* in 1965, the themes of depression and suicide have been widely explored in critical commentary on Plath's work. These themes have become so synonymous with her work through the evolution of the Plath Myth that even readers not familiar with her poems recognize them as central to her subject matter. Robert Lowell's foreword to the first printing of *Ariel* reinforces this connection when he describes Plath as "dangerous, more powerful than man, machinelike from hard training, ... a little like a racehorse, galloping relentlessly with risked, outstretched neck, death hurdle after death hurdle topped" (vii). Lowell goes on to describe the poems of *Ariel*, writing that "her art's immortality is life's disintegration. The surprise, the shimmering, unwrapped birthday present, the transcendence 'into the red eye, cauldron of morning,'

and the lover, who are always waiting for her, are Death, her own abrupt and defiant death" (viii). Plath the poet becomes synonymous with the speaker of her poetry, "a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God" (*Ariel* 196). The God-like father-figure connected to images of torture and suffering is the collection's most widely recognized image but it extends far beyond the poem "Daddy," finding voice, in one form or another, throughout Plath's work. The imagery may appear full force in "Daddy," but it resonates throughout *Ariel* and *The Colossus*. Plath's speaker rages against a father, and a depression, in whose shadow she has "lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" (*SPCP* 222).

The implied connection between Plath and the narrator of her poems parallels an implied connection between Hughes and the unfaithful husband of the *Ariel* poems. This association has everything to do with Hughes's loss of authority over his own story. It could be argued that in *Birthday Letters* the image of Daddy is a translation of the appearance of depression within Plath's work and life. This act of translation does not require strict adherence to the original image and, as with his many other translations, Hughes takes Plath's text as a "point of departure" (Bassnett 140) for his own interpretation of Daddy. Hughes's creation is similar to Plath's, but he has switched the focus from an externalized figure "at the blackboard" (*THCP* 1167) to an internal one toward which she "descended in each night's sleep" (*THCP* 1135). In *Birthday Letters*, Daddy becomes a force within Plath that is tormenting her; this force is actually depression itself, a consuming condition without discernable cause. Indeed, throughout

the collection Hughes suggests that Daddy exists inside Plath, inhabiting her dreams, and appearing in various forms or as a state of panic.

In *Birthday Letters* Hughes admits that he did not truly understand the grip that depression had on Plath. The poem “The Tender Place” is his most concentrated effort to understand Plath’s illness and the treatment she received for it. The poem describes thunderbolts “crash[ing]... into your skull” (*THCP* 1050) and the terror Plath experienced “waiting for these lightnings” (*THCP* 1050). This poem relives Plath’s first suicide attempt in 1953 when she swallowed sleeping pills and hid for three days in “the bolt-hole basement” (*THCP* 1050). Try as he might, though, he cannot grasp the enduring influence that depression held over his wife. Hughes addresses Plath’s depression in both a public and a private manner. Personally, Hughes attempts to understand for himself the mental illness from which his wife suffered. But through the public gesture of poetry, he can take up the popular image of Daddy created by the Plath Myth and explore its own powerful manifestation. Of course, his tinkering with this sacred, albeit demonized, figure has led others to vilify him. “Daddy” is so closely connected with the Plath repertoire that it is not surprising echoes of the poem sound throughout *Birthday Letters*; “The Shot,” “Black Coat,” “The Minotaur,” “The Table,” “Dream Life,” “Being Christlike,” “The Cast,” “The God,” and “A Picture of Otto” all draw directly from the power of “Daddy.” To extend this analysis further, it is useful to explore the Daddy figure in two poems that speak to it powerfully.

