

# **A STUDY OF TED HUGHES'S *BIRTHDAY LETTERS***

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## Abstract

This thesis focusses on the literary self-reflexivity of *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes's collection of poems addressed to his long-dead first wife, poet Sylvia Plath. By close attention to the language of select poems and a discussion of cross-referencing images and allusions across the volume, and intertextually, I argue that the collection is more self-consciously ordered and designed than the mainly biographical criticism the work has met with suggests. The thesis focusses on the poets' art rather than the biographical context of *Birthday Letters*, though it does not draw a neat distinction between their lives and their poetry – rather it demonstrates how *Birthday Letters* itself treats the relationship of art to life thematically.

The introduction outlines the context of the volume's genesis and publication and the notions of poetry, myth and drama out of which Hughes works, and introduces the central metaphor of metamorphosis as figured in Ariel's song "Full Fathom Five" from *The Tempest*, as well as the importance of that play to Plath. Each of the chapters that follow focusses on a cluster of inter-related imagery through a discussion of four or five key poems.

Chapter One examines Hughes's portrayal of himself as imprisoned by Plath's poetic portraits, and relates this to the recurring motifs of the snapshot and the Medusa myth. The poems discussed emphasize Hughes's consciousness of the metamorphic and "magical" relationship of art to life.

The second chapter discusses Hughes's use of the myth of the labyrinth and the Minotaur, tracing it back to Plath's writings and reading, and pointing out its self-reflexivity: the labyrinth figures Hughes's own loss as well as the labyrinthine nature of writing.

The third chapter considers the themes of possession and loss, and how they attach themselves to images of houses and jewels. Possession and loss turn, self-reflexively, upon issues of inheritance and remembrance, notably Hughes's inheritance of Plath's poetic legacy, and his remembrance of her and her poetry through his own poetry.

The conclusion pursues connections between the observations made in the separate chapters, outlining the larger context out of which the poems emerge, and returning to the trope of metamorphosis as figured in "Full Fathom Five".

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## Notes on References and Abbreviations

This thesis generally follows the MLA guide to referencing. Unless otherwise indicated, all the Hughes poems referred to are from *Birthday Letters*, and I simply give a page number. Likewise, all the Plath poems cited are from her *Collected Poems*, and are simply indicated by a page number. (I only cite *Collected Poems* by title when I am referring to information contained in an editorial note).

Where I am not introducing a poem, I give the page number for the specific quotation or image referred to (rather than the first page of the poem). If the poem is only one page long, I do not indicate a page number again when referring to it. Brief reference to a discussed image or incident does not repeat a page number for it. Nevertheless, I have tried to be as helpful as possible to the reader, at the risk of occasional repeated page references. Internal cross-references are referred to by “page”.

The publication of *Birthday Letters* received a great deal of media attention, and many of the newspaper articles I cite have been retrieved online. Consequently, many of my references are non-paginated. I have followed the MLA guide to internet referencing, referring to a shortened version of the title and including “n.pag.” to indicate where information was not paginated. Full versions of all references can be found in the select bibliography. Some scholarly articles, too, have been retrieved online, from databases to which the university subscribes, and consequently are non-paginated. Bibliographic entries for these do not give URLs but rather supply full publication details, with “online” attached. There was no print translation of Andersen’s fable “The Toad” available locally, and the translation referred to is from the official website of the Hans Christian Andersen Centre.

In both cases, the standard editions of the collected works of Freud and of Jung have been consulted, and references to their works cite the relevant volume number and pages only. The full details of the consulted multivolume editions are given in the select bibliography.

I have used several abbreviations in parenthetical references: *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* is referred to by the shortened *SGCB*, Ted Hughes’s *New Selected Poems: 1957-1994* is abbreviated as *NSP*, and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* as *Journals*. Very occasionally I have departed from MLA style by placing a parenthetical reference in a footnote so as not to entangle my syntax.

Many of the Hughes writings referred to are collected in *Winter Pollen* – I cite each article by name rather than simply referring to *Winter Pollen*, as it is helpful to know the context of the reference. Therefore each article cited from *Winter Pollen* is listed individually

in the select bibliography. For the same reason a number of Plath writings that have been collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Stories* are cited individually. Again, MLA guidelines are followed, and in the select bibliography these entries are appropriately shortened and cross-referenced.

I refer to Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath by their surnames throughout, except for when I need to differentiate them from other family members with the same surname, at which point I use their first names.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

“I do not think a ‘headline poetry’ would interest more people any more profoundly than the headlines” (Plath, “Context” 92).

Ted Hughes (1930–1998) and Sylvia Plath (1932–1963), married from 1956 to 1963, were two of the most prominent English-speaking poets of the second half of the twentieth century, eventually famed as much for their personal relationship as for their poetry. In May 1962, Hughes had an extramarital affair and Hughes and Plath separated in October of that year. In February 1963, she killed herself. After her death she became famous for her highly self-reflexive poetry, most of it published posthumously with Hughes as its literary executor. Hughes and Plath became objects of public scrutiny, and Hughes was frequently vilified as somehow responsible for Plath’s death, his betrayal being elided with her death in a relationship of direct and simple cause and effect. Plath, in turn, became for many an iconic figure of martyred womanhood. Conversely, she was regarded as a madwoman, to be reviled, and he as a nobly suffering victim of a “feminism” prejudicially regarded as dubious. Such conceptions of the two were aided by the rise of feminist consciousness (and attendant upon it a strain of anti-feminism) and also by the dramatic and confessional tropes and rhetorics of Plath’s own poetry. As Christina Britzolakis has argued in *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (1999), Plath’s poetry frequently assumes a confessional voice or persona, incorporating figures from her private life (especially her father) in manners deliberately theatricalised, oblique and rhetorical, rather than simply descriptive, narrative and naturalistic. Despite the riddled nature of Plath’s poetry, though, some readers have read in it direct and faithful portraits of historical individuals.<sup>1</sup> While she may often have taken as a starting point for a poem an incident from her own life or what may appear as a character trait or aspect of a particular person, she tends to develop her observations dramatically so that her poems become allegorical explorations of particular psychic workings or relationships. As Britzolakis argues, it is inadequate to read Plath’s poems simply as confessional, unless we re-examine what the “confessional” denotes and review the relationship between the private and the public supposed by it: even the development in Plath’s style towards “greater subjectivity – the shift away from empirical-naturalistic models of poetic form towards psychodrama – is not a purely psychobiographical event, but the product of a reflexive

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<sup>1</sup> Plath’s poem “Daddy” (222) particularly has been read as a portrait of both her father, Otto Plath, and her husband, Hughes. Written in the first person but spoken by a dramatic persona rather than in Plath’s own voice, the poem is addressed to an obviously hyperbolic “Daddy” figure, and is a “pastiche” (Britzolakis 18) of various elements (Freudian psychoanalysis, autobiography) amongst which are details from Plath’s own life. These include her seven-year marriage, the break-up of which seems to have fuelled much of the poem’s anger (it was written on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1962, the day after Hughes moved out of their home, Court Green [Wagner-Martin 218]).

engagement with the modernist and surrealist legacy of twentieth-century art” (5). Although Plath’s poetry clearly emerges from a far larger context than her marriage and family life, it has often been read narrowly as reflective of a particular (much-pathologized) psyche, the result of which has been an inordinate interest in her biographical details, so that her family have found themselves the subjects of much, and often intrusive, literary criticism.

Despite large public interest, Hughes kept silent on his relationship with Plath until in 1998, a few months before he died, he published *Birthday Letters*, a series of eighty-eight poems on which he had been secretly working over a period of twenty-five years.<sup>2</sup> All but six<sup>3</sup> were addressed to Plath, and they recounted their life together, and his experience of her, in roughly chronological order.

Extraordinarily for a book of poetry *Birthday Letters* became a best-seller, evincing a great hold on the public imagination.<sup>4</sup> The volume not only had mass popular appeal but also won the acclaim of a number of Hughes’s fellow poets— Andrew Motion, Douglas Dunn, Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney all gave it high praise<sup>5</sup> – and garnered a number of well-respected literary prizes, including the 1998 Forward Prize, the 1999 T.S. Eliot Poetry Prize, the 1998 Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the 1998 Whitbread Poetry Award.

Notably, Hughes’s success followed that of his *Tales from Ovid* which also won both the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the Whitbread Poetry Award (for 1997), a text which, together with *Birthday Letters* and a number of other late translations of classical works, forms part of a larger elegiac task on Hughes’s part. Classical myth and drama are an imaginative cornerstone of Plath’s own work and Hughes’s late translations (all in the

<sup>2</sup> Eight of the poems (“Chaucer”, “You Hated Spain”, “The Earthenware Head”, “The Tender Place”, “Black Coat”, “Being Christlike”, “The God” and “The Dogs are Eating Your Mother”) had been published as uncollected pieces in 1995 in Hughes’s *New Selected Poems: 1957-1994*, and one of these, “You Hated Spain”, in 1982 in Hughes’s *Selected Poems: 1951-1981*. Out of context, and without it being specified that the “you” addressed was Plath, these received scant critical attention (Brain 197). The quite different reception of the volume *Birthday Letters* does not necessarily imply that its popularity is simply a matter of voyeurism. As I shall argue, much of the power of the collection comes from the dense cross-referencing of its images, and its dramatic structuring.

<sup>3</sup> “The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother” is addressed to their children and “A Picture of Otto” to Otto Plath; “The Pan” and “The Inscription” are written in the third person, and “Flounders” and “Karlsbad Caverns” have no moments of second person (Churchwell itemizes these six, pointing out that most reviewers identified only two [“Secrets and Lies” 103]).

<sup>4</sup> It was the third highest selling hardback book of 1998 in Britain (Brain 184).

<sup>5</sup> Logan cites these poets:

British poets and critics, mostly male, have been nearly unanimous. For Andrew Motion in *The Times*, where the poems were first serialized, ‘Reading it is like being hit by a thunderbolt .... There is nothing like it in literature.... this is his greatest book’. For Tom Paulin, ‘It’s a knockout volume, absolutely staggering’. Douglas Dunn, in the *Financial*

nineteen-nineties) of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Euripides's *Alcestis*<sup>6</sup> and Racine's *Phèdre* (a work in turn based on Euripides's *Hippolytus*) are undoubtedly all concomitant with a return to Plath and his confrontation with their relationship through poetry. Translation itself Hughes regarded as a therapeutic task: "a whole gymnasium of new exercises and techniques for himself [the translator], to crack something open in himself, and develop himself in some way" ("Doubletake" 2).

Hughes increasingly saw poetry itself as therapeutic and redemptive in essence – "as if artistic creation were the psychological component of the galvanized auto-immune system" ("The Poetic Self" 284) – and the discourse surrounding the publication of *Birthday Letters* (both in Hughes's comments and those of the media) suggests a drama of psychological liberation through a public confession; Hughes himself wrote:

those letters do release the story that everything I have ever written since the 1960's had been evading. It was a kind of a desperation that I finally did publish them – I had always thought them too raw and 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. (sic) (qtd. in Wagner 4)

As with Plath's poetry, though, a reading of Hughes's poems in terms of "confessional expressivity" (Britzolakis's term for the model of reading applied to Plath's work, 7) is insufficient. For a start, the poems do *not* say anything new about the Plath-Hughes relationship; most of the incidents referred to are traceable to published accounts elsewhere – in the *Journals*, *Letters Home* or her poems. Moreover, on close reading they reveal a degree of artistry that defies a model of simple "confessional expressivity". Even the impression of direct speech they marvellously provide is the product not of artlessness but rather the achievement of years of work – in an interview given in 1982 Hughes claimed that this "colloquial expressiveness" was a poetic ideal:

What you can't do, I think, is formalize everyday speech. You can't say: 'I will now write in the speech of the people', because you write it as a writer [. . .] your attitude to it turns it into a formalized language, and it finally rests with just the few writers, at any time, who somehow or other manage to be able to do it. Everybody realizes it's an ideal but there are very few writers who can actually tap that colloquial expressiveness of ordinary speech in a written language. ("Doubletake" 6).

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Times: 'Birthday Letters is of an order that practically places Hughes beyond the ranks of ordinary mortals.' Only a few critics have suggested otherwise. (sic) (n.pag.)

<sup>6</sup> Hughes's adaptation of Euripides's *Alcestis* also incorporates Euripides's *Hercules Furens*.

The *Birthday Letters* poems recurrently “tap that colloquial expressiveness of ordinary speech”, working out of familiar conventions and figures, and having a broad and direct appeal.

The poems are not only significant for their immense popularity, but for the light they throw on Hughes’s other work, as some of the most mature and refined work of one of England’s most prominent recent poets (at the time of publication he was Poet Laureate), and because of the way they traverse and respond to Plath’s own notoriously controversial poetry. Many of the poems pick up on and respond to her poems, some even taking the same titles. Hughes’s allusions are not facile or one-dimensional, but rather are overdetermined – pointing in several directions, and the poems are fascinating for the way in which they inherit from, and recall, her own poetry.

They particularly recall aspects of her work that he has repeatedly characterized in his critical writings on her as “mythic” and “dramatic”. For Hughes, Plath is *the* quintessentially “mythic” writer: in his introduction to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* he differentiates between the “mythic” artist and the “realist” artist, using Plath to exemplify the mythic.<sup>7</sup> This is because the myths she uses are not merely illustrative, but resonate deeply with her life:

her metamorphosis of Phaeton into Icarus [he is discussing the transition between her poems “Ariel” and “Sheep in Fog”], which a realist might notice as a pretty piece of myth-kitty counterpoint, and use as an illustrative clever metaphor, was for her the crucial episode of her soul’s myth – in the most literal sense a life-and-death emergency trying to communicate itself. There is no getting round the fact that these poems are valued as they are because it was so. Which tells us why an author’s ‘myth’ is worth searching out. This blood-jet, autobiographical truth is what decides the difference in value between a myth (or any other image) as used by a realist and the mythic image as it appears in a truly mythic work.<sup>8</sup> (42)

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes’s prefacing of his argument about Shakespeare’s work with an example of his reading of Plath’s work suggests just how much Hughes’s book is, as Heaney claims, a “mythological fantasia” in which he attempts to deal with his relationship with Plath and, at the same time, “to fly beneath the critical radar” (“A Wounded Power” n.pag.). Like Hughes’s translations, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* is clearly an exploration of his relationship with Plath and the sources of her poetry, and will be returned to often in this thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes’s reading of Plath’s work here, a reading based on detecting a system of associations between and within her poems and their manuscripts, is not idiosyncratic:

It has often been noticed that her images tend to accrue relevance from the context provided by a ritualized repetition and elaboration, both within and between poems. (Britzolakis 54)

According to Hughes, the Icarus and Phaeton myths in Plath's work had at this point in her career "lost their Greek settings, their name, gone down the full five fathoms, and had become the expressive symbols of her soul's story" (42) – they had become internalized.

Hughes elaborates on his understanding of myth and its intimate relation with our own lives and cognitive processes in his essay "Myth and Education":

A child takes possession of a story [he uses "myth" and "story" interchangeably here] as what might be called a unit of imagination. A story which engages, say, earth and the underworld is a unit correspondingly flexible. It contains not merely the space and in some form or other the contents of those two places; it reconciles their contradictions in a workable fashion and holds open the way between them. [. . .] There is the beginning of a form of contemplation. [. . .] If the story is learned well, so that all its parts can be seen at a glance, as if we looked through a window into it, then that story has become like the complicated hinterland of a single word. It has become a word. Any fragment of the story serves as the 'word' by which the whole story's electrical circuit is switched into consciousness and all its light and power brought to bear. [. . .] A word of that sort has magnetized our life into a special pattern. And behind it stands not just the crowded breadth of the world, but all its depths and intensities too. Those things have been raised out of chaos and brought into our ken by the story in a word. The word holds them all there, like a constellation, floating and shining, and though we may draw back from tangling with them too closely, nevertheless they are present. A story can wield so much! And a word wields the story. (138-140)

Hughes's own use of language in *Birthday Letters* is mythic in this sense. Often a word will wield a story — a single word will signal another of Plath's, or of some other author's, and the intertexts alluded to can be astonishingly apt and integral to his point at hand. Moreover, words and phrases signal one another within the text, building up rich chains of association, and suggesting a "mythic hinterland"<sup>9</sup> out of which they emerge and draw their power. These words, moreover, are carefully placed, adding a further interpretive dimension and giving the volume's ordering an element of the "dramatic". In his introduction to *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* Hughes speaks of the problem of reading pieces of Shakespeare's poetry out of their larger dramatic context:

the play binds the words magnetically [. . .]. Reading them [the words] in context, we look through them into the action and life of the play, a wonderfully well organized circuit of interior illuminations, to which all the complexities of the words are aligned with such subtle accuracy it seems miraculous. ("Notes on Shakespeare" 103)

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<sup>9</sup> The phrase used by Hughes to describe the background of "Sheep in Fog" (*SGCB* 42).

That Hughes meant for his poems to be read in context, and carefully arranged them in order to structure and illuminate their meanings, might be inferred from the fact that he forbade certain poems to be published out of context.<sup>10</sup>

While the *Birthday Letters* poems are far looser and more narrative than Plath's compressed and imagistic work, the volume as a whole tends to generate across itself metaphors that find concrete expression in its own phrases, and in this doubling and self-dramatization (especially of their own workings) his poems recall her own. Here myth and drama go hand in hand: the word or phrase that "wields a story" becomes a dramatization, or embodiment, out of a "hinterland" of story.