“The Minotaur” opens with an image of violence. It recounts an event in which Plath, angry with Hughes for being late, destroys an item of antique furniture:

The mahogany table-top you smashed
Had been the broad plank top
Of my mother's heirloom sideboard –
Mapped with the scars of my whole life. (*THCP* 1120)

Clearly, such an act of destruction speaks to the turbulence in the relationship. Plath destroys a cherished piece of furniture, one with profound symbolic value. The violence of the act stuns Hughes, and he responds directly: "That's the stuff you've been keeping out of your poems!" (*THCP* 1120). Presumably, this "stuff" is everything Plath keeps out of her poetry, repressing it instead, leading to acts of rage and violence. Later, and more calmly, Hughes encourages Plath to explore the source of these feelings when he says, "Get that shoulder under your stanzas / And we'll be away" (*THCP* 1120). With the best of intentions, the husband coaches the wife to release her demons, channeling them into her creative acts. It is, therefore, a profound irony that such encouragement would not only generate a new phase of Plath's writing but ultimately involve Hughes himself in the role of tormentor. Immediately following this encouraging but somewhat patronizing statement, a goblin unexpectedly appears. In a *London Magazine* interview in 1971, Hughes described goblins as being the unknown that can impede plans:

You choose a subject because it serves, because you need it. We go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed. At the end of the ritual up comes a goblin. (Gifford and Roberts 231)

Goblins appear in several other *Birthday Letters* poems: “Fate Playing,” “Stubbing Wharfe,” “Apprehensions,” and “The God.” In each of these poems, the goblin is an enemy character that bodes mischief and trouble. Notice the appearance of this folkloric figure in the last poem in Hughes’s critically acclaimed *Cave Birds*, “Finale”: “At the end of the ritual / Up comes a goblin” (THCP 440). “The Minotaur” concludes by listing the casualties that depression has ultimately had on Plath’s life: her marriage has “unravelling,” her children are lost “echoing / Like tunnels in a labyrinth,” her mother has been left a “dead-end,” and Plath herself is dead. The appearance of the only remaining figure, the Daddy figure, coincides with Plath’s death, since depression has

Brought you to the horned, bellowing

Grave of your risen father –

And your own corpse in it. (THCP 1120)

Hughes can only look back years later through the poems, letters, and journals to come to terms with the devastating effects of Plath’s mental illness. But even as he writes with the benefit of hindsight, he acknowledges that he still does not fully understand what happened. The question “So what had I given [the goblin]?” (THCP 1120) remains unanswered. *Birthday Letters* allows him to revisit the experience, to try to achieve higher awareness of it, and perhaps to relieve the pressure of guilt and responsibility, but one cannot remake the past-- one can only come to an acceptance of it.

“The Table” continues the theme of “The Minotaur,” connecting the Daddy figure to Plath’s exploration of her depression through her poetry. The poem begins with

Hughes creating a writing table for Plath, a simple “elm plank two inches thick” (*THCP* 1132); however, the wood Hughes chose for this piece of furniture is “coffin elm” that

gives the dead

Protection for a slightly longer voyage

Than beech or ash or pine might. (*THCP* 1132)

The plank of wood is saturated with spiritual energy that “frees her voice but imprisons her” (Wagner, E. 145). Before long, the table becomes associated with the Daddy figure:

With a plane

I revealed a perfect landing pad

For your inspiration. I did not

Know I had made and fitted a door

Opening downwards into your Daddy’s grave. (*THCP* 1132)

Again, we hear Hughes acknowledging the unintended consequences of his own role in his wife’s decline. Moreover, throughout *Birthday Letters*, the poet connects Plath’s self-destruction with her insatiable need to become a great writer. Perhaps by exploring her feelings of anxiety through her poetry, Plath opens the door to her own grave, fulfilling a long determined death wish.

The appearance of Daddy signals a tragic breakdown in the relationship, as the husband failed to understand, quite literally, what is being expressed:

My incomprehension

Deafened by his language – a German

Outside my wavelengths. (*THCP* 1133)

German was the language of Plath's parents and a language that she studied throughout her life, the language of the recent war, imposing, signifying death and destruction. The Daddy figure takes Plath "down through the elm door. / He had got what he wanted" (*THCP* 1133); he "got" his own daughter's death. Later, the poet reflects on what has happened:

I woke upon the empty stage with the props,
The paltry painted masks. And the script
Ripped up and scattered, its code scrambled,
Like the blades and slivers
Of a shattered mirror. (*THCP* 1133)

The "script" reveals the narrative of their marriage as it would develop from the pages of *Ariel* and Plath's journals into the widely accepted story of neurosis and self-destructiveness. Its codes remain "scrambled" because of Hughes's inability to understand the meaning of its signs. And much of the harsh criticism directed toward him since that time has resulted from the fragments of "blades and slivers" of what remains.

Hughes ends the poem with an image of the table eventually showing up in America, an object emptied and cleansed of its original power, a relic of another time:

It washed up, far side of the Atlantic,
A curio,
Scoured of the sweat I soaked into
Finding your father for you and then
Leaving you to him. (*THCP* 1134)

The table helped Plath to write some of the most celebrated poems of the twentieth century, but it “seems to lose its significance; without her presence becoming again simply a thing, ‘a curio’” (Wagner, E. 146). It is Plath who created the poems and Plath who conjured Daddy from her own psyche; without her energy, the table is “no longer a door. Once more simply a board” (*THCP* 1133).

Throughout *Birthday Letters*, the appearance of the Daddy figure coincides with the emergence of Plath’s depression. Understandably, Hughes looks for meaning in these passages, seeking a way back to his own identity: “The body of the ghost and me the blurred see-through / Came into single focus” (*THCP* 1109). This “single focus” elided Hughes from the relationship, except as a demonic, authoritarian figure in the way Daddy always appears. Ultimately, the Daddy of “*A Picture of Otto*” is very different from the Daddy of *Ariel*. Hughes has distanced himself from the dark figure of Plath’s imagination, performing a reinterpretation of the man who loomed so large in Plath’s tragic destiny.

iv. A Picture of Otto

In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes is more open about his life than he had ever been, not shying away from any unflattering moments. For example, Assia Wevill, the woman for whom Hughes ostensibly left Plath (and who also committed suicide), appears in the poems “Dreamers,” “Fairy Tale,” and “The Inscription.” However, in the collection, Hughes encourages the reader to see him as a caring husband who encouraged Plath’s development as a person and as a writer. He introduced her to the things he held most

dear, most notably nature, as in "The Owl" and astrology, as in "Ouija." Increasingly, in this collection, Hughes insists he was not Plath's enemy, as he had been portrayed for so many years. He was doing his best, he says, however inadequate it might have been.

One of the collection's last poems is directly addressed to Plath's father and describes Hughes's spiritual journey toward reclaiming the role of author of his own story. "A Picture of Otto" begins: "You stand there at the blackboard" (*THCP* 1167). This line loudly echoes the line in Plath's poem "Daddy," "You stand at the blackboard, daddy" (*SPCP* 223), bringing the two poems into conversation with each other, so to speak. In "Daddy," Plath's father is a tormentor; associated with him are acts of torture, death camps, and amputation. In Hughes's poem, by contrast, a new image of Otto Plath materializes. Hughes strips away Plath's grotesque imagery and instead conjures Plath's father as a normal man. He begins matter of factly by informing Otto Plath that he has been configured to fit the story of the Plath Myth:

Your idea

Of Heaven and Earth and Hell radically

Modified by the honey-bee's commune. (*THCP* 1167)

"The honey-bee's commune" both alludes to Otto Plath's fascination with bees and suggests the feminist critics who hovered over the legacy of Plath. The three cosmic locations of "Heaven and Earth and Hell" (*THCP* 1167) imply that the "commune's" creation of the Plath Myth extends everywhere, even into death itself. The poem also asserts Hughes's belief that the daddy figure "conjured into poetry" has come to be "so tangled with me" (*THCP* 1167).

In keeping with the general movement of *Birthday Letters*, the major theme of this poem is reconciliation with Daddy. Hughes speaks to the spirit of Otto Plath, but not to the demonized image of Plath's creation:

I never dreamed, however occult our guilt,

Your ghost inseparable from my shadow

As long as your daughter's words can stir a candle.

She could hardly tell us apart in the end. (*THCP* 1167)

Surprisingly, Hughes recognizes Otto in an unexpected way: "Your portrait, here, could be my son's portrait" (*THCP* 1167). The physical connection to Hughes's own son stirs feelings of respect for the father-in-law he never met. Following this intergenerational association, Hughes's tone softens even more, and he refers to Otto as his "friend" (*THCP* 1167), extending a truce to the man who was unwittingly made his enemy:

I understand – you never could have released her.