Possibly the most striking aspect of *Birthday Letters* is its literary self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity – the way the poems seem to comment on each other and each other's workings – is more deep-rooted than a mere authorial self-consciousness, though these go hand-in-hand and at times converge. The text moves between these states, giving a sense of an active working through of particular concerns. Hughes claim of the poet that

Certain memories, images, sounds, feelings, thoughts, and relationships between these, have for some reason become luminous at the core of his mind: it is in his attempt to bring them out, without impairment, into a comparatively dark world, that he makes poems. ("Context" 2)

The work's self-reflexivity not only manifests itself in the manner in which it generates images of its own workings, but in its numerous references to other art forms (puppetry, drama, drawing, dance) and its extraordinary degree of intertextuality. The text is packed with diverse images and allusions of an epic scope, most of which are culled from literary tradition, or have resonances with age-old myths and stories. Hughes draws particularly on Classical myths, Greek drama, Shakespeare's plays – notably *The Tempest* – and Plath's poetry. *The Tempest* is a particularly prominent palimpsest, the aptness of which I shall return to in my conclusion. For the moment it is necessary to note that it was a "totemic" text for Plath, who first read it at age nine, shortly after her father's death (Britzolakis 46); deciding, in 1958, to call her next volume of poetry *Full Fathom Five*,<sup>11</sup> she noted

It relates more richly to my life and imagery than anything else I've dreamed up: has the background of The Tempest, the association of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious, to the

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<sup>10</sup> Wagner notes that when Hughes submitted his manuscript to *The Sunday Times* for the serialization of select poems, "Dreamers", "The Inscription", "The Cast", "The Ventriloquist" and "Life After Death" were all prohibited from being taken out of context (25). Brain notes that "Fidelity", too, was not permitted to be reprinted out of context (213).

<sup>11</sup> This volume became *The Colossus*.

father image – relating to my own father, the buried male muse & god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted, to the sea-father Neptune – and the pearls and corals highly-wrought to art: pearls sea-changed from the ubiquitous grit of sorrow and dull routine. [. . .] O, only left to myself, what a poet I will flay myself into. (sic) (*Journals* 381)

In this journal entry Plath views her marriage with Hughes as a restoration of her lost father, and also as somehow bringing about a violent rebirth of her poetic self. This passage is repeatedly alluded to in *Birthday Letters* – the images of the risen father, of Hughes’s muse-like relationship to her work (he is continually encouraging her writing, like a fatal nurse figure in tragedy) as well as the notion of art as metamorphic of life, bringing about a “sea-change”, crop up again and again.

The effect of the text’s numerous literary allusions is to inscribe the Plath-Hughes relationship within literary paradigms, foregrounding the vexed question of the relationship of art to life, a question already central to *Birthday Letters* because of its autobiographical aspect. This matter of the relationship of art to life gains further resonance by its centrality to the study and critical reception of Plath’s own poetry and by the nature of the collection’s most ostensible narrative subject – its concern with understanding the role that art and creativity played in determining the lives of the two younger poets. “Poetry” and “Love” are consistently personified as players in a drama (the life/lives of Hughes and Plath are self-consciously described as if a drama, their meeting described as if stage-set) and *Birthday Letters* tends, especially in its second half, self-consciously to emplot Plath’s writing career, and Hughes’s encouragement of it, as a determining narrative.

In the nature of the reading *Birthday Letters* offers of Plath’s poetry, a reading which in turn writes itself, the text extends the problem of the relationship between art and life to that of reading and writing. It raises the questions of whether art and life can be “read” in the same way and how in turn these readings “write” or determine life, and produce writing. These are questions central to the readings of Hughes’s and Plath’s lives by the general public, readings undoubtedly generated by Plath’s own poetry and conditioned by the subtlety of reading brought to it, and to the writing (and presumably public reception of) *Birthday Letters* itself. On a surface level, the fact of the text’s numerous allusions allegorizes its deeper motivating questions: how did poetry affect Plath’s life, how does her poetry now write and determine Hughes’s life, and how can poetry free him from this spell?

Hughes recurrently depicts himself as trapped by Plath’s poetry, captured within a certain image – as if in a snapshot. But if Plath’s poetry has a photographic immediacy, it is the glare of the public’s enquiry which acts as a fixative, ensuring his imprisonment. The notion of being imprisoned within an image is one that Hughes connects elsewhere too with the photograph: he writes of the narrowly “objective imagination” as being “materialised in

the camera” and that “Materialized in the camera, it has imprisoned us in the lens” (“Myth and Education”, 146 – 148). The photograph is a frequent motif in *Birthday Letters*, generally evoking an image of Plath as ghostly and unreachable. Hughes’s conception of the photograph here is close to Roland Barthes’s in *Camera Lucida*, and in chapter one I will return to *Camera Lucida* in a discussion of the snapshot motif and its relation to the myth of Medusa and the superstition of the evil eye in the work of both Plath and Hughes. In looking at *Camera Lucida*, I am following the leads of Paul Bentley and Joanny Moulin, both of whom have turned to Barthes and the photographic in discussing Hughes’s work. Bentley draws on *Camera Lucida* in his discussion of Hughes’s *Remains of Elmet*, poems written to accompany photographs of the Calder Valley, where Hughes grew up. For Moulin, Hughes’s work is paradoxically both mythic and realistic – to the point of being “photographic” in its closeness of observation (significantly, Hughes encourages the aspirant poet to develop a photographic eye) – and he sees Hughes’s combination of realism and myth as stemming from a state “akin to belief” (“Mytho-poetic icons” n.pag). Although Moulin does not draw specifically on *Camera Lucida*, his detection of a state of belief in Hughes’s attitude towards his subject matter, chimes with the attitude Barthes takes towards the photograph – that of the “realist”, for whom the photograph is a “magic”.

Each chapter of this thesis returns to a cluster of imagery which is mythic in the sense that Hughes describes in “Myth and Education”, revealing a shadowland of pertinent concerns. The second chapter looks at Hughes’s use of the motif of the labyrinth and the third at images of possession and loss.

The myth of the labyrinth and the Minotaur is at once the most overt myth in the text and also the most oblique (it has not gone down “the full five fathoms” as Hughes claims of the Phaeton and Icarus myths in Plath’s work). Yet an examination of it is essential in order to understand out of what context Hughes is working. He himself seems almost to use it as a superstructure in order to draw out and articulate what images have become “luminous at the core of his mind”. Significantly, the myth is repeatedly linked to *The Tempest*, most notably in the obscure “Setebos” (132).

The labyrinth motif is also self-reflexive about writing, suggesting that it is labyrinthine and imprisoning, a fate from which there is no exit. Hughes has elsewhere described his own method of writing in imagery that recalls the labyrinth myth – as a quest that follows the unravelling of a thread: “my method was to find a thread and draw the rest out of a hidden tangle” (qtd. in Bere n.pag.).

“Possession”, with variants of it, becomes a word which Hughes uses mythically to wield a number of stories. It links notions of artistic inspiration, inheritance and ownership and also dispossession and *loss*. By the volume’s integrated allusions to numerous literary texts, Hughes is placing Plath’s work in a broad tradition, as well as inscribing his work as

literary heir to hers. In chapter three I trace the motif of possession through images of jewels and houses, linking it to matters of loss, mourning and inheritance.

Throughout the thesis I look at how these images touch upon other works, particularly his translations, and at what they suggest about language and its determinative and social functions. The poems are in many ways a meditation on, and manifesto of, poetry, self-reflexively articulated through poetry itself over the course of twenty-five years.

*Birthday Letters* is a work of epic proportions, drawing together strands of Hughes's work with Plath's own, and alluding to a number of other works. The volume follows her poetry in revealing a "largescale psycho-mythological drama"<sup>12</sup> and, as in her writing, this drama is the story of a soul trying to communicate itself – the poems do not just present a portrait of the past, but tell a present story, that of the impact of Plath's death and the reception of her poetry on his present work and life, and also look forward towards some redemption or transcendence: they aim to immortalize her.<sup>13</sup> In this they are "dramatic" in accordance with Hughes's notion of drama as "a ritual for the manipulation of the soul" (*SGCB* 33) and in the sense that Sacks discusses in *The English Elegy*<sup>14</sup> – that is, they are a *work* of mourning and are self-consciously structured as such. One thinks of Tennyson's re-ordering of his *In Memoriam* poems, written over seventeen years, to resemble a three-year process of mourning. Although Hughes does not impose a dramatic time frame, the complex temporality of the poems, written in the present tense, but looking back to the past, is integral to the impression of the work as an active work of mourning, and not merely a memorialization. Moreover, there are hints throughout of the work's self-consciousness of itself as a work of mourning, and the volume builds to a dramatic ending with the simple

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<sup>12</sup> Hughes claimed that submerged in Plath's writing was a "largescale psycho-mythological drama" ("Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog'" 207).

<sup>13</sup> Hughes claimed that he addressed the poems to her on the principle of evoking her presence to himself and aiming "never to lose [. . .] the person I was communicating with – her" (qtd. in Moulin, "Disappearance" n.pag.). In "Poetry in the Making" he claims that the writer seeks to render his experience external to himself through writing, that is to realize it – as he does her here: "Words are tools [. . .] with which we try to give some part of our experience a more or less permanent shape outside ourselves" (21).

<sup>14</sup> Sacks bases his study of elegy on an interpretation of the genre's conventions, rather than merely a description of them. He goes about this interpretation by

asking how the traditional forms and figures of elegy relate to the experience of loss and the search for consolation. I wish to view this relationship between the language of elegy and the experience of loss as an event or action: rather than finding absence or loss to be somehow already 'there' in the language [. . .]. Each elegy is to be regarded, therefore, as a *work*, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of a dynamic or impulse – the sense that underlies Freud's phrase 'the work of mourning'. (1)

Sacks then names this area of focus as the "*dramatic* and not just the structural relation between loss and figuration [. . .]" (emphasis added) (1).

statement of loss at its close. My last chapter pays attention to the ordering of the final poems and the text's self-conscious treatment of matters of mourning and loss, and references to the dramatic.

In this thesis I hope to give some sense of the extraordinary richness, complexity and conscious artistry of the volume by offering close readings of different poems under the separate chapter headings. Although the principle of close reading is that on which I proceed, traditional poetic practical criticism, with its bias towards analysis of internal design, study of the poem simply on its own terms, and sustained focus on the poem at hand is not alone sufficient, for the poems are densely interlinked and richly inter-associative and gain much of their strength from their place in the collection. Hence, there will be extensive cross-referencing between poems. I shall also comment on what the poems seem to say about their own function, and how they reflect back on the time of writing in which they occur; though the poems hark back to the past they are all written in what is essentially a vivid present tense, for Hughes is always addressing Plath as if present and alive: still in existence. Part of the strength of the poems is this layered temporality, which serves to double their impact, and even at times produce the brief fiction of Plath's presence or re-animation as the layers blur into one.

## Chapter One

### “Snapshot Portrait Fixtures”<sup>1</sup>

Seek no stony camera-eye to fix  
The passing dazzle of each face  
In black and white, or put on ice  
Mouth’s instant flare for future looks

(“Epitaph for Fire and Flower”, *Collected Poems* 45)

The relationship between the camera-eye and the Medusa’s gaze, and the anxiety about portraiture and its potentially petrifying effects suggested in Plath’s “Epitaph for Fire and Flower”, recur in *Birthday Letters*. The image of the snapshot occurs obsessively, and the myth of Medusa haunts the text. The attitude shown towards the “camera-eye” in Plath’s work and in Hughes’s goes back to the superstition of the evil eye, and the notion that the photograph captures the photographed person’s soul or double, which is then in the power of the owner of the photograph who can cast spells over it. For Barthes this supposedly primitive attitude towards the snapshot is in fact that of the “realist”; he explains how photography differs from other forms of representation:

Photography’s Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call “photographic referent” not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. (sic)  
(*Camera Lucida* 76)

Following this logic, Barthes states that

the realists do not take the photograph for a “copy” of reality, but for an emanation of a *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art. To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation. (*Camera Lucida* 88)

Hughes evinced a similar attitude towards photographs; in a letter to Keith Sagar written in 1974 he asked Sagar to remove all but one of the photographs of him from his forthcoming critical work on Hughes because the photograph “sharpens, in any reader, the visual image of me, making the ‘telepathic’ interference correspondingly more difficult to counter”. Similarly he declined to attend a conference because of “the evil eye aspect” (letters to Sagar, qtd. in Patterson n.pag.).

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is from “Costly Speech” (170).

In this chapter I look at Hughes's linking of the Medusa and snapshot motifs and what they suggest about the impact Plath's poetic portraits of Hughes have had on his life. I discuss "Fulbright Scholars", "Drawing", "The Earthenware Head" and "Black Coat".

The opening poem of the volume, "Fulbright Scholars" (3), offers portraits of Hughes and Plath which will become paradigmatic: of Plath as caught in a snapshot, and of Hughes as dumbfounded. The dynamic suggested here is Medusan: Hughes, confronted by Plath's image, is rendered silent as if petrified by the Medusa's head; Plath, caught by the camera, is like the Medusa stilled by Perseus and become in turn his weapon, an instrument of petrification, like the camera.

Although the *Birthday Letters* poems are ordered roughly chronologically and span the area of Hughes's life that he spent with Plath, the sequence does not open with their initial meeting, or even his first glimpse or awareness of her. Rather it starts, paradoxically, with a memory of *not* remembering her. "Fulbright Scholars" notes his uncertain memory of seeing a photograph of the 1955 intake of Fulbright Scholars, of which Plath would have been one. He remembers seeing the picture – though he is not quite sure where he saw it ("was it in the Strand?")—but he does not remember noticing her in it. He knows in retrospect that Plath, who started at Cambridge on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1955, might have been in the photograph – indeed probably was.

Hughes opens with a question, seemingly addressed to himself – "Where was it, in the Strand?" – which stresses the uncertainty and fallibility of his memory. From the start, he does not claim to be providing an authoritative version of the past; rather, these poems constitute a searching out of the complex ramifications of a past that continues to haunt and elude him.<sup>2</sup> The opening question of the volume is apt: in *Birthday Letters* Hughes is continually trying to situate events, as if to map, and thus account for, the past. He then continues with another answer, explaining what the "it" is that is so memorable and striking:

A display  
Of news items, in photographs.  
For some reason I noticed it. (3)

It is in retrospect that the act of noticing it seems significant, seems to have "some reason" for it. What is striking to the reader is not "why did Hughes notice it then," but why does he notice this fragment of memory now: why does it seem significant now? "Display" stands out a little from the rest of the sentence – the word is resonant, and will chime with the sense of dramatization and public exposure of their lives in the poems to follow, and which haunts the volume. In retrospect it is unsurprising that Hughes should find so striking a memory of

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Whitehead makes this clear in her article "Refiguring Orpheus: The Possession of the Past in Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*".

photographs on display, for public consumption, possibly with Plath in them, and with an import relating to his own life (though he did not know it at the time). After her death Plath would become an iconic figure, her image mythic and much mediated.

Recalling the scholars, Hughes asks “Were you among them?”; the reader realizes now that he is addressing Plath rather than merely communing with himself. These poems are addressed to her, and it is she whom he turns to as he tries to retrace the past. Hughes describes his response to the picture; it is concentrated enough but, ironically, casual and disinterested –

I studied it,  
Not too minutely, wondering  
Which of them I might meet.  
I remember that thought. Not  
Your face. (3)

His description of his studied examination could be one with his focus here, a “wondering” study not too minute in detail: it is an imaginative recreation of what he did then which blurs with what he is doing here. He remembers wondering whom he would meet – a casual thought, ignorant of his later fate. This type of irony is typical of the poems. He is struck by the fact that he remembers this thought but not her face: “I remember that thought. Not / Your face”. He does not remember her face – either he did not see it, or if he did see it, he forgot it (he forgets seeing it). Either way, the conclusion of this is that he does not remember seeing her face now, a statement which in the context of the volume has a certain poignancy. His poems, ostensibly conjuring her as if present, are at the same time filled with images of her looking away, often bowed over her work, and not properly visible to Hughes. He says that “maybe” he “noticed” her:

No doubt I scanned particularly  
The girls. Maybe I noticed you.  
Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely. (3)

Presumably he feels “unlikely” because she is not his type – the cool, calculating appraisal of “weighed” suggests something of the sort. This makes the possibility of his even noticing her itself “unlikely”, an unlikeliness suggested by the repetition “Maybe...Maybe”. “Unlikely” comes to describe his feelings then and now. Such double duty, the ability of a word to colour previous words, is typical of the economic and nuanced use of words in the *Birthday Letters* poems.

He does not remember the picture but he moves into an imaginative recreation of how she appeared when she first came to Cambridge, and how she would most probably have

looked if she had been in the picture. Hughes himself did not meet Plath till a good six months after this and his own “memory”<sup>3</sup> here would have been influenced by extant photographs of her at that time:

Noted your long hair, loose waves –  
Your Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid.  
It would appear blond. And your grin.  
Your exaggerated American  
Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners.  
Then I forgot. (3)

This is an imaginative recreation; Hughes does not remember her face, but rather is doing the “noting” of the details of her hair now, albeit with the coolness of his eye then: the poem is casual, notational and conversational (at least this is how it initially appears; it moves at the end to a sense of stunned silence). Veronica Lake was an American star of wartime movies famous for her hairstyle, emulated by many women, including Plath. By mentioning Lake, Hughes also alludes to the Second World War and Plath’s American glamour. Plath’s glamour and American heritage are repeatedly juxtaposed with Hughes’s memory of the Second World War (compare “A Pink Wool Knitted Dress”, “Your Paris”, “The Beach”). He notices her bang, but not what it “hid”. In “18 Rugby Street” the reader will discover that it hides her scar from her near fatal suicide attempt of 1953. For the moment, one is only aware that what is hidden is something metaphorically “dark” – the bang “would appear blond”. Literally, her hair would “appear” blond because dyed (Plath was naturally brunette) but “appear” also suggests the tensions between realities and appearances and between Plath’s inner world and outer appearance, that haunt the text. Then he turns to her “grin”. It is at first simply a part of her American manners: “Your exaggerated American / Grin for the cameras”. The “cameras” are followed by more ominous recipients – “the judges, the strangers, the frighteners” – and the grin becomes not only a mannerism but a defence mechanism: it wards off the “frighteners”, an apotropaic mask (Hedley 39). Like her bang, her grin hides something darker: fear beneath her cheery and confident façade.

“Then I forgot” is abrupt – his vision of her ends instantly. Following immediately after the description of her face, the phrase is fallacious. Hughes surely cannot remember now forgetting the face *then*, for the simple reason that he does not remember seeing it in the first place. His entire description of her has been an imaginative recreation. He might have

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<sup>3</sup> As Whitehead and Hedley both point out, Hughes is “remembering” through photographs (*aides-memoire*). His own “memory” of Plath is mediated. The poem recognizes the impossibility for him to “recapture” his memory of Plath, removing it from the “contamination” of other people’s perceptions and interpretations, a wish he expressed in a letter to Anne Stevenson, Plath’s biographer: “My simple wish [is] 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” (qtd. in Malcolm 142).

forgotten the *picture* then, but what the poem suggests by the simple juxtaposition of its statements (this follows directly after his vivid recreation of her face) is that Hughes recalls forgetting her face. He *is* forgetting her face *now*: the imaginary image he has so vividly recreated, which has so vividly re-presented itself to him, slips from him in an instant. His inability to remember then, his not seeing her then, elides with his sudden stopping in his description now. Our sense that Hughes, by sleight of hand, is referring to forgetting the face rather than the picture is reinforced by the immediately following statement:

Then I forgot. Yet I remember  
The picture: the Fulbright Scholars. (3)

The picture's caption, which becomes the title of this poem, strikes him as much as anything else does. "Fulbright" is one of the many richly associative words which, by the economy of the writing and the intricate pattering of the poems, stands out for its internal resonances and connotations. Full-bright conveys the sense of shiny brightness and hopeful optimism that seemed to characterize Plath, specifically as a scholarship recipient, and that now haunts Hughes. Her prizes and successes are all marks of potential, and speak of a promising future; in "Wuthering Heights" Hughes, again envisaging Plath in a snapshot, compares her, supposedly with her life ahead of her, to Emily Brontë, her life cut short at thirty (as Plath's would be), saying

The future had invested in you –  
As you might say of a jewel [...]. (61)

In each poem the snapshot conveys a sense of its subject as ghostly and unreachable, as if proleptically configuring her death. Hughes was clear about the ghostliness and haunting power of the photograph from an early point in his career. In "Six Young Men" (*NSP* 17) (written in 1957) he used it to evoke the haunting horror of the First World War, describing a photograph of six young men all killed in war:

That man's not more alive whom you confront  
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,  
Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,  
Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;  
No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:  
To regard this photograph might well dement,  
Such contradictory permanent horrors here  
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out  
One's own body from its instant and heat. (18)

The vividness of the photograph confounds any comprehension of the death of those it portrays and seems somehow to still hold and keep alive. Barthes explains the paradox of those in photographs seeming both alive and immemorially dead that Hughes evokes in “Six Young Men”:

the photograph’s immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces the belief that it is alive...but by shifting this reality to the past (“this-has-been”), the photograph suggests that it is already dead. (*Camera Lucida* 79)

Here, in “Fulbright Scholars”, Hughes’s evocation of Plath as caught in a photograph creates a sense of Plath forever dead and out of reach, even before he meets her.

Near the close of the poem, Hughes juxtaposes this fragment of memory (of the picture) with another. In his mind, these memories are connected to each other whether or not they were temporally adjunct. Asking himself was it “then” that he bought a peach, he answers

That’s as I remember.  
From a stall near Charing Cross Station.  
It was the first fresh peach I had ever tasted.  
I could hardly believe how delicious.  
At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh  
By my ignorance of the simplest things. (3)

The tasting of the peach is a new encounter for Hughes, living in post Second World War England still suffering the deprivations of the war. The peach, like Plath with her American glamour and “Veronica Lake bang”, suggests a world beyond the war and its rationing. Following on from his wonderment – “I could hardly believe how delicious” – to “At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh”, the second line seems to elaborate on the first. But in fact the latter line is part of a new sentence and goes on to qualify itself: “By my ignorance of the simplest things”. Hughes is not simply dumbfounded at the peach, but at his own dumbfoundedness. In retrospect, his astonishment at his ignorance then, at twenty-five (when he is in fact comparatively innocent), is ironic – and the wonderment shifts beyond the poem: Hughes is astonished now by his astonishment then. It is as if the astonishment at the peach ripples outwards from it, and the experience is still fresh and alive: the freshness of the peach transfers itself and still communicates itself. “Fresh” elides also with the sense of newness and shock: and the experience of this transference, or rippling outwards, is mirrored on a linguistic level through the repetition of “fresh” in “afresh” two lines later.

The mention of “Charing Cross Station” is the first of many allusions to the underground. Here the delicate allusion to the underground is apt; it is consonant with the

earlier reference to the “Strand” (which suggests the shore of the Styx across which the dead are ferried to the underworld),<sup>4</sup> and possibly chimes with the biting of the peach, which seems an initiatory act. For Seamus Heaney this peach is also Persephone’s “pomegranate” (which wedded her to the underworld) (“A Wounded Power” n.pag.); for Katha Pollit it is the “forbidden fruit”(n.pag). Charing “Cross” is also suggestive; in “Caryatids (2)” (5) Hughes will describe himself as being at a crossroads (5). The entire tenor of “Fulbright Scholars”, with its references to the Strand, the underground (specifically Charing Cross Station) and the bitten fruit, is of Hughes being on the threshold of a journey. The tasting of the peach also elides with the later image in “St. Botolph’s” (14) of Plath biting him, and with the sense of him still reverberating from this shock at the end of that poem; he recalls

my stupefied interrogation  
Of your blue headscarf from my pocket  
And the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks  
That was to brand my face for the next month.  
The me beneath it for good. (15)

In “Fulbright Scholars” Plath is ghostly, held by an imaginary photograph, and Hughes is “dumbfounded”. Although the link between them is not direct, this relationship sets the pattern that recurs throughout the text: Plath as somehow missing or frozen and Hughes in shock, silenced by her loss. In his account of their first meeting, “St. Botolph’s”, they are similarly represented: she is “stilled in the camera’s glare”, he is “Stupefied”. He describes the setting:

The hall  
Like the tilting deck of the *Titanic*:  
A silent film, with that blare over it. Suddenly –  
Lucas engineered it – suddenly you.  
First sight. First snapshot isolated  
Unalterable, stilled in the camera’s glare. (14)

The traumatic meeting is burnt in memory as if a still, or snapshot: compare his impression of the Calder Valley (where he grew up) and how it bore the memory and scars of the First World War:

A slightly disastrous, crumbly, grey light, sunless and yet too clear, like a still from a documentary film from an accident. The hours could be terribly long and empty, when the whole valley looked like a pre-first-world-war snapshot of itself, grey and faded, yet painfully bleak and irremovable, as if nobody could

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<sup>4</sup> This makes a resonant and suggestive beginning for *Birthday Letters*, structuring it as a quest into the underworld.



In the caryatids poems Hughes clearly extends the motif of petrification and dumbfoundedness to include the impact her poetry has had on him. He recurrently depicts himself as if determined by Plath's representations of him: they capture him in a certain image and determine his life. This he links to her particularly visual imagination, what he calls the "still-life graphic artist in her" (introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 12).

This is well illustrated by "Drawing" (44). "Drawing" opens with a reminiscence of Plath sketching at Benidorm, where she and Hughes honeymooned in July/August 1956. The poem begins by asserting the calming effect drawing had on Plath, and then in turn on Hughes:

Drawing calmed you. Your poker infernal pen  
Was like a branding iron. Objects  
Suffered into their new presence, tortured  
Into their final position. As you drew  
I felt released, calm. Time opened  
When you drew the market at Benidorm.  
I sat near you, scribbling something.  
Hours burned away. (44)

The sense of calm and "release" is shadowed by a sense of Plath's pen as imprisoning:

You drew doggedly on, arresting details,  
Till you had the whole scene imprisoned. (44)

An ironical relationship is set up between the sense of release experienced by Hughes and Plath and the "imprisonment" of the subject matter. Similarly, for the artist the process of drawing "opens" time while it "arrests" in time what is depicted. Plath's "poker infernal pen" brands as if the objects copied were actually changed by her representation of them – they "suffer", and are "tortured" into their "final position". The process is metamorphic: what is depicted is fixed in that attitude perpetually, stuck there. Copies of Plath's pen drawings<sup>7</sup> show a bold, tight drawing style, every line joined up to another, and Hughes's evocation of a style tortuous, precise and meticulous is apt.

Her drawing and his "scribbling" are set up as analogous; the two occupations occur side by side, in tandem, as they sit nearby one another, a literalization of how the two creative processes – drawing and writing (cleverly described as "scribbling" which suggests a type of drawing)—parallel each other. The same word, "calm", describes them both, reinforcing the

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<sup>7</sup> For a reproduction of one of Plath's Benidorm drawings see page 281 of Newman's *The Art of Sylvia Plath*.

analogy between their two processes and also creating a sense of a happily and comfortably shared space. As elsewhere in the text, literal space mirrors psychic space.

“As you drew / I felt released, calm” creates the impression that her drawing has a magical effect on him. The “as” makes his state dependent on and continuous with her action. He is controlled by it at every moment.

If her drawing is imprisoning it is also memorializing, a “rescue”:

You drew doggedly on, arresting details,  
Till you had the whole scene imprisoned.  
Here it is. You rescued for ever  
Our otherwise lost morning. Your patience,  
Your lip-gnawing scowl, got the portrait  
Of a market-place that still slept  
In the Middle Ages. Just before  
It woke and disappeared  
Under the screams of a million summer migrants  
And the cliff of dazzling hotels. (44)

“Here it is” suggests that the picture is before Hughes, the starting point of this reminiscence, to which he is directly responding— or as if his recollection has magically recreated it. The deictic creates a sense of vivid immediacy, bringing the imaginary picture before the reader’s eyes. This method of presenting as if real and present something which is absent is typical of the poems. It emphasizes what is true of all poetry and words per se, but is made thematic in *Birthday Letters*: that words are substitutes, signs denoting what is absent rather than the “thing itself”. Plath’s words do not replace her and Hughes’s words cannot reconstitute her, or their connection. Hughes most often presents the reader with or refers to snapshots, evoking a sense of immediate reality, which is undercut by the sense that this is all entirely illusory.

In “Drawing”, Hughes links Plath’s activity here with her writing by his description of her “lip-gnawing scowl”. Throughout the book, she is frequently depicted as gnawing or pursing her lips when busy writing, and this phrase in “Drawing” directly echoes a description of her writing in “Portraits” (104):

Hardly a week before –  
Entranced, gnawing your lips, your fingers counting  
The touches of your thumb, delicately  
Untangling on your fingers a music  
That only you could hear, you had sat there,  
Bowed as over a baby,  
Conjuring into its shrine, onto your page,  
This thing’s dead immortal doppelgänger. (105)

The content of “Portraits” contextualizes what is being described in “Drawing”, reinforcing the sense that art has a magical relation to and power over life. In the above passage he tells

how her poem “Medallion” (124), describing a dead snake, anticipated their sighting of a real snake. The snake glides past as Plath is having her portrait painted by Howard, an artist friend. The similar descriptions of her at work in the two poems parallel the similar set-ups the poems describe. Both poems intimate the magical power that art, specifically “portraiture”, has over life. “Portraits” not only describes a poetic portrait that is prophetic (“Medallion”) and a portrait-in-process (Howard’s of Plath), but itself offers a portrait of Plath which is (knowingly) proleptic<sup>8</sup> in the context of *Birthday Letters*. “With horrible premonition” (“Portraits”, line 30) Hughes sees her as “tethered” in an inaccessible “chamber”, kept there by a curious “Humanoid of raggy shadows”—at this point only a vague “smudge”, but to become horribly realised in “Fairy Tale” (159) as an ogre. In “Fairy Tale” Plath will be carried away by an ogre to a secret chamber from which Hughes is again (at least initially) debarred.

In “Portraits” (104) the relation of art to life, and of original to representation, is very clearly seen to be a magical one, and representation and original are “doppelgängers” of one another. Double and original are linked by a sympathetic magic. Likewise, in “Your Paris” (36), where her drawing is again alluded to, a portrait and its subject are again seen to be in an uncanny relationship. Here Hughes refers to

Picasso’s portrait  
Of Apollinaire, with its proleptic  
Marker for the bullet. (37)

From the time Picasso and Apollinaire met in 1904, and particularly in 1905 and 1906, Picasso produced various depictions of Apollinaire with a mark on his forehead. In 1916 Apollinaire was to receive a serious head wound from shrapnel (Stegmuller 257).<sup>9</sup> “Your Paris” closes powerfully with an image of Plath drawing Hughes:

The mere dog in me, happy to protect you  
From your agitation and your stone hours,  
Like a guide dog, loyal to correct your stumblings,  
Yawned and dozed and watched you calm yourself  
With your anaesthetic – your drawing, as by touch,  
Roofs, a traffic bollard, a bottle, me. (38)

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<sup>8</sup> Proleptic rather than prophetic because Hughes is working retrospectively.

<sup>9</sup> Picasso’s depictions of Apollinaire are mostly sketchy and comic and this mark is very unpronounced – at most the caricature of a furrowed brow, or a dimple. It is likely that Hughes is misremembering (as he is about the supposed bullet, in fact the fragment of a shell) and has in mind a portrait of Apollinaire, done in 1914, by Giorgio de Chirico, an artist with whom Plath felt a great affinity (*Journals* 359). In de Chirico’s painting, “Premonitory Portrait of Apollinaire” (ironically it is a painting on the subject of the artist as seer), this mark is far more prominent, and is in the exact place where Apollinaire was to receive his head wound. Apollinaire himself referred to the painting as a portrait of himself as a “target man” (qtd. in Legrand 66).

As in “Drawing” (44) he watches her “calm” herself, but, as there too, he becomes aware, seemingly in the process of writing the poems, that he is the subject of her art and is himself stilled (though more sinisterly). He is the subject of her “drawing” in so much as he is being drawn by her (now) as he writes, and to some extent he, and his poem, are drawn in her image, under her influence (the influence of her eye).

In *Birthday Letters*, he fixes especially on the notion of *portraiture*, and on the effect art or representation might have on *identity*. In “Drawing” even the depiction of the market scene is described as a “portrait” (44). Hughes’s obsessive return to portraiture is unsurprising. Plath’s poetic portraits of Hughes have affected his public identity, and even his own sense of identity, arguably inseparable from how one is perceived in the eye of the other. Plath’s own poetry, with its self-dramatizing exploration of first person and its strange correlation to her own life, also suggests an intriguing relationship between portraiture/self-portraiture and identity.

Images of sleeping and waking are recurrent in *Birthday Letters* and in “Drawing” his description of her portraying the village that still “slept” before it “woke” is reflective of his own continuous, horrified sense of awakening in the text – an awakening occasioned by Plath’s death, which is almost immediately referred to after this description of the town disappearing

Under the screams of a million summer migrants  
And the cliff of dazzling hotels. As your hand  
Went under Heptonstall to be held  
By endless darkness. (44)

The two images – of the Benidorm they knew disappearing and of Plath’s grave (she was buried at Heptonstall) – are conjoined in his mind and coalesced by the word “as”; they appear as if occurring at the same time because analogous in his mind. Elsewhere in the text her death is characterized as followed by the screams and blinding light of public interest. Both the hand that executed the drawing, and the place the drawing represented, go “under” as if at the same time or by the same stroke – suggesting a relationship between creator and created similarly magical to that between original and representation.

Hughes sets up a number of parallels and contrasts between different types of “hands” and “holding”:

As your hand  
Went under Heptonstall to be held  
By endless darkness. While my pen travels on  
Only two hundred miles from your hand,  
Holding this memory of your red, white-spotted bandanna,  
Your shorts, your short-sleeved jumper –

One of the thirty I lugged around Europe –  
 And your long brown legs, propping your pad,  
 And the contemplative calm  
 I drank from your concentrated quiet,  
 In this contemplative calm  
 Now I drink from your stillness that neither  
 Of us can disturb or escape. (44-45)

Her hand is “held” by endless darkness while his pen travels on “only two hundred miles from your hand”. As at the beginning of the poem they are set up in parallel (the mention of her hand being held parallels his which “holds” a pen) and the physical distance between them is not too far. But they are now separated by death, an immeasurable distance. Their hands – hers dead in her grave at Heptonstall, his writing these poems – would seem to occupy utterly different realms, but a parallel is drawn between them, “while” suggesting some simultaneity between the hand held by endless darkness and his pen – here a metonym for his hand, which in turn is a metonym for his creative art. And indeed his “pen travels on” across the poems of *Birthday Letters* in a continuous present tense not dissimilar in manner to her hand being held “endlessly”. “Endless” ostensibly describes the darkness, but the phrase “endless darkness” signifies her death and it is her death which has fixed her hand “endlessly” – for good, in darkness – that is in her grave. Both hands are caught – hers in death and his, in the wake of her death, in trying to make contact with her through writing. He is fixated upon her and her death, as if he is still being “drawn” by her, in the sense that he is drawn to her. There is the sense that her hand exerts a control over him beyond the grave. As once she literally “drew” him, she now “draws” him insofar as he is metaphorically “drawn” to her as his poetic subject matter. By the end of the poem the simple title “Drawing” comes, punningly, to carry a number of different meanings, becoming a figure for fascination, inspiration and determination, or fate.

“Endless” picks up on Plath trying to capture the market place “for ever”. Page and grave are akin, and the “final position” of the representations (line 4) anticipates her “final position” of death. Art threatens to immobilize in the same manner that death fixes things irreversibly.

The mention of his pen, engaged in writing, is shadowed by the earlier mention of her pen drawing, making visual depictions elide into verbal ones. In this way, and in the context of the volume as a whole, the magical relationship between art and life comes to be a metaphor for the power Plath’s poetic representations have exerted over Hughes’s life (also the pen is a familiar metonym for creative art, and the power it may wield). His pen “holds” his memory rather than her hand. The immediate juxtaposition of “holding” and “your hand” suggests, behind what is actually being said, an image of held hands. His writing in fact is a substitute for, and metaphoric means of, holding her hand insofar as it is a means of having

contact with and communicating with her. His writing is also a means of metaphorically “carrying” something and in this respect is like a hand, or a pen which “holds”. His memory of “lugging” her clothes about continues the motif of holding, and the word “holding” coalesces what he did then (carried her clothes) with his remembrance of it now, itself a type of “holding”. This joining together of what he did then with what he does now, through the meaning of “holding” being doubled, brings everything into the vivid present, providing his recollection with a dramatic immediacy and intensity of aspiration and longing (as if time could be breached or overcome) typical of the *Birthday Letters* poems. Hughes’s “lugging” and “holding” in the context of other images of hands and holding in *Birthday Letters* come to have shades not just of “carrying” something in the sense of “carrying on” a tradition but of “carrying on” despite grief.