I was a whole myth too late to replace you. (*THCP* 1167)

Hughes acknowledges that he has been vilified as much as the Daddy figure has. Admitting that he was "a whole myth too late" (*THCP* 1167) is Hughes's acknowledgement that he was not able to save Plath. Neither man consented to the role of Plath's tormentor, nor could either of them refute it, at least not until now when Hughes is able to accept his conjoined role with Otto Plath: "She could hardly tell us apart in the end" (*THCP* 1167). For many, this hybrid connection between Hughes and Daddy will always exist:

This underworld, my friend, is her heart's home.

Inseparable, here we must remain,

Everything forgiven and in common. (*THCP* 1167)

Plainly, Hughes finally accepts this role with dignity, likening it to that section of Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," where the speaker meets his former enemy, and like Owen's speaker, Hughes lies entwined with Daddy "in the catacomb, / Sleeping with his German as if alone" (*THCP* 1167).

Through *Birthday Letters*, Hughes is able to reclaim the role of author by reinterpreting the source material responsible for its original loss. The collection earnestly strives to understand how the events of their life together became so entangled with the poetry and subsequent "story" of their lives.

Conclusion

Birthday Letters is a fine achievement of what we might call translation and re-appropriation. *Birthday Letters* is the culmination of the variety of themes and approaches that have been discussed in the thesis. The violence of Hughes's nature poetry, the disorder found in the shamanic approach he used to write poems, and the reinvigoration of existing texts that characterized his translation work are all found throughout *Birthday Letters*. Each contributes to the collection's overall power and depth. The observant reader will notice in particular ways how Hughes takes up issues related to war, gender, the environment, and other shared themes.

For example, the politics of war offers a fascinating avenue of future exploration. Both Hughes and Plath were very much concerned with the effects war had on people and the natural world. Although neither poet is considered to be overtly political, each weaves images of wartime atrocities into their work. For Hughes, wartime imagery is often transposed onto an animal, such as the salmon in "October Salmon." War, in light of the salmon awaiting death, allows the possibility of noble sacrifice. For Plath, images of war focus mainly on the suffering inflicted by humans on each other. In his poetry Hughes identifies himself with British soldiers; his father fought in World War I and Hughes himself served as a radio technician in his early twenties. Plath identifies herself with Jews persecuted by Nazi Germany; Plath herself was of German ancestry and she clearly makes this connection in two of her most famous poems, "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." Since this perspective figures so prominently in *Ariel*, Hughes must attempt to understand its meanings in his new work.

Another potential area of exploration is Hughes's reworking of the nature imagery contained within Plath's work; both were concerned with the effects of human interaction on the natural world. In *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Tracy Brain focuses attention on Plath's often overlooked environmentalism, believing her to be "concerned with the penetrability of borders and the relationship of any human being to the larger world. Whether she is talking about language, country, or the environment, Plath jolts the reader out of the luxury of the tourist's position" (84). Indeed, a study of the different ways language is harnessed to convey these concerns would be fruitful.

In addition to these potential areas of study, the entire collection can be read as an act of mourning. This idea is proposed by Neil Roberts in *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life*. Wisely, the critic understands how the collection is "encouraging us to accept the possibly fictive device of the poet communing privately with his dead wife, and enhance the effect of passages... where Hughes's language rises to a (for this book) uncharacteristic intensity, as it articulates the strange temporality of mourning" (Roberts 212). Further, Alice Whitehead's article, "Refiguring Orpheus: The Possession of the Past in Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*," carefully considers the collection as "poetry of mourning." She reads the poems as attempts to remember events from the past, and she observes that throughout Hughes is "fascinated with exploring the complex temporality of traumatic loss" (235). Keith Sagar and Lynda K. Bundtzen have also written about this theme, but to date no one has made the direct connection between the different texts, those by Plath and this newly fashioned one by Hughes.

No doubt, work will continue to be undertaken on the troubled, fascinating, and richly evocative works and lives of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.

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