In the final lines of the poem Hughes returns to the memory that instigated the poem (and to the opening and key statement of it as well): “the contemplative calm / I drank from your concentrated quiet”. The reader at first assumes the “contemplative calm” will refer to her calm (he is, after all, describing his memory of her), but in the next line discovers it has been transferred to him – as it was then, when he imbibed it from her “concentrated quiet”. This transference from her state of mind to his is typical, and many of the poems follow this pattern. The repetition of the phrase “contemplative calm” and its parallel and identical placement at a line ending, reinforces the parallelism between them – their respective positions then and now – as he comes to bear, or carry, what then belonged to, and seemed particular to, her. He also evinces an awareness that by writing this poem he is doing to her what she once did to him, and this parallelism in their metaphorical positions is mirrored in the identical line positions of “contemplative calm”. At the end of this particular poem, her deathly calm comes to characterize him – her stillness is one that “neither / Of us can disturb or escape”.

The inescapable “stillness” recalls the stillness of the drawing, and the manner in which her portrait imprisoned and fixed the town. Ironically and with a self-reflexive twist, Hughes has become the stilled subject matter of his own poem rather than simply author. His “calm” is not now as at the start of the poem that of the detached observer but of an “object”, “suffered” into a “new presence”.

The stillness described at the close of the poem picks up and consolidates the earlier atmosphere of stillness evoked but there is also an ironic reversal between Hughes’s position then and now. Unable to “escape”, he and she are like the imprisoned subjects of her Benidorm drawing. Plath is inescapably “still” because dead, Hughes because he is transfixed and fascinated by Plath and her irreversible death which poetically he seems unable to move beyond. If he is paralysed by it, it also inspires this poetry – hence the paradox of a Medusan muse. “The Blue Flannel Suit” (67) ends similarly with an image of Hughes transfixed by the

spectre of Plath's death as he was (fascinated) by her earlier in their life. He describes an incident when he cannot fathom what Plath is thinking or experiencing and closes the poem:

But then I sat, stilled,  
Unable to fathom what stilled you  
As I looked at you, as I am stilled  
Permanently now, permanently  
Bending so briefly at your open coffin. (68)

Again the same word, "stilled", repeated in similar positions, blurs distinctions between then and now, him and her, and his contemplation of her then and now (through memory). This fascination now becomes an extension of his love for her then, of which visual fascination was a part as "St. Botolph's" (14) has made clear. Here she is "Unalterable, stilled in the camera's glare" (15), and he continues to be fascinated by this image:

I see you there, clearer, more real  
Than any of the years in its shadow –  
As if I saw you that once, then never again. (15)

In its last lines "Drawing" is self-reflexive about the manner in which it itself stills them into art and is also self-reflexive about its own source of inspiration – Plath's death.

Hughes makes it appear as if he is being drawn by Plath's hand as he writes. This is powerfully rendered at the close of "Your Paris" (36) too, with the lines "your drawing, as by touch [...] me" (38). The close of the poem comes with a self-reflexive twist – dozy, detached Hughes is forced into a sudden position of self-recognition/awareness as he has become both Plath's subject-matter and the subject matter of his own poem. The short, unexpected "me" reverberates in the gap left by the poem's sudden ending.

Her power over him, to fascinate, and as "Drawing" would have it, imprison him (like the imprisoned town), makes her akin to the figure of the Medusa. Traces of the Medusa myth haunt *Birthday Letters*: images of Plath's head recur in conjunction with the sense of Hughes as silenced or stilled and there are a number of images of petrification and paralysis (as with Hughes being stilled at the end of "The Blue Flannel Suit" [68] and "Drawing" [45])

In "Fever" (46) Hughes describes himself as the "stone man" (48); here a fear of petrification expressed in "The Rock", his account of his formative childhood landscape, appears to be realised. The rock overhanging the West Yorkshire valley where he grew up has an "evil eye" which implicitly threatens to petrify (422): West Yorkshire is described as a place where the graves are "too close to the surface" and the people "are not detached enough from the stone" (423). As Bentley notes, poetry implicitly becomes a mountaineering against this rock, a means of deflecting the "evil eye" of brute and depressing circumstance and

oppressive materiality (32). The shadow that the rock casts, like the glance of an evil eye, is one with the weight of all the dead of the First World War which hangs about the place. The depressed postwar mood of the place is burnt into his memory as a “documentary still of an accident” (a bleak variation of the “snapshot”), and the place itself looks like a “snapshot of itself” (422).

In “The Rock” Hughes uses the snapshot as an image of trauma; he also implicitly, via his allusions to the evil eye and petrification, connects it with the Medusa myth. In *Birthday Letters* poetry is also a mountaineering against the shadow/evil eye of an oppressive reality, this time the trauma of Plath’s death. Here the model of poetry is Perseus confronting Medusa with a mirror: Plath’s death, like the Medusa’s head, cannot be directly confronted, but only approached through the mirror of his poetry; also Hughes cannot see her, but can only perceive her through the mirror of her poetry, by going back to her words in which she is reflected. At the end of his poems, these reflections always prove themselves illusory: to be reflections and shadows of Plath rather than providing access to the real, as in the story of Narcissus, to which the myth of Medusa is closely linked (both figures are victims of their own reflections).

Medusa is a more explicit motif in Plath’s writings, the “Muse” over her work (Quinn 97). Her poem “Medusa” (224) makes of her mother a paralysing Medusa figure antagonistic to her attempts at writing. Originally entitled “Mum”, the poem puns on her mother’s name, Aurelia, also the name of the Medusa jellyfish. Her analysis of her relationship with her mother drew on Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*:

Read Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* this morning, after Ted left for the library. An almost exact description of my feelings and reason for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the “vampire” metaphor Freud uses, “draining the ego”: that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother’s clutch. I mask my self-abasement (a transferred hate of her) and weave it with my own real dissatisfactions in myself until it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is really bogus criticism from what is really a changeable liability. How can I get rid of this depression: by refusing to believe she has any power over me, like the old witches for whom one sets out plates of milk and honey. (*Journals* 447)

In “Medusa” she shows such “Mother’s clutch” to be paralysing and pictures its effects as of an internalized eye, similarly to how Freud describes the formation of the ego-ideal in *Mourning and Melancholia* (14: 247).

One of the poems in which Plath most obviously haunts *Birthday Letters* in the Medusan form of a severed head is “The Earthenware Head” (57). This work returns to Plath’s early poem (1957), “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” (69), in which the head is described as a “basilisk”, a close relative of the Medusa. In “The Earthenware Head” it is not

Plath's hand which fascinates and fixates Hughes from beyond the grave but her look, or eyes – other metonyms for her creative art.

Plath's poem describes a portrait clay head which an unnamed "lady", the original for the portrait, disposes of because it disturbs her. She lodges it in a willow tree, but even when she has put it out of sight it continues to haunt her and she feels its "basilisk-look" constantly upon her. The poem describes what in fact was an autobiographical incident: Plath herself is the original for the "lady" who feels herself bound by strange relationship to the head. The head was given to her by a roommate (M.B. Derr) in her junior year at Smith College (1953) (*Letters Home* 336) and she evidently cared enough for it to take it with her to Cambridge in 1955. In an earlier version of the poem (included in *Letters Home*) than that published in her *Collected Poems*, she suggests that it was Hughes who urged her to rid herself of it;<sup>10</sup> to her mother she wrote: "I didn't have the heart to throw it away because I've developed a strange fondness for the old thing in passing years" (7 February 1957, *Letters Home* 336). The head is something he did not want to recognize but which comes back to haunt him, as "The Earthenware Head" attests.

Hughes's poem starts in the shadow of her poem. Her head, the model for the earthenware head of her poem, haunts Hughes who constantly "looks back" in this poem to hers. The first line of Plath's poem, "Fired in sanguine clay, the model head", is directly echoed in the first line of his poem, "Who modelled your head of terracotta?": "model head" is echoed in "modelled your head" and the image of the sanguine clay in the simple word "terracotta". The poems are bound in a relationship akin to that of the original and the representation in Plath's poem, unsurprisingly – his poem is to some extent a representation or copy of hers, working from it as if from an original. Her vision insofar as it is represented

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes appears to be the original for the "visitor" described in the earlier version of the poem, in which the head is:

Far too unlovely a conversation piece,  
Her visitor claimed, for keeping.

And how unlike! In distaste he pointed at it  
[.....]  
Rude image indeed, to ape with such sly treason  
Her dear face: best rid  
Hearthstone at once of the outrageous head.  
With goodwill, she heard his reason,

But she – whether from habit grown overfond  
Of the dented caricature, or fearing some truth  
In old wives' tales of a bond  
Knitting to each original its coarse copy  
(Woe if enemies, in wrath,  
Take to sticking pins through wax!) – felt loath  
To junk it. (*Letters Home* 337-338)

by her poem, becomes internalized, as an eye that watches over him – not dissimilar to the earthenware head’s basilisk-look. It is the head’s look, the way its image haunts her as if watching her, that is the subject-matter of her poem. The opening stanza focuses on the head’s “eye”, and “look” –

eye under a dense lid,  
On the long bookshelf it stood  
Stolidly propping thick volumes of prose: spite-set  
Ape of her look. (69)

And the last stanza returns to it –

It ogled through rock-fault, wind-flaw and fisted wave –  
An antique hag-head, too tough for knife to finish,  
Refusing to diminish  
By one jot its basilisk-look of love. (70)

The ending comes with a twist: the mention of “love” is sudden and unexpected, as is its association with a basilisk – a mythical creature whose look and breath were fatal. In myth it is closely linked to the Medusa, whose glance was also lethal, and the two appear as variants of one another. Traditionally, both the Medusa’s and the Basilisk’s gaze are linked with the superstition of the evil eye<sup>11</sup> and with the notion of a fatal attraction based on looks/looking (Spence n.pag.). As Quinn notes, “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” “develops the evil eye theme” (109). In her early poetry Plath herself frequently links love and death, and passion is a destructive and devouring force, often depicted as fire. In this poem love is persecutory, ogling through everything, unavoidable and inescapable (one thinks of Hercules’s shirt of flame). At approximately the time of writing “The Earthenware Head” (early 1957) she was also busy on a novel, “Falcon Yard”, which took its name from the place where she and Hughes met (mentioned in “St. Botolph’s” [14]) and which was to deal with “the redemptive power of love”, and specifically her and Ted’s love (*Journals* 275 and 284). If love is painful it is also redemptive, an attitude which persists in her later poetry.<sup>12</sup>

In “The Earthenware Head” Hughes describes the head and their response to it:

Life-size, the lips half-pursed, raw-edged  
With crusty tooling – a naturalistic attempt  
At a likeness that just failed. You did not like it.  
I did not like it. Unease magnetized it

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<sup>11</sup> “The story of Medusa is but an incident in the evil eye and should be carefully studied by all interested in the subject” (Frederick Turner Elworthy, qtd. in Quinn 109).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, her introduction to “Fever 103” where she talks of the fires of heaven which purify (*Collected Poems* 293, note 188).

For a perverse rite. (57)

The untraceable discrepancy between the head's look and Plath's is disturbing. Their response is to put the head out of sight, as if there were something they would prefer not to see.<sup>13</sup> In *Birthday Letters* she is repeatedly described as with "lips half-pursed", a characteristic mode of hers indicating concentration. It also provides the sense of a suddenly caught moment, as if she were metamorphosed, and transfixed in that attitude.

The description of the head as magnetic recalls Plath's description of it in a much later (18 February 1958) journal entry. Deciding to entitle her next volume of poetry "The Earthenware Head", she explains the choice as follows:

It is derived, organically, from the title & subject of my poem "The Lady & the Earthenware Head", and takes on for me the compelling mystic aura of a sacred object, a terrible and holy token of identity sucking into itself magnet wise the farflung words which link & fuse to make up my own queer & grotesque world – out of earth, clay, matter, the head shapes its poems & prophecies, as the earth-flesh wears in time, the head swells ponderous with gathered wisdoms. [. . .] This book title gives me such staying power [. . .]. (sic) (*Journals* 332)

The head persists past "earth-time", gathering things to it, compelling and shaping "magnet wise" poems and prophecies; it is an avatar and totem of her immortal, poetic self – what gives her "staying power" – and is represented as such in his poem about it (itself a poem magnetically drawn to, and shaped by it). Hughes himself recurrently uses the term magnetic to describe how words may shape lives or writing. In "Myth and Education" he claims that a story that is learnt well, so that it becomes like a "word" (a unit of imagination which gives access to a vast hinterland of associations and meanings), "has magnetized our life into a special pattern" (139, and quoted in my introduction [5]).<sup>14</sup> He claimed too that the literature of the past magnetizes (that is shapes and orders) our own writings, using a similar image to that of Plath's "mother clutch" in his description of English poetic tradition as a "terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus". Speaking of this image in an interview in 1970, he explained:

What I meant by the octopus was the terrific magnetic power of the tradition to grip poets and hold them. [. . .] And some of the great poets are such powerful magnetic fields they remake us in their own image before we're aware. Shakespeare in particular of course. (qtd. in Faas 201)

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<sup>13</sup> Hughes's claim that she, too, disliked it contradicts the evidence of her own writings.

<sup>14</sup> Compare Hughes's notion that "A simple tale, told at the right moment, transforms a person's life with the order its pattern brings to incoherent energies" ("Myth and Education" 153).

In *Birthday Letters* Plath herself is acknowledged as such a literary predecessor, particularly by Hughes's depiction of her in "The Earthenware Head". He aptly returns to a figure which she herself recognised as a totem of her poetic self and envisioned as having "magnetic" powers. Moreover, the sense created in "The Earthenware Head" of an internalized eye chimes with Plath's fear of "Mother's clutch".

"Magnetized" also links with a number of other images of magnetism, fascination and duality within *Birthday Letters*. In "Night-ride on Ariel" (174) Plath's mother has a "magnetic eye" which exerts control over her (making her "dance" on her father's coffin, an image for her poetry in *Birthday Letters*). It is an internalized eye, as haunting as the "basilisk-look" of the head, which continues to influence her despite being out of sight. Plath herself connected her mother (her internalization of her mother's views, complexes – her mother's "eye") with the Medusa's gaze, and in these references Hughes subsumes a lot of Plath's own interpretation of her own complexes.

In "The Earthenware Head" the head disturbs them both and they feel the need to get rid of it as if exorcizing themselves of it. "Perverse rite" suggests the ritualistic nature of this act, and the superstitious nature of the impulse which gives rise to it. Her own poem suggests a similar attitude to the head: it is an "effigy" which they lodge "ceremoniously". Their poetry at this time, particularly Hughes's, was heavily influenced by Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* and was self-consciously seen to be part of a tradition of ritual and magic. Before she met Hughes, Plath had read Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and was especially fascinated by his chapter "The Perils of the Soul",<sup>15</sup> which describes how in certain societies reflections and representations are considered as magically linked to their object of reference and to somehow contain their souls. In the same journal entry on the head in which she describes it as a "token of identity", she makes the exclamatory note: "how all photo-portraits do capture our souls!" (*Journals* 332).<sup>16</sup> Plath was particularly drawn to Freud and his linking of art, magic, religion and primitive society. Her undergraduate dissertation, "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels" draws on Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (Britzolakis 118), which directs the reader for its premises to his earlier work

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<sup>15</sup> In a letter (dated 13 October 1954) to her mother, Plath writes, "Your book gift, *The Golden Bough*, comes in handy, as it has an excellent chapter on 'the soul as shadow and reflection' " (*Letters Home* 156).

<sup>16</sup> This is discussed by Frazer:

As with the shadows and reflections, so with portraits; they are often believed to contain the soul of the person portrayed. [. . .] Some villagers in Sikkim [. . .] hid away whenever the lens of a camera, or 'the evil eye of the box' as they called it, was turned on them. They thought it took away their souls with their pictures, and so put it in the power of the owner of the pictures to cast spells on them [. . .]. (193)

*Totem and Taboo*, in which art, magic and religion are linked and the psychological power of art is emphasized.<sup>17</sup>

Referring to their wish to dispose of the head in a “perverse rite”, Hughes asks what “possessed us / To take it with us in your red bucket bag?”. Possession is a recurrent word and motif which acquires great resonance across the poems but which he uses here in a perfectly simple, idiomatic way that at first is not striking. Yet the line ending after the first part of the sentence, “what possessed us”, makes the question resonant and more generally relevant. He immediately turns to a description of place; and there is a sense in which a spirit of place “possesses” them, here and elsewhere in the text. The atmosphere of the place is keenly evoked; it is an autumn/winter (November) scene, pastoral and beautiful in a way, yet with a sense of melancholy created by the images of willows, waters, haze, bare trees and leaves floating down the river. The description of the chosen willow as a “twiggy crotch” recalls the phrase “a crotched willow” in her poem. Again his words directly echo hers, setting up a labyrinthine hall-of-mirrors echo effect as the reader works between his writings and hers. Such direct echoes seem to answer to and engage with Plath’s poems as if Hughes is speaking with her, but as in the tale of Echo and Narcissus (re-told by Hughes in *Tales from Ovid*) the final effect is generally one of loneliness and self-consciousness as the poems self-reflexively double back on themselves as they close, and the illusion of the other’s presence disappears.

The description of the niche as “nearly an owl’s porch” is ominous. The owl is traditionally a portent of death, and it is in this guise that it appears in *Birthday Letters*.<sup>18</sup> The niche in the willow is described as a “mythic shrine for your double”. “Shrine” recalls her description in the last stanza of “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” of the head as “shrined on her shelf” and has religious connotations which reinforce the sense of the act as a “rite”. The description of the head as a “mythic double” is resonant. In her journal entry quoted above she herself described the model head as a “Double” as well as a “mirror-twin” and “Muse” (*Journals* 333). In her poem she describes the head as a “basilisk”, a creature related to the Medusa, which becomes a mythic double for Plath in *Birthday Letters*.

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<sup>17</sup> Freud describes the “uncanny” as follows:

We appear to attribute an ‘uncanny’ quality to impressions that seek to confirm the omnipotence of thoughts and the animistic mode of thinking in general, after we have reached a stage at which, in our *judgement*, we have abandoned such beliefs. (13: 86)

<sup>18</sup> In “The Owl” (33), another poem set at Grantchester, an owl swoops upon Hughes. In “Stubbing Wharfe” (106), prophecy is compared to an owl swooping past, and this movement is echoed later in the poem by an image of a “silent wing” of Plath’s “grave” going over her (107). Hughes would have been self-conscious about the symbolism of the owl. In his tale of Myrrha (*Tales from Ovid*) he describes an owl as “death’s doppelgänger” (124), adding to Ovid’s text where the owl is simply “bubo funereus”, “a funereal owl” (Book X, line 452).

The head “watches” rather than simply faces East, suggesting a certain animation (as if alive and having supernatural powers) and vigilance:

And a willow tree  
Was a Herm, with your head, watching East  
Through those tool-stabbed pupils. We left it  
To live the world’s life and weather for ever. (57)

The description “tool-stabbed pupils”, in its sudden, rough violence, after the gentle, pastoral scene, jolts the reader. In his poem too, as in hers, it is the image of the eyes, or look/gaze, which surprises, as if in a transference of the stunning power of the basilisk’s look to the poem itself which “stabs” at this point. As in her poem, this look is perpetual – the notion of it “watching East” creates an impression of it watching the sunrise, which rises each day without variation, and they leave it to live or suffer the “world’s life and weather for ever”. There is an ambiguity about the word “live” – the head is inanimate, and moreover stuck in one place. It is reminiscent of a metamorphosed creature, somewhere between life and death (or as in the case of Myrrha or Tithonus condemned to life without the escape of death). The internal rhyme of the “weather for ever” makes for a strong line ending and the first section closes heavily on this haunting image of the eyes looking out “for ever”.

The poem breaks here with this picture of the head as everlasting and “watching”, and he moves on to how the image of it continued to pursue her, and how she tried to exorcize herself of it through poetry:

You ransacked thesaurus in your poem about it,  
Veiling its mirror, rhyming yourself into safety  
From its orphaned fate. (57)

The notion of veiling a mirror extends the earlier intimation that there is some resemblance in the head that they would prefer not to see: this head becomes the suppressed other/double of Plath, and a mythic avatar of the now dead Plath and all her strength and magnetic power.

She “rhymes” herself into “safety” in a protective defence mechanism continuous with the previous act of getting rid of the head. “Rhyme” is talismanic, their art akin in its impulse to the superstition which motivated the disposal of the head. The mentions of “rhyme” and her “thesaurus” suggest that her writing is a defensive means of protection. “Rhyming” as an act of defence is also a way of metaphorically holding up a mirror to something, as in Plath’s early poem “Perseus: The Triumph of Wit over Suffering”<sup>19</sup> (82). In this poem, she offers

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<sup>19</sup> The poem is an ephrasis of Paul Klee’s drawing, *Perseus, der Witz hat über das Leid gesiegt* (1904). Klee “portrays a complete reversal of roles – Perseus is painted full face with a terrible countenance, while Medusa turns aside” (Dumoulié 781).

Perseus as a model of the artist holding up a mirror to Medusa and all the horrors she embodies, and thus outwitting her gaze and her suffering by his wit and reflection.

In “The Earthenware Head” she rhymes herself into safety not just from the head, but also from “its orphaned fate”. In “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” Plath expresses an anxiety that the image is somehow related to the original, and a fear that if the head is harmed she might be. She envisages it as maltreated by “rough boys” who

Might well seize this prize,  
Maltreat the hostage head in shocking wise,  
And waken the sly nerve up

That knits to each original its coarse copy. (69)

The image of its fate as “orphaned” picks up on it as abandoned by them: “We left it” (second last line of the first section). Despite even her attempt to exorcize it through poetry, it “would not leave you”. His poem here continues where hers left off:

Weeks later

We could not seem to hit on the tree. We did not  
Look too hard – just in passing. (57)

“Just in passing” makes light of an anxiety at not being able to find it again:

Already

You did not want to fear, if it had gone,  
What witchcraft might ponder it. You never  
Said much more about it.<sup>20</sup> (57-58)

The poem then breaks and pauses and Hughes asks “What happened?” rather than “What happened to it?”. The more general, rhetorical question suggests that he thinks this incident might provide a clue to the more general story of “what happened”. In “The Earthenware Head” there is the sense that if they could trace the head’s fate their own might be accounted for. Similarly in “Error” (122), their move into Devon, a literal move, seen in retrospect as in the wrong direction, opens up into the more general question “What wrong fork / Had we taken?” (122), that is, where did we go wrong? and there is an attempt to retrace an erroneous and fateful course. Although the question “What happened?” is strongly rhetorical, he has been addressing Plath, and this question continues to be addressed to her,

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<sup>20</sup> Plath definitely did see the head once more; in a letter to her mother she speaks of going to visit it: “I returned there for the first time today, and there it was [. . .] gazing out over the lovely green meadows with the peace that passes understanding” (*Letters Home* 336). The claim that she “never / Said much more about it” is odd, given that she later intended calling a volume of her poetry “The Earthenware Head” and wrote so passionately about it in her journal. The journals also record an instance when she is upset at Hughes’s criticism of “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” (*Journals* 272).

creating a sense of her as an all-seeing and omniscient source of information, looking on from the dead. This makes her elide even more with the earthenware head with its “basilisk-look” that “ogles through” everything. Hughes answers himself “Maybe nothing happened” and immediately continues with “Perhaps”, ostensibly picking up on the pragmatic and dismissive “maybe” but actually moving into an entirely different line of thought – he offers visions of the head, or its fate, which clearly belong to the realm of the imagination:

Perhaps  
 It is still there, representing you  
 To the sunrise, and happy  
 In its cold pastoral, lips pursed slightly  
 As if my touch had only just left it.  
 Or did boys find it – and shatter it? Or  
 Did the tree too kneel finally? (58)

“Representing you / To the sunrise” recalls the description of the head looking “East”, and conveys a sense of her being caught perpetually in the iterative – as artwork she is endlessly “re”presented, to and in the passing days, as the sun goes on rising every day. This is an adequate image for her own fate, or that of her work. She, her image and her work are endlessly re-interpreted and reconstructed in representations of her, critical or creative. “Still” adds combined resonances of fixity, as if it is paused/frozen and trapped there, and of endlessness.

“Happy” sits precariously at the edge of the line and there is a pause before it is given a qualifying context: (perhaps) it is “happy” in its own (limited) realm, a “cold pastoral”, which like its antecedent in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (line 45) has passed and survives only in fixed and frozen form as representation. The “cold pastoral” evoked in the first section of the poem –

November fen-damp haze, the river unfurling  
 Dark whorls, ferrying slender willow yellows (57)

– is literally “cold”, a November scene, but also “cold” metaphorically because the time in which it occurred has passed, and it is confined to a representation. It is cold in the manner of a stone or a corpse, inanimate. In Keats’s poem the “cold” contrasts with an earlier description of a “happy love”, “warm” and “panting” as if alive. Hughes’s collocation of “happy” and “cold pastoral”, virtually in the same breath, delicately condenses and alludes to the antitheses which “Ode on a Grecian Urn” sets up:

More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
 For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,  
 For ever panting, and for ever young –

[.....]  
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!<sup>21</sup> (lines 25-27, 44-45)

“Lips pursed slightly” recalls the earlier description of the head with “lips half-pursed” and the entire sentence (from “Perhaps” to “left it”) could be a literal re-statement of the earlier description of the head and its disposal. All the details mentioned here – of the pursed lips, of the head looking towards the sunrise, of his hand as being the last to touch it, of the scene as a “cold pastoral” – have been anticipated. The enjambment between “lips pursed slightly” and “As if my touch had only just left it”, however, suggests not that the latter line qualifies the entire description (that is perhaps it is still there, just as I left it) but that its lips have pursed slightly in response to his touch. It is as if it had briefly come alive, or been transfigured. Here, Plath’s head is brought to life through Hughes’s poetry. There is the briefest illusion of animation. Although the reader knows that Hughes’s “touch” literally refers to his placing of the head in the willow, the context of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” suggests that the touch could be that of a kiss. The moment that is immortalized here as metamorphic is that of their lips just separating, rather than its opposite, frozen moment in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, where the lovers are stopped always about to kiss (lines 17-18). In “The Earthenware Head” the brief, but frozen, separation is a haunting image for their relationship – which Hughes believed would be restored (Ezard n.pag.).

Hughes then posits alternative fates for the head:

Or did boys find it – and shatter it? Or  
 Did the tree too kneel finally? (58)

The first alludes to the fear expressed in her poem of the “rough boys” finding it and waking the sly nerve “That knits to each original its coarse copy”. The second is enigmatic. “Finally” together with the image of the tree “too” kneeling, as if in unison with the rest of creation, suggests a scene almost apocalyptic. The image of kneeling also prefigures the action of prayer, which Hughes will seem to move into at this point. Having suggested these fates, he makes a break and in the last section offers a vision he would like to assert:

Surely the river got it. Surely  
 The river is its chapel. And keeps it. Surely [. . .]. (58)

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<sup>21</sup> The statement that immediately precedes the exclamation “Cold Pastoral!”, “Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity”, is a strong subtext of “The Earthenware Head”. It is in her silence that Plath is Medusa, a figure of fascination. Such “silence” is also part of the fascination of art works: as Plato notes – “they seem to want to speak to us, but when you ask them questions they go on saying the same things forever” (*Phaedrus* section 275).

The chapel recalls the earlier image of the shrine, and this incantation, like the previous act of shrining the head in the willow, becomes a way of metaphorically housing Plath's image. Indeed the poem itself, as it moves towards prayer, becomes like a chapel.

The repetition of "Surely the river" and again of "Surely" within the space of two lines, with all three "surelys" placed either at the beginning or the end of a line, suggests that Hughes is using repetition in a magical way akin to the manner in which he earlier claimed Plath used rhyme. He is "rhyming" Plath's image "into safety". "And keeps it" suggests a desire for preservation, even immortalization. Hughes here is exalting her into the realm of the mythic. Like a metamorphosed creature, she is lifted onto a plane beyond life or death and made permanent.

In "The Lady and the Earthenware Head" the lady had at first considered getting rid of the head by placing it in a "dark tarn", but she imagines the head "Lewdly beckoning" towards her, willing her to drown. In the last section of "The Earthenware Head" Hughes imagines the head drowned and reconciled with the "Father". This echoes not only the image of drowning in Plath's poem but more specifically the wish for drowning and a mysterious reunion with her father expressed by the speaker in Plath's "Full Fathom Five" (92):

Your shelled bed I remember.  
 Father, this thick air is murderous.  
 I would breathe water. (93)

"Full Fathom Five" takes its title from Ariel's song in *The Tempest* about the magical transformation and preservation of Ferdinand's drowned father:

Full fathom five thy father lies.  
 Of his bones are coral made;  
 Those are pearls that were his eyes;  
 Nothing of him that doth fade  
 But doth suffer a sea-change  
 Into something rich and strange. (1.2.399-404)

In "The Earthenware Head" Hughes imagines Plath as similarly transfigured, and also as reunited with her lost, drowned father:

Surely

Your deathless head, fired in a furnace,  
 Face to face at last, kisses the Father  
 Mudded at the bottom of the Cam,  
 Beyond recognition or rescue,  
 All our fears washed from it, and perfect,  
 Under the stained mournful flow [. . .]. (58)

Hughes clearly has in mind not only Plath's "Full Fathom Five" but the inspiration behind it. The unusual and strikingly placed word "Mudded" echoes Alonso's desire in *The Tempest* to join, by drowning, his son Ferdinand (whom he thinks lost):

Therefore my son i'th' ooze is bedded, and  
I'll seek him deeper than e'er plummet sounded,  
And with him there lie mudded. (3.3. 100-102)

"Your deathless head" refers to the earthenware head left "to live [. . .] for ever", an art object beyond either life or death; but the phrase also blurs into an image of Plath's head as Hughes metamorphoses her through his own art and attempts to render her, or his memory of her, "deathless" through art. "Fired in a furnace" literally refers to the clay head's firing, and also suggests this is an alchemical process which transfigures the head, rendering it "perfect". Fire is frequently associated with love in Plath's work, and it is difficult not to connect these fires with the refining fires of love; in a letter to her mother written in her first year at Cambridge, Plath herself claims: "I am being refined in the fires of pain and love" (*Letters Home* 249). Love and perfection are the subtexts of the next phrase too. "Face to face at last" recalls St Paul's text on love (1 Corinthians 13) where he too images a reunion with the "Father", as the creator: "For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face" (*The Holy Bible: The Revised Version* 1 Cor. 13.12). Significantly, Hughes, in "The Earthenware Head", does not envision a reunion with *her* father, but with "the Father". By linking Plath's desire (expressed in "Full Fathom Five") for (re)union with her father to St. Paul's essentially religious vision, Hughes recontextualizes it. He highlights what he believed was the strongly mystical and visionary core of Plath's poetic talent and of her poetic vision of her father.<sup>22</sup> This re-union is not darkly incestuous, but accords with images of divine incest that recur in various mythologies,<sup>23</sup> and with Hughes's notion of "Poetry as the voice of Eros" ("The Poetic Self"

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<sup>22</sup> See Hughes's discussion of Plath's poem "Ariel", in which he claims:

Behind that poem is the myth of Phaeton – Phaeton hopeful: a mythic image of her relationship with her inaccessible, worshipped father, which was a subjective experience, going back to her childhood, with a strong visionary and mystical core (the core of her mythic personality). (*SGCB* 41)

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Chapter 5, "Symbols of the Mother and of Rebirth", of Jung's *Symbols of Transformation* (vol. 5 of *The Collected Works*), and particularly pages 222-224, for a discussion of these symbols and their occurrence in various mythologies. Jung points out the symbolic rather than literal nature of these images of divine incest, and draws a parallel with the symbolic purport of "the *nuptiae chymicae*, the *coniunctio* of alchemy" (223), the object of which was rebirth. Jung claims that in such myths it "is not incestuous cohabitation that is required but rebirth" (224). The Jungian interpretation of the alchemical *coniunctio* as in quest of, and an allegory of, the rebirth of the perfect, divine or "individuated" self is constantly reiterated by Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, particularly in Chapter VI, his discussion of *The Tempest*.

268). In *Birthday Letters* the image of divine rebirth through sacred incest is echoed in “Child’s Park” (69), where Hughes envisions Plath as “fearless / To meet your Father” and as imagining “a veil-rending defloration / And a rebirth out of the sun” (70).

In “The Earthenware Head” the image of the head kissing the Father recalls the earlier image of its lips “pursed” as if in response to Hughes’s touch. There is some blurring between the roles of father and Hughes: as elsewhere in the text they are doubles for, and shadow, one another. By imagining her as reconciled with her father, Hughes gestures towards a hoped-for but seemingly impossible reconciliation of himself with her. The image of the kiss also recalls Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and the manner in which it contrasts the pros and cons of art and life:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 17-20)

Hughes’s imagined kiss posits a transfiguration, a coming alive beyond the imprisonment of Keats’s subject, as well as a perfection that is the property of art. Plath “at last” reaches her “goal”, coming “face to face with the Father” rather than merely winning near it. There is also, however, a deep note of sadness and resignation in Hughes’s lines. He himself is like the lover on the urn perpetually separated from his beloved: he and Plath are separated by the unimaginable divide between life and death and cannot see “face to face”.

Like the earlier phrase “and happy”, “and perfect” strikes out a little from the rest of the line and has the same sense of sadness and chill and qualification. Perfection denotes stillness and completion and its realm – like that of the “cold pastoral” – is of art rather than life. In St Paul’s text it is imaginable only after death. Moreover, the perfection is achieved through being “washed” by the “stained mournful flow” of the river. It appears to arrive through what Hughes in his essay on T.S. Eliot calls “the alchemy of mourning” (“The Poetic Self” 289).

At the end of the poem Hughes again evokes the atmosphere of Cambridge, and greets in spirit, or salutes (as the head is “saluted”), Rupert Brooke’s “The Old Vicarage, Grantchester,”<sup>24</sup> which closes

Stands the church clock at ten to three?  
And is there honey still for tea? (lines 140-141)

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<sup>24</sup> Suitably, Brooke’s poem also looks back to an isolated time of happiness. Writing in Berlin, he considers Grantchester as a mythic place of peace and loveliness, amidst other areas of Europe and even Britain (other places are parodied, but Grantchester remains untainted and Edenic).

Brooke's stopped clock and honey are echoed here. The head is imagined as if

saluted  
 Only in summer briefly by the slender  
 Punt-loads of shadows flitting towards their honey  
 And the stopped clock. (58)

The "slender / Punt-loads of shadows flitting" down the river are shadowed by the earlier description of the river "ferrying slender willow yellows". These shadows are akin to those ferried across the Styx; certainly the brevity and vanity of their existence is emphasized. Moreover, the stress pattern of "the stópped clóck", the placement of this phrase at the end of the sentence, and the curt shortness of the line itself, suggest a brutal cessation.

The images of summer and honey would seem to contrast with the earlier wintry evocation of Grantchester, but this too is a frozen idyll, existing in a time past and irrecoverable – the clock is stopped.<sup>25</sup> Brooke's depiction of England before the Great War captures what seems a photographic moment and is akin to Philip Larkin's "MCMXIV" or Hughes's own "Six Young Men" (*NSP* 17). All three poems show prewar England as a place of irretrievable innocence and the past as irrevocable; in "Six Young Men" Hughes explicitly renders this sense of a time lost or frozen by describing the vision of the past as a photograph – in it, time appears to be bizarrely arrested, confounding any comprehension of the death of those it still portrays. He uses the photograph similarly in *Birthday Letters*. In "Perfect Light" (143) Plath's innocence becomes a property of the photograph, which removes the scene from the taint of time and history, isolating it as a moment of pure happiness:

And the knowledge  
 Inside the hill on which you are sitting,  
 A moated fort hill, bigger than your house,  
 Failed to reach the picture. While your next moment,  
 Coming towards you like an infantryman  
 Returning slowly out of no-man's-land,  
 Bowed under something, never reached you –  
 Simply melted into the perfect light. (143)

Hughes strikingly ends his poem on the earthenware head with the word "evil" where Plath had ended her own on the word "love". She had described the head as "evil-starred" but had emphasized "love" more strongly. By ending his poem with "evil" where she had ended

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<sup>25</sup> The allusion to "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester" also recalls a letter of Sylvia's to her mother shortly after her arrival at Cambridge (it is dated 18 October 1955); she describes having tea at Grantchester: "Remember Rupert Brooke's poem? Well we had tea by a roaring fire [. . .] and the 'clock was set at ten of three' and there was the most delectable dark clover honey [. . .]" (*Letters Home* 210). Hughes's poem gains an added pathos from this context of Plath's enthusiasm for Cambridge and her evocation of a literary pastoral of which she has become – and is becoming through his mythicization of her in "The Earthenware Head" – a part.

hers with “love”, Hughes sets the two terms in an intriguing relationship. He establishes a mirroring relationship between them: they appear as if opposite sides of the same coin. The head as “evil” here is a far cry from its imagined apotheosis in the preceding section, where Hughes had alluded to St. Paul’s text on love. The words mark the breaking of the reverie: it is the first time the head is simply “the head” rather than “your head” and Hughes here reflects on Plath’s response to the head, rather than blurring Plath and the head. Yet, although these words mark the breaking of his reverie, and his return to Plath’s words which still haunt him, there is an odd sense of continuity and finality (aided by the repetition of the word, which is given an entire line to itself). Hughes’s fascination with the head shows him to be drawn to or by something darker than one would customarily associate with “love”. His fascination here is akin to that described in “Portraits” (104), where the word “evil” is again repeated in quick succession. In this poem Howard tells him that the snake he deems beautiful and which, like the head, has a magnetic power, “thrills” him because it is evil:

‘You like it,’ he said,  
‘Because it’s evil. It’s evil, so it thrills you.’ (105)

In describing the head as having a “basilisk-look of love” Plath herself seems to have been drawing on a tradition where love, fascination and the superstition of the evil eye are linked, and where the basic substance of love can also be that of envy and evil (Spence n.pag.).<sup>26</sup>

“The Earthenware Head”, then, evokes the power of art (particularly portraits) over life and itself attempts, through its own prayer-like art, some transformation. Rhyme, patterning and art become talismans of power, as in “The Gypsy” (116). In this poem, an elderly gypsy woman curses Plath: “Vous / Crèverez bientôt” (“you will soon be dead”). In response Hughes

Talismans of power, in cyghanedd,<sup>27</sup> rhymed  
To neutralize her venom. (117)

Within *Birthday Letters* itself the curse is seen to come true: Plath will die not long afterwards, and in retrospect she seems to Hughes already deafened in a “crypt”, lost to him. The scene depicted is proleptic, like that in “Portraits”(104). By constructing his story proleptically, Hughes reinforces the sense that art prefigures life.

<sup>26</sup> See Plath’s “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover” (325) for a poem which explicitly works out of this tradition. The superstition of the evil eye relies on the extramission theory of light (the notion that light is emitted from the eye).

<sup>27</sup> Cyghanedd is a heavily alliterative Welsh verse governed by strict rules for the patterning of its consonants; it is mentioned by Graves in *The White Goddess* (18). Its formalism and the bardic tradition it comes from are suited to Hughes’s “talismanic” use of words here.

In his references to magic, *cursing* and superstition Hughes is not being simplistic or literal. The incidents he offers act as tropes or allegories of, and reflect on, other more complex workings. Insofar as he employs the magical power of art as a metaphor for the power Plath's art has exerted over his own life (the cursing power of her words), he does not imagine a direct link between artwork and original. The cursing power of words depends, as Jeanne Favret-Saada notes, "on the authority of a collective discourse":

If anyone can be caught by spells, the question is not one of knowing whether or not the spells are objectively true or false but whether it is true that words can kill. And this is proved every day by psychoanalysts in the private speech of their patients. In witchcraft the private vows of death are in addition upheld by the authority of a collective discourse, which has been effective over several generations. This is why it is in no way irrational and even less stupid to believe in spells. (1168)

The public's interpretations and reception of Plath's work have had a great effect on Hughes's life and it is they who sanction and make real the power of her art. Hughes most frequently alludes to the effects of the public mediation of her poetry upon his life through references to photographs or "snapshots" (emphasizing the violence and violation of the public's enquiry). As Barthes notes, the photograph presents an apt image of the private become public (*Camera Lucida* 98).<sup>28</sup> In "Black Coat" (102) Hughes indicates clearly the violent impact the public's readings of her work, especially "Daddy" (222), have had on him, and links this to the photographic.

The title "Black Coat" points the reader to Plath's "Man in Black" (119). "Man in Black" describes a seascape across which a man strides. The entire poem, spread out across seven stanzas, consists of one sentence which leads up to the image of the man striding across the scene and "riveting" everything "together":

And you, across those white

Stones, strode out in your dead  
Black coat, black shoes, and your  
Black hair till there you stood,

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<sup>28</sup> Barthes' words are pertinent to the celebrity of Hughes and Plath:

the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly (the incessant aggression of the Press against the privacy of the stars...testify to this movement). But since the private is not only one of our goods (falling under the historical laws of property), since it is also the absolutely precious, inalienable site where my image is free (free to abolish itself), as it is the condition of an interiority which I believe is identified with my truth [. . .] I must, by a necessary resistance, reconstitute the division of *public* and *private* [. . .]. (*Camera Lucida* 98).

Fixed vortex on the far  
 Tip, riveting stones, air,  
 All of it, together. (119-120)

The poem's reference to the Deer Island prison (line 7) indicates that the coastline described is that of Winthrop, a town in the area of Massachusetts generally known as "The North Shore". Plath grew up in Winthrop and moved from it shortly after her father's death. With this move the sea and her father became identified and the two came to occupy a mythic place in her imagination:

And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those first nine years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth. ("Ocean 1212-W" 124)

In "Man in Black" the speaker's fixation on this figure and the manner in which he becomes the focal point of the entire scene is the chief subject of the poem. It was written in March 1959, six months before Hughes and Plath took up residence at an artists' colony at Yaddo (in Saratoga Springs, New York).<sup>29</sup> "Black Coat", placed before "Portraits" (104), which is set at Yaddo, returns to the setting and scenario of "Man in Black" and contextualizes the genesis of Plath's poem. It is clear from Hughes's reference to the "North Shore" that he is returning to Plath's "Man in Black". Hughes casts himself as the anonymous "man in black" by writing himself into the scene she depicted:

I remember going out there,  
 The tide far out, the North Shore ice-wind  
 Cutting me back  
 To the quick of the blood – that outer-edge nostalgia,  
 The good feeling. (102)

Again the deictic ("there") presupposes a familiarity on the part of the reader and suggests that the object of reference is directly before him. With this deictic Hughes establishes an intimacy between himself, Plath and reader: "there", indicating the shore, suggests he is communicating with Plath; "there" indicating her poem establishes a link with the informed reader. Hughes is retrospectively casting himself as the man in black after the repercussions of Plath's own description of him as a "man in black" in her much later poem (1962) "Daddy" (222):

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<sup>29</sup> "Man in Black" was written sometime in March 1959 (inferred from *Journals* 477) and they went to Yaddo in September 1959.

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. (224)

By recasting himself as the original of the “man in black” Hughes suggests that he provided the inspiration for her poem—or rather, that his image provided a platform for another sort of inspiration to emerge (or “crawl” out). Here he identifies an imaginary point of genesis for the association between him and Otto which was to culminate in “Daddy”.

The first two sections of “Black Coat” relate Hughes’s memory of his feelings as he stood at the sea’s edge. Ironically, given the fame of Plath’s later depiction of him as a “man in black”, he is here “Trying to feel thoroughly alone”. His “conversation” with the sea is one he cannot at that point understand:

My minimal but satisfying discussion  
With the sea.  
Putting my remarks down, for the thin tongue  
Of the sea to interpret. Inaudibly.  
A therapy,  
Instructions too complicated for me  
At the moment, but stowed in my black box for later.  
Like feeding a wild deer  
With potato crisps  
As you do in that snapshot where you exclaim  
Back towards me and my camera. (102)

The image of the “black box” as a place where the present is stored for future reference (after a disaster) echoes other images of dark spaces in which his future resides, as in “The Machine” (25), where Hughes finds himself sucked into a dark space which is his future, and in “Visit” (7), in which his future is a sort of photographic dark-room in which the present is “developed” (7). The mention of the “black box” suggests that Hughes is writing after a disaster. He compares his impression of his remarks being stored in a black box to a photograph of Plath feeding a wild deer the unlikely food of potato crisps. In this snapshot Plath is turning back to the camera and “exclaiming”, but as in “Perfect Light” (143) her words are “lost in the camera”. The conjunction of the ghostliness of the photograph (reinforced by the knowledge that she is dead) and the animation of an exclamation makes this a poignant image of loss.

The scene of him communing with the ocean is one of self-absorption. He is unself-conscious and has no idea that Plath is watching him, as it seems to him from the evidence of “Man in Black” she must have been doing:

So I had no idea I had stepped  
 Into the telescopic sights  
 Of the paparazzo sniper  
 Nested in your brown iris. (102-103)

“Paparazzo sniper” echoes the earlier image of the snapshot. The double image of the photographer and “sniper” conveys a sense of the photograph as wounding that is subsumed into the word *snapshot*. This impression of her vision as wounding and violent is reinforced by “sights”, suggesting the sights of a gun and giving a sense of a closely focused gaze that is a recurrent characteristic of Plath’s in *Birthday Letters*. In “Child’s Park” (69) too, Plath is seen to have a deadly gaze, a “homicidal / Hooded stare” (69). In “Black Coat” Hughes does not simply equate her eye with a camera or photographer. His conception of her eye here is realized retrospectively and informed by his experience of the public’s reception of her creative vision (here metonymically alluded to by her eye, or “sights”). Rather, the “sniper” is “nested” in her eye. “Nested” conveys two senses which point to the same end: primarily it suggests that the sniper is hidden, and yet (over time) to be made manifest. This is reinforced by a secondary sense of nested, suggesting a birth – the “paparazzo sniper” is yet to be hatched/ born. After her death and the publication of her poetry the two became the subjects of critical, popular and even “paparazzo” interest. “Telescopic” too not only conveys the sense that she is watching him from a considerable physical distance, which is confirmed two lines later – “So far off, half a mile maybe” – but that this distance is one of time. Hughes’s entire imaginary recreation here is governed by his retrospective knowledge. It is Hughes whose sights are “telescopic”, he himself has the long view of time and this perspective governs his entire interpretation.

“Paparazzo” emphasizes the role of the public’s (prurient and voyeuristic) interest in their lives (in interpretations of their poetry) and “sniper” the harmful effect of this, and its viciousness. Plath’s poetry is not straightforwardly autobiographical, but has frequently been read as such, as if her poems were documentary snapshots rather than highly coded and rhetorical. Chief among the reasons for the focus on and vilification of Hughes after Plath’s death is the simplistic identification of him with the husband figure in “Daddy” who is described as a “man in black”. Hughes reinforces the impression that he is referring to later *interpretations* of her poetry (that is that “paparazzo” does not simply refer to her but implies that her vision interacts with the public’s interest) when he envisages her as perhaps ignorant of the consequences of her vision:

Perhaps you had no idea either,  
 So far off, half a mile maybe,  
 Looking towards me. Watching me  
 Pin the sea’s edge down. (103)

“Watching” echoes the action of the earthenware head and this vision of Plath looking and watching is again imaginary. He could not have seen her watch him, his back is to her – and she, in any case, would have been too far off. He could not literally have seen her watching him; he does now metaphorically though, still feeling the effects of her gaze on him. Hughes’s “vision” here is inspired by her poem and an imaginative reconstruction of events rather than by direct recollection; its immediacy, however, has the authority of direct recollection. Its immediacy, like that of the photograph, however, is deceptive. As was the case in “The Earthenware Head” (57), the gaze imagined here is a particularly powerful and piercing one, as if from beyond the grave, and “Looking” catches a particular note of longing. Placed first in the line, the word itself is striking and its force is doubled with “Watching”, placed later in the line.

“Perhaps you had no idea either” echoes “I had no idea”, putting them in the same helpless position of ignorance (as elsewhere they are in the same position, although they cannot communicate). “Perhaps you had no idea either” is poignant: Plath may well have been aware of her identification of Hughes with her father when writing “Man in Black”,<sup>30</sup> but she would not have been aware of “the paparazzo sniper”. By the time the sniper had sprung into action she would be dead. It is arguable that her later depictions of Hughes were deliberately vengeful,<sup>31</sup> but even so it is doubtful that she could have envisaged the full extent of the effect her poems were to have on his reputation.

“Perhaps you had no idea” is qualified and elaborated by “so far off”, and the image of her as “so far off” carries with it the further implication that she is “so far off” because dead. “So far off” parallels the description of her sights as “telescopic”, and again the distance suggested is as much temporal as spatial.

The image of her looking at him recalls the earlier image of her looking back to him and his camera, where she turns back briefly exclaiming something that cannot be heard. Plath here is as if a fleeting apparition, and the snapshot (as often) conveys a sense of ghostliness. At this point in “Black Coat”, however, it is not Plath who is the frozen object of the camera’s gaze, but Hughes.

At the same time, though, with this imaginative vision of her watching him he is “looking”, metaphorically, at her. He offers a vision in which both of them look, at different times and from different points, at each other. Though their roles are reversed and parallel, their gaze is not reciprocal. He imagines them as if looking at each other from opposite

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<sup>30</sup> It seems she was aware of this identification, at least not long after her composition of the poem – one month after she had written it she noted: “The ‘dead black’ in my poem may be a transference from the visit to my father’s grave” (*Journals* 478).

<sup>31</sup> The manuscripts of her bee poems suggest otherwise, that she was self-consciously looking beyond the dynamics of revenge. See Susan van Dyne’s article “‘More Terrible Than She Ever Was’: The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath’s Bee Poems”.

perspectives, unseen by each other and “missing” each other. This is part of what adds to the force of “Looking”. The sense of Plath’s gaze as wounding – a sniper – is doubled here by the dramatic re-creation of this look as Hughes moves into that present participle. As often with Hughes’s dramatic recreations, where the past and present are brought together into a vividly immediate imaginative scenario, what is described is informed with, and its sense doubled by, present emotions. The look is painful because underscored by a feeling of loss and the impossibility of communication. Hughes is “looking” some time after her death and is writing here with a belated understanding engendered by it. His present feelings and awareness as he writes the poem are contrasted with his former, and there is a belated impact of what was supposedly missed then:

No idea  
 How that double image,  
 Your eye’s inbuilt double exposure  
 Which was the projection  
 Of your two-way heart’s diplopic error,  
 The body of the ghost and me the blurred see-through  
 Came into single focus,  
 Sharp-edged, stark as a target,  
 Set up like a decoy  
 Against that freezing sea  
 From which your dead father had just crawled.

I did not feel  
 How, as your lenses tightened,  
 He slid into me. (103)

Hughes imagines that her sighting of him “pinning” down the sea’s edge triggered an association with her father, and that he and Otto became the dual subjects of “Man in Black”. Conversely, the ghost has a body, and Hughes is a “see-through”. He suggests that Plath does not see him accurately, but uses him to see and give form to her own phantasms and fantasies in her poetry – he exists only within an all-consuming psychodrama. Similarly in “The Shot” (16) Hughes is “mind-stuff, speculative” on the path to her father, as if in reversal of the fact that her dead father is “mind-stuff”. The images of a “target” and a gun also appear in “The Shot” – here Plath’s “Daddy” is her “real target” who “hides” behind Hughes, who consequently gets hit. She herself is pictured as a bullet in flight, the trigger and destination of her flight both her daddy. In “Black Coat” Hughes describes himself as a “decoy”, a trap or lure for her father. This is how he seems to be used in her poetry, as a means for homing in on feelings associated with her father.

“Dead” picks up on her phrase “dead / Black” (lines 16-17) in “Man in Black”; it is partly on her description of the black of the man’s clothes as “dead” that Hughes hinges his interpretation of the figure as a composite image of himself and Otto.<sup>32</sup>

Hughes describes Plath’s eye as having an inbuilt propensity for “double exposure”. The phrase “double exposure” is another intertextual reference: it was the title of a semi-autobiographical novel Plath wrote about an adulterous husband, and which Hughes claimed he lost (Churchwell 132). For Hughes the tendency of Plath’s vision towards “double exposure” is the result of her heart’s “diplopic” course, diplopia being the medical condition of seeing double. As Seamus Heaney describes it, Hughes’s own method in *Birthday Letters* is “diplopic”. Heaney notes how Hughes works through two “lenses”, citing “Black Coat” as a brilliant example of this (without pointing out that the poem itself describes such a process, but supposedly as operating in Plath’s poetry):

From beginning to end, Ted Hughes focuses on his subject through two lenses and each produces a different kind of reading. On the one hand, there is the lens of personal recollection where the writing is a view-finder with telescopic<sup>33</sup> and even microscopic powers of concentration.

On the other hand, there is the lens which Hughes has fashioned out of his overall diagnosis of Sylvia Plath’s psychology/pathology, in which the poet sees himself reincarnated by his wife in her unconscious as her dominant father, Otto Plath... When the second lens is used on its own, it tends to produce some schematic versions of the story, but when it comes into play bifocally, as it were, as the second sight behind the scene which the first lens is presenting, then it produces brilliant and terrifying visions, such as “Black Coat” and “The Table” (“A Wounded Power” n.pag.)

With an irony characteristic of the *Birthday Letters* poems, Hughes in “Black Coat” does exactly what he describes Plath’s “diplopic vision” as doing. In “Black Coat”, he makes a composite image from a number of others, reinscribing himself and Otto as the dual subjects of her poem by conjoining “Man in Black” with an image from another of her poems, “A Life” (149), which ends

The future is a gray sea-gull  
Tattling its cat-voice of departure, departure.  
Age and terror, like nurses, attend her,  
And a drowned man, complaining of the great cold,

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<sup>32</sup> He is also here returning to her own incipient interpretation of the poem: see footnote 30 (page 45).

<sup>33</sup> Note how Heaney uses the word “telescopic” to describe Hughes’s vision – the same word that Hughes uses in “Black Coat” (a poem Heaney cites) to describe Plath’s vision.

Crawls up out of the sea. (150)<sup>34</sup>

In retrospect the unnamed “man in black” appears to be such a focal point in “Man in Black” because he is a reminder of Plath’s father, intimately linked for her with the sea generally and particularly the sea at Nauset<sup>35</sup> near where this poem is set. “A Life”, written on the 18th of November 1960, suggests that the future will be dominated by the (re)appearance of the drowned figure upon whose image it closes. Although the figure is unnamed it is difficult not to connect him with the “father” lamented two years earlier in “Full Fathom Five” (92) and pictured as an unburied body or ghost which cannot be prevented from (re)surfacing:

The muddy rumors

Of your burial move me  
To half-believe: your reappearance  
Proves rumors shallow [. . .]. (93)

In “Daddy” Plath herself connected her poem “Man in Black”, and specifically the process of making the poem, with her superimposition of Hughes and her father in her psychic life and poetry. She wrote “I made a man in black” (224), repeating the title of her earlier poem, and alluding to this “making” of the “man in black” as the poetic process itself. In retrospect she implicates her poetry and its processes with her identification of Hughes and her father.

In “Black Coat” Hughes describes himself as if he were the subject in a photograph. It is as if, reading her poem, he is looking at a photograph of himself and remembering the experience of the photograph being taken of him:

The body of the ghost and me the blurred see-through  
Came into single focus,  
Sharp-edged, stark as a target,  
Set up like a decoy  
Against that freezing sea  
From which your dead father had just crawled. (103)

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<sup>34</sup> Hughes also picks up on “A Life” in “The Table” (138), where he pictures the re-emergence of a drowned, shivering Otto who comes between himself and Sylvia:

He limped up through it  
Into our house. While I slept he snuggled  
Shivering between us. (138)

<sup>35</sup> See Plath’s journal entry quoted in my introduction (6) for her self-conscious association of her father and the sea. Her father is particularly associated with the sea at Nauset in “Daddy” (222), where he has a “head in the freakish Atlantic / Where it pours bean green over blue / Off the waters of Beautiful Nauset” (223) and in “Ocean 1212-W” (quoted on page 42), which describes her formative childhood landscape at Nauset, and closes with a mention of her father’s death and how it precipitated a move inland, so that the two – her father and the sea – become identified in her imagination.

“Against that freezing sea” not only picks up on the images in “A Life” and “Man in Black” of the sea as cold, but provides a sense of the image as freezing over, becoming photographic and fixed. It is as if caught in a snapshot that Hughes retrospectively sees himself. The experience of feeling oneself a “see-through” tallies with Barthes’s description of the experience of having a photograph taken of oneself:

I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object:  
I then experience a micro-version of death (a parenthesis): I am truly becoming a  
specter. (*Camera Lucida* 14)

This experience accords with that in “Drawing” (44) of Hughes finding himself the object of his own poem rather than simply author, and the similar self-awareness that runs through most of the *Birthday Letters* poems. “Black Coat” points more overtly than the other poems to how Plath’s poetry imprisons Hughes as if in a photograph, and how “Daddy” particularly has been responsible for this.

In the closing lines of the poem the violence of the public’s enquiry (the paparazzo sniper), suggested by the word “snapshot”, has become a bodily violation, a rape of Hughes’s identity as it comes to be replaced with that of “Daddy”:

I did not feel  
How, as your lenses tightened,  
He slid into me. (103)

The snapshot/paparazzo sniper image in “Black Coat” has a further relevance in its association with Plath’s eye (a metonym for her artistic vision), conveying the stunning impact of her often highly visual poetry. She herself described her eye as photographic and although in her early writings she laments it as such,<sup>36</sup> this objectivity of observation was to become part of the force and strength of her later poetry, as Hughes notes:

Some of them [her short stories] demonstrate [. . .] just how much the sheer objective presence of things and happenings immobilized her fantasy and invention. The still-life graphic artist in her was loyal to objects. [. . .] This limitation to actual circumstances, which is the prison of so much of her prose,

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<sup>36</sup> She wrote in her journals that:

What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination. . . that photographic mind which paradoxically tells the truth, but the worthless truth, about the world. It is that synthesizing spirit, that “shaping” force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire. [. . .]. We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine; it is that kind of madness which is worst: the kinds with fancies and hallucinations would be a Bosch-ish relief. (*Journals* 260)

became part of the solidity and truth of her later poems. (Introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* 12)

The impression of her eye as photographic is reinforced elsewhere in the volume. In “Costly Speech” (170), which refers to the publication of her novel *The Bell Jar*, her depictions of those in it are “snapshot portrait fixtures” (170). “The Owl” (33) describes her as “a camera recording reflections you could not fathom” (33), particularly because she was alien to England and its folklore and mythology.<sup>37</sup> In her early writings she berates herself for her “photographic mind”, setting up the “photographic chamber of the eye” versus myth, as in “Tale of a Tub” (24-25).<sup>38</sup> As Hughes shows, this photographic eye has just as much mythic potential as any folkloric reference. It is this eye – the strength of her later poetry – that has turned him and her into iconic and mythic figures. In “Black Coat”, Hughes suggests that it is a myth (of her drowned father risen through her art) which underpins her “photographic” sighting of Hughes in “Man in Black”. As Moulin has noted of Hughes’s work prior to *Birthday Letters*, Hughes himself reconciles the realistic and the mythic in his poetry, which is “at once [. . .] extraordinarily referential and remarkably mytho-poetic” (1). For Moulin, a large number of his poems “build a myth on a hypotyposis, most often a visual one, nearly photographic” (7). In *Birthday Letters* Hughes takes this one step further, the photograph itself becomes a linguistic trope, and while evoking the “real” it is at the same time nothing more tangible than a linguistic trick, thus generating in the reader’s mind an awareness of the problematical relationship of “language” to “reality” (a relationship which ties in with the questions of the relationship of art to life and fiction to reality, so central to readings of the Plath-Hughes relationship). Doing so, he suggests the deceptive immediacy of the “photographic” image which has done so much to imprison him.

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<sup>37</sup> As Hughes explains it in “Myth and Education”, myths are what makes us cohesive as a group:

By ‘mythologies’, here, I mean nothing more than the picture languages that we invent in order to embody and make accessible to casual reference the deeper shared understandings which keep us intact as a group – so far as we are intact as a group. (310)

<sup>38</sup> Her early story “The Wishing Box” (1956) is a notable exception, showing some rebellion against this notion of myth. The two protagonists, Harold and Agnes, are clearly based on Hughes and Plath, and the story sends up a dream that derives from Hughes’s famous fox dream, later written up as “The Burnt Fox”. For a discussion of this story, see Gilbert’s “In Yeats’s House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath”.

## Chapter Two

### The Myth of the Labyrinth

In *Birthday Letters* images of labyrinths and mazes generally refer back to the legendary labyrinth at Knossos and the myths associated with it. The labyrinth at Knossos, the chief city of Crete, was variously either the palace of King Minos or an adjunct to this palace built to house the Minotaur. Minos's wife, Pasiphae, had mated with a bull, by means of a device made by Daedalus, and had produced the Minotaur. The Minotaur, half man and half bull, was housed at the centre of the labyrinth. He was a man-eater and every nine years the Athenians would send to King Minos a sacrifice of seven young men and seven young women for the Minotaur's consumption. Theseus, one of these young Athenian men, escaped death with the help of Ariadne, Minos's daughter. She gave him a ball of thread which he unravelled behind him as he went in search of the Minotaur. When Theseus had killed the Minotaur he was able to exit the labyrinth by retracing the thread. The thread, as a single continuous strand, contrasts with the dead-ends and endless ramifications of the tunnels of the labyrinth: it untangles the tangles of the labyrinth, enabling escape from it. On his journey back to Athens, Theseus abandoned Ariadne on an island. He had fallen in love with her sister Phèdre, whom he had taken with him from Knossos, and she became his wife. Phèdre inherited the curse of her blood, her mother's monstrous desire for the bull, and conceived an incestuous passion for her stepson Hippolytus. In Hughes's translation of Racine's *Phèdre*, her own desire, in an echo of her mother's, is described as "monstrous" – threatening to overcome her and transform her into a monster. Passion here is akin to Hughes's understanding of it in his *Tales from Ovid*: the love is metamorphic, changing the person or creature who suffers it.

Hughes returns again and again in his writings to the cluster of stories around the myth of the labyrinth. He gives a substantial discussion of Euripides's *Hippolytus* in his epic work on Shakespeare, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (67-74), and at the end of his life he translated Racine's *Phèdre*, making the maze motif even more prominent than in the original (Berry 540-541). In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* Hughes begins on the premise that all of a writer's work may be traced to a single myth, and that all the work together provides a self-portrait (40) – he epigraphs his book with a quote from Yeats:

The Greeks, a certain scholar has told me, considered that myths are the activities of the Daimons, and that the Daimons shape our characters and our lives. I have often had the fancy there is some one myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought. (W. B. Yeats, 'At Stratford-on-Avon: Ideas of Good and Evil') (n. pag.)



Hughes traces all Shakespeare's work to the myth of Venus and Adonis and his particular inflexion of it in his early poem "Venus and Adonis":

Shakespeare's is the only version of the myth (to my knowledge) in which Adonis (in the name of Adonis) rejects Venus. Adonis's love for the Goddess is, as it were, by definition absolute, and even in Ovid's degenerate sentimentalization of the myth in the *Metamorphoses*, which was Shakespeare's immediate source, Adonis's love is still absolute. (57)

In Ovid's tale Venus and Adonis are happy lovers, but Adonis ignores Venus's warnings not to endanger himself by hunting and is gored to death by a boar. Venus mourns him by transforming his blood into a flower. In Shakespeare's version Adonis rejects Venus's love and is killed by the boar. Hughes sees a causative link between Adonis's rejection and death. Venus, for Hughes, is not just a classical goddess, but represents the Goddess of Divine Love (a concept promulgated at Shakespeare's time by Neoplatonists such as Giordano Bruno)<sup>1</sup> whose forms are many. In Hughes's reading Adonis is perverting the all-powerful circuit of Divine Love – and the boar is an aspect of his Puritanism transformed, which is what kills him. Hughes sees a similar working of Divine Love in Euripides's *Hippolytus*, which he describes as the "logbook and cipher" of Shakespeare's poem (70). Here, Hippolytus, who is renowned for his chastity and who has rejected Phèdre, is torn apart by his horses who are frightened by a bull that rises from the sea, an avatar of Phèdre's rejected "monstrous love". For Hughes "The sea bull is Divine Love completing its circuit by breaking violently through the obstruction of Hippolytus's self-enclosing resistance" (*SGCB* 70).

In *Birthday Letters* the labyrinth is a multivalent motif, and Hughes draws on its many traditional associations: the labyrinth as an image of fate, the labyrinth and the quest

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes goes into a fairly extensive discussion of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism in his introduction to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (19-34). Many features of this Neoplatonism which Hughes picks out as salient to Shakespeare's work are salient to his own, particularly *Birthday Letters*: "The idea of meditation as a conjuring, by ritual magic, of hallucinatory figures – with whom conversations can be held, and who communicate intuitive, imaginative vision", "The idea of drama as a ritual manipulation for the soul", "The idea of a syncretic mythology, in which all mythological figures and events are available as a thesaurus of glyphs or token symbols" (32-33) and numerous others. Hughes was particularly drawn to the Neoplatonists' memory systems, especially the "memory theatre", for him "the metaphor of a theatre for the structured image system [. . .] of the Occult Neoplatonist [. . .] is apt" (32). Hughes's own mythic use of words (words as verbal iconographs) and their dramatic arrangement suggests that his interest in Neoplatonism reflects his own poetic occupations. And the memorializing nature of *Birthday Letters* reinforces this sense of Hughes structuring his work on the idea of the "memory theatre". He certainly suggests that Plath may have worked in a syncretic mythological manner: in "The Table" he describes her desk as bearing "sigils" (139), iconographs which provide access to a larger realm and are mentioned by him in his discussion of Neoplatonism (*SGCB* 22). Hughes's basic affiliation with Neoplatonism seems to be that the image may provide access to a larger reality: twice he quotes with approval St. Thomas Aquinas's dictum "Man cannot understand without images" (*SGCB* 22) and "Introduction" to *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember* xv). According to this, art and illusion are the way to a perception of the real.

(the story of Theseus and the Minotaur), the labyrinth as a prison, the Minotaur and human sacrifice. The myth of the labyrinth is the most overt mythic allusion in the text, and it is often brought together with *The Tempest*, notably in the obscure “Setebos” (132). In this chapter I hope to show how pervasive the labyrinth image is, and to suggest why it is so recurrently linked to *The Tempest*.

I will interweave my argument through close readings of four poems which explicitly refer to the labyrinth and/or the Minotaur – “18 Rugby Street”, “Fishing Bridge”, “The Minotaur” and “A Picture of Otto” – and will also cross-refer extensively to a number of other poems.

“18 Rugby Street” (20) is the first poem in which the myth is referred to. It is one of the many poems in the volume which take as their starting point a place Hughes and Plath lived at or visited.<sup>2</sup> These tend to be lengthier and more relaxed and digressive in style than the poems which meditate on more general themes and which have a stronger sense of internal design (for example “Drawing”, “Horoscope”, “Trophies”, “Red”, “Totem”).

The poem records the couple’s second meeting, Hughes’s first proper look at Plath and their first sexual encounter. These occurred on Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1956 (*Journals* 552), when Plath visited Hughes in London on her way to Paris, where she was hoping to meet up with her lover Richard Sassoon. In “18 Rugby Street” Hughes transposes this meeting to the date of Otto Plath’s birthday, 13<sup>th</sup> April, conjoining this with the fact that it took place on a Friday: “April 13th, your father’s birthday. A Friday”. Hughes here is not merely imposing his own schema, but returning to Plath’s words. The meeting he describes did *not* take place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, but it would seem from a journal entry of Plath’s made on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1958 that they did also meet on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1956, when Plath *returned* from the continent:

TODAY: is an anniversary. Two years ago, on Black Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, I took a plane from Rome through the mist-shrouded sky of Europe, to London – renounced Gordon, Sassoon – my old life – & took up Ted and my resurrection came about with that green and incredible Cambridge spring. (*Journals* 366)

In “18 Rugby Street” Hughes returns to the significance of this date for Plath as well as the rebirth and resurrection metaphor of her journal entry. Doing so, he shapes the consummation of their relationship as an ominous birth of Sylvia’s father. (This

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<sup>2</sup> These include: “St. Botolph’s”, “Fidelity”, “Your Paris”, “You Hated Spain”, “55 Eltisley”, “Wuthering Heights”, “Flounders”, “Child’s Park”, “9 Willow Street”, “The Badlands”, “Fishing Bridge”, “The 59th Bear”, “Grand Canyon”, “Karlsbad Caverns” and “Stubbing Wharfe”.

conjunction, like the conception of the Minotaur, retrospectively seems cursed and is self-consciously emplotted as such by Hughes).

In the first section Hughes describes 18 Rugby Street:

I think of that house as a stage-set –  
 Four floors exposed to the auditorium.  
 On all four floors, in, out, the love-struggle  
 In all its acts and scenes, a snakes and ladders  
 Of intertangling and disentangling  
 Limbs and loves and lives. Nobody was old.  
 An unmysterious laboratory of amours.  
 Perpetual performance – names of the actors altered,  
 But never the parts. They told me: ‘You  
 Should write a book about this house. It’s possessed!  
 Whoever comes into it never gets properly out!  
 Whoever enters it enters a labyrinth –  
 A Knossos of coincidence! And now you’re in it.’  
 The legends were amazing. I listened, amazed. (20)

Hughes remembers the house as if it were “a stage-set”: by implication he conceives of their lives, at least in retrospect, as a drama. 18 Rugby Street is one setting in the drama of their lives just as “18 Rugby Street” the poem is one setting in the drama which *Birthday Letters* constructs. The description of the stage as “set” suggests that this drama is fateful. Similarly in “St. Botolph’s”, which portrayed their first meeting, he described another scene that was like a stage-set, everything rigged for action, and Hughes envisaged it in retrospect as like a film:

The hall

Like the tilting deck of the *Titanic*:  
 A silent film, with that blare over it. Suddenly –  
 Lucas engineered it – suddenly you. (14)

Here the scene is more explicitly fated: Hughes introduces it with a catalogue of the position of the stars on that date. And the claim that Lucas “engineered” their meeting reinforces the sense that they are puppets in a drama of fate, the subjects of some mysterious orchestration.

In “18 Rugby Street”, Hughes does not merely recall the house, but offers an image of his recollection: “I *think* of that house *as* a stage-set” (italics added). This use of “as” or, more often, “as if” is typical of the poems. Hughes does not claim an exact correspondence between his impressions, interpretations and experience, but points to the gap between them, and the provisional nature of how things appear. The image of the house as “exposed” is a mirror reflection of its metaphorical internalization – its walls taken down – in his mind. Thinking of the house, Hughes does not just recall his own life there but sees the entire house as if simultaneously – “Four floors exposed to the auditorium” – from a generalizing

perspective, in which his own story becomes part of a larger drama or pattern: “the love-struggle”. In the opening section a number of parallels are set up via the image of the house: between love and the labyrinth, love and the drama, and love and chemistry (and implicitly between all the latter three). This “love-struggle” is seen as labyrinthine: the “intertangling and disentangling” of “Limbs and loves and lives” is reminiscent of the tangles of the labyrinth. And, a few lines further on, the house, a “stage-set” for the playing out of various love affairs, is described as a “Knossos”.

Imagery of “tangling” recurs in *Birthday Letters*;<sup>3</sup> the word “tangle” and variants of it especially recall Plath’s use of it in “Full Fathom Five” (92), where she uses it in the context of the labyrinth:

Waist down, you may wind

One labyrinthine tangle [. . .]. (93)

There is a similar verbal echo in her early poem (1956) “Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea” (327) – “Thoughts that found a maze of mermaid hair / Tangling in the tide’s green fall”. This feature of two (or more) words or images (here the maze and the word “tangle”) recurring in conjunction, a feature of what Hughes describes as Plath’s “mythic” mode of writing (*SGCB* 40-42), is characteristic of *Birthday Letters*. “Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea”, like “Full Fathom Five”, also returns to the motif of transformation (“those are pearls that were his eyes”) through a “sea-change” in Ariel’s song in *The Tempest*. In both of Plath’s poems, though, the transformation that the pearl represents, and the consolation that it thus offers, eludes the speakers. In “Full Fathom Five” the speaker, rather than having her grief allayed, wishes to join her dead father by drowning:

I walk dry on your kingdom’s border  
Exiled to no good.

Your shelled bed I remember.  
Father, this thick air is murderous.  
I would breathe water. (93)

In “Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea” (327) the imagination does not transform cold actuality:

Cold and final, the imagination  
Shuts down its fabled summer house;  
[. . . . .]

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<sup>3</sup> The word “tangle”, or variants of it, also recurs in *Phèdre* and *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

No *sea-change* decks the sunken shank of bone  
 That chuckles in backtrack of the wave;  
 Though the mind like an oyster labors on and on,  
 A grain of sand is all we have.

Water will run by; the actual sun  
 Will scrupulously rise and set;  
 No little man lives in the exacting moon  
 And that is that, is that, is that. (327) (emphasis added)

In “18 Rugby Street” Hughes, by making the “love-struggle” an endlessly replayed drama across the same stage, demystifies it to an extent. His own relationship with Plath becomes part of something larger, a momentary manifestation of a particular drive, in line with his Schopenhauerian conception of the universe.<sup>4</sup> Romantic love is seen to have conventions akin to those of the drama: there are certain parts, which do not change, and it is “staged” or “set” (somehow fateful). His Schopenhauerian worldview is one in which everything is dramatized, and constantly seeking form; Hughes writes in his essay on “Myth and Education” that

Now and again we are made aware of what seems to be an even larger drama of moods and energies which it is hard to name – psychic, spiritual, cosmic. [. . .] We can guess [. . .] that all these intervolved processes [. . .] are talking incessantly, in a dumb radiating way, about themselves, [. . .] because all these *dramatis personae* are really striving to live, in some way or the other, in the outer world. (145)

In “18 Rugby Street”, with his description of the house as “possessed”, Hughes introduces the motif of the haunted house, one which will recur. By describing the house as “possessed” immediately after his mention of it as a place of an intertangling of lives and loves and limbs, he intimates that love itself is a type of possession. As will eventually be seen, the basic force which animates everything is for Hughes, as he argues in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, the “love that moves the sun and all the other stars” (504).

Love and the drama are again set up in parallel in a self-reflexive vignette in “Setebos” (132):

Who could play Miranda?  
 Only you. Ferdinand –only me.  
 And it was like that, yes, it was like that.  
 I never questioned. Your mother  
 Played Prospero, flying her magic in  
 To stage the Masque, to bless the marriage [. . .]. (132)

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<sup>4</sup> Hughes stated that “The only philosophy I ever really read was Schopenhauer. He impressed me alright” (qtd. in Faas 205). For a discussion of Hughes and Schopenhauer see Eddins.

Here Hughes and Plath “play” Ferdinand and Miranda,<sup>5</sup> actors in a larger drama of an exterior orchestration. In *The Tempest* Ferdinand and Miranda’s meeting (orchestrated by Prospero) and their falling in love (which Prospero cannot ensure) operate self-reflexively to comment, via the notion of magic as an “art”, on the powers of art, the magus Prospero functioning as a substitute artist figure. This is a theme that works throughout the play. Prospero’s epilogue becomes a plea for the good will of the audience: it is up to them how to respond to the play and thus “free”<sup>6</sup> Prospero from the island-stage – this is beyond his magic charms. There is a sense in which *Birthday Letters* requires a prologue akin to Prospero’s epilogue. The amazement with which Hughes enters the house in “18 Rugby Street”, ought to be that of the reader as s/he enters the maze of the text. What is required for entering upon any text, and, by analogy, for falling in love, is a certain “suspension of disbelief” induced (but not ensured) by a sort of “magic”

In “18 Rugby Street” Hughes is told “You / Should write a book about this house. It’s possessed! / Whoever enters it never gets properly out! [. . .] And now you’re in it!”. There is an evident irony between his being told he should write a book then, and his present writing of this poem. The implication is that Hughes, having entered the labyrinth-house, has become possessed, and the result of this possession and his love-affair is this poem, or “book” of poems. The quotation of supposed advice does not ring true as a single piece of conversation; Hughes does, however, manage to bring together a number of important motifs in it: possession, writing, the labyrinth and coincidence/fate are all linked. Hughes here suggests particularly relationships between writing and demonic possession that haunt the text.

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<sup>5</sup> The description of Hughes and Plath as “players” together with the allusion to *The Tempest*, where Ferdinand and Miranda themselves are pictured self-reflexively as if in a little tableau and are playing chess (5.2.172-174), creates a hall-of-mirrors effect of infinite reflections and convolutions.

<sup>6</sup> I must be here confined by you,  
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
Since I have my dukedom got  
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell  
In this bare island by your spell;  
But release me from my bands  
With the help of your good hands:  
Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill, or else my project fails,  
Which was to please. Now I want  
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,  
And my ending is despair,  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so that it assaults  
Mercy itself and frees all faults.  
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,  
Let your indulgence set me free.

Hughes closes the opening section of the poem with “The legends were amazing. I listened, amazed.” It is unlikely that the verbal echo of the “maze” motif in the word “amazed” is simply fortuitous: the repetition has a certain heavy-handedness, and this sort of echo, which seems purely verbal, is typical of the workings of the poems. (There are constant fleeting echoes of recurrent motifs, even in seemingly disjunctive contexts). Frequently, though, deeper connections subtending these allusions are touched on. Here, the image of “amazement” links to a sense of wonder (echoed again at the close of “18 Rugby Street”) and suspension of disbelief that is recurrently linked to love and the drama, and here specifically linked to the maze/ labyrinth. Entry into the maze – what Hughes is on the threshold of – requires a certain amazement (or susceptibility to it). The poem appropriately breaks here, having established this sense of wonder, and then proceeds to a description of Hughes’s life within the Knossos-house.

The second section of “18 Rugby Street” elaborates on this “intertangling and disentangling” of the loves and lives of its inhabitants by providing examples. Whereas in the first section Hughes had presented a unifying spatial image which allowed the larger pattern to be observed, here he does so with the hindsight of time, noting stories with parallels to his own. Here, too, there is a strong sense of irony between Hughes’s awareness then and now. He recalls a “Belgian girl” whom he did not take much notice of at the time – she was simply and suitably a foreigner, about whom he knew little – but whose fate has a strange contiguity with Plath’s. She too would gas herself, and in the same year as Plath (“seven years later”).<sup>7</sup> Hughes makes clear that Plath herself would die seven years later in his discussion of another inhabitant, “Susan”, ensuring that the similarities are noted, whether or not the reader knows the exact biographical context of *Birthday Letters*. He emphasizes with heavy irony, given his present overall perspective in which all is seen to be intertwined and linked, the strangeness of the girl:

She was nothing to do with me. Nor was Susan  
 Who still had to be caught in the labyrinth,  
 And who would meet the Minotaur there,  
 And would be holding me from my telephone  
 Those nights you would most need me. On this evening  
 Nothing could make me think I would ever be needed  
 By anybody. Ten years had to darken,  
 Three of them in your grave, before Susan  
 Could pace that floor above night after night  
 (Where you and I, the new rings big on our fingers,  
 Had warmed our wedding night in the single bed)  
 Crying alone and dying of leukaemia. (21)

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<sup>7</sup> This meeting took place in 1956 and Plath killed herself in 1963.

It would appear that Hughes did not know Susan then – certainly she was not an inhabitant of the house during the same period – for she is “still” to “be caught in the labyrinth”. Again the house is compared to the labyrinth at Knossos, and now the Minotaur is mentioned. Quite what it signifies is uncertain: in this context it would seem to be death, as Susan dies in the house. Odd contrasts and parallels are set up between her life and theirs, and her death – in the room in which they had spent their wedding night – retrospectively comes to cast a shadow over their own marriage and love-making, which is repeatedly connected to this house. The labyrinth becomes a mixed place of death and desire, much as in (Plath’s reading of) *Phèdre*.<sup>8</sup> Not only are there parallels between their lives, which makes them seem, as inhabitants of the same house, subject to a similar fate, but Susan’s life “intertangles” with his life with Plath (actively affecting it) – she “would be holding me from my telephone / Those nights you would most need me”.<sup>9</sup>

Only in the third section of the poem does Hughes present his own “love-struggle”. He is casually hanging about, waiting for Plath who is on a fleeting visit to London on her way to Paris. Here she hoped to meet Richard Sassoon, at that point the great love of her life. When she arrived in Paris he had left with no word as to where he had gone. Hughes’s conception of her imminent trip is completely mistaken:

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  
Around the cobbles of Paris. I deferred for a night  
Your panics, your fevers, your worst fear –  
The toad-stone in the head of your desolation.  
The dream you hunted for, the life you begged  
To be given again, you would never recover, ever.  
Your journal told me the story of your torture. (21)

Hughes emphasizes the distance between his understanding of Plath then and after her death when he reads her journals. As the Belgian girl has in retrospect a familiarity, although she seemed completely foreign when Hughes knew her, so Plath, whom he thought he knew, seems in retrospect a stranger.

This description of her desperate “search”, “scattering tears” in “18 Rugby Street” is very closely echoed in “Your Paris” (36), where it is directly related to the Minotaur myth:

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<sup>8</sup> See her letter to her mother dated 9 March 1956 where she speaks of “*Phèdre*, where passion as destiny is magnificently expressed” and of a death that “includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love, which is part of it” (*Letters Home* 249).

<sup>9</sup> I cannot find any clarification as to who Susan was.

## Your Paris

Was a desk in a *pension*  
 Where your letters  
 Waited for him unopened. Was a labyrinth  
 Where you still hurtled, scattering tears.  
 Was a dream where you could not  
 Wake or find the exit or  
 The Minotaur to put a blessed end  
 To the torment. (38)

Retrospectively, Hughes pictures Plath on her passionate quest for Sassoon as doomed, caught (like Susan in “18 Rugby Street”) in a labyrinth from which there is no exit. Again love is labyrinthine, a metaphorical place or “state” from which there is no escape. Moreover, Plath, in her passion for Sassoon, is shown to be caught in a labyrinth even before she visits Hughes at 18 Rugby Street. In “18 Rugby Street” the “house” is just a name which provides a context for a unified overall view: everyone in it has intertangling fates, contiguous and parallel. It is like a “house” in a tragedy, where a curse is passed down through a dynasty, linking all its members.<sup>10</sup> It enables a generalizing view, wherein one’s own fate is seen as part of something larger. Insofar as the Knossos-house is a symbol of fate, the labyrinth too becomes an image of fate.<sup>11</sup>

In “18 Rugby Street” the motif of the “toad-stone” is introduced. Its use here (“the toad-stone in the head of your desolation”) is unusual, for it is generally something positive: the “jewel in the head”<sup>12</sup> of the toad, a mythical gem of magical properties used to ward off the evil eye. Like many apotropaic objects, however, it can be a poison as well as an antidote and ambivalence is one of its key features. In *As You Like It* its dual nature is compared to “adversity”:

Sweet are the uses of adversity  
 Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
 Wears yet a precious jewel in his head [. . .]. (2.1.12-14)

In *Birthday Letters* Hughes seems to be looking to Plath’s use of the word in a draft manuscript of “The Rival” (166), in a section which she excluded from the published version

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the house of Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the house of Atreus in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*.

<sup>11</sup> Significantly, Hughes pictures fate as a labyrinth in his translations of both *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon*. Berry (546) points out how in the latter, Hughes claims that Agamemnon “Gropes home through the labyrinth of his fate” (16). In *Oedipus*, the chorus says: “a man’s life is a pattern on the floor like a maze it is all fixed” (52–53). In both instances of translation the image of fate as a labyrinth is an addition to the original text on Hughes’s part.

<sup>12</sup> This phrase, used in “The Beach” (154), is a quotation from Hans Christian Andersen’s fable “The Toad” (n.pag.).

of the poem but which he saw fit to publish in an endnote to the poem in his edition of her *Collected Poems* (291, note 147). “The Rival” is a curious poem, and it is unclear just who the “rival” is and what his<sup>13</sup> relationship to the speaker is. As in her poem “The Jailer” (226), the setting is domestic and the speaker and the addressee are constantly in each other’s thoughts, painfully inhabiting each other’s mental worlds. The poem closes:

No day is safe from news of you,  
Walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me. (167)

A further section excluded from the final version continues these motifs –

You preoccupy my horizon.  
What good is all that space if it can’t draw you off?  
You are the one eye out there (291)

– and closes with the acceptance of this haunting image, the “one eye out there”:

Toad-stone! I see I must wear you in the centre of my forehead  
And let the dead sleep as they deserve. (291)

This strange linking of the toad-stone motif, the jewel worn in the centre of the forehead, and the poet’s relation to the dead, is picked up by Hughes in “The Prism” (186).<sup>14</sup>

All that is clear in “The Rival” is that the speaker and the rival are bound together in a tortuous relationship based on envy (as the “rivalry” suggests). The toadstone here is a burden – she *must* wear it in the centre of her forehead – which she (reluctantly) recognizes and accepts. Or perhaps this acceptance is a means of making the best out of adverse circumstances.

In “18 Rugby Street” Hughes describes Plath’s impassioned search for Sassoon as being in “raging faith” that what she desires will somehow ensue –

By clairvoyance, by coincidence –  
Normally child’s play to a serious passion.  
This was not the last time it would fail you. (22)

“Normally child’s play to a serious passion” echoes the connection between love and the drama suggested in the first section. Although “play” here may seem only a verbal echo of the drama motif, it is in this way that Hughes reinforces associations.

<sup>13</sup> The “rival” is clearly male: he is “Spiteful as a woman”.

<sup>14</sup> “The Prism” is discussed in the next chapter.

Plath's "raging faith" exemplifies what Freud describes in *Totem and Taboo* as the "omnipotence of thought", the "principle which controls magic" in societies where animistic thought is prevalent (13: 73). For Freud this is also what children indulge in when they play (13: 72) – making "child's play to a serious passion" a particularly apt description – and remains for adults in the field of art:

Only in one field has the omnipotence of thought been retained in our own civilization, namely in art. In art alone it still happens that man, consumed by his wishes, produces something similar to the gratification of these wishes and this playing, thanks to artistic illusion, calls forth affects as if it were something real. We rightly speak of the magic of art and compare the artist to a magician. (13: 90)

"Fate Playing" (31) describes an occasion in which Plath's faith seems to bring about what she wishes; there is some miscommunication between her and Hughes and she does not find him at their arranged meeting point; when she does meet him it is

As if I had come back from the dead  
 Against every possibility, against  
 Every negative but your own prayer  
 To your own gods. There I knew what it was  
 To be a miracle. (31-32)

What Hughes describes here and in "18 Rugby Street" as typical of the state of love is the state of "the omnipotence of thought". In "Fate Playing" Hughes also repeats the phrase "scattering tears", reinforcing associations between this poem, "18 Rugby Street" and "Your Paris".

In "18 Rugby Street" Hughes too behaves like the lover who suffers from the omnipotence of thought – willing Plath, and supposedly willing fate:

Meanwhile, there was me, for a few hours –  
 A few pence on the fare, for insurance.  
 Happy to be martyred for folly  
 I invoked you, bribing Fate to produce you.  
 Were you conjuring me? I had no idea  
 How I was becoming necessary,  
 Or what emergency surgery Fate would make  
 Of my casual self-service. (22)

The metaphor of conjuration, and specifically the verb to conjure, is used of her writing too ("Portraits" [104]), and here Plath's artistic drive and her love for Hughes are connected. The metaphor of conjuration links magic, art and love.

Fate makes “emergency surgery” of Hughes’s offering of playing the role of lover, because he becomes a substitute for Sassoon. Hughes had alluded to her relationship with Sassoon, and her devastation at its end, in “Trophies”(18), the poem immediately preceding “18 Rugby Street”. This poem starts with an intertextual reference: the panther to which it refers is the objectified embodiment of passion in Plath’s poem “Pursuit” (22), a poem about “the dark forces of lust” (*Journals* 214). Dedicated to Hughes, her poem was written two days after she met him and supposedly records the sort of passion he inspired in her. That people should accept this at face level is not surprising (and it fits the common, stereotyped Heathcliffesque perception of Hughes); the jaguar (closely related to the panther) as an embodiment of animal power would become one of Hughes’s most famous images. But both poets were moving in similar directions (towards a poetry of “violence”) before they met. Her own conception of love here is coloured especially by her reading of Racine, and the poem is epigraphed with a quotation from *Phèdre*, which she was reading when she met Hughes: “Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit”, translated by Hughes in his *Phèdre* as “Everywhere in the woods your image hunts me” (26).<sup>15</sup> The poem follows a notion of “Passion as Destiny” (the title of a paper on Racine she wrote at the time [*Journals* 225]), and in it love and death are seen as intimately linked; the panther, representing passion, “stalks me down: / One day I’ll have my death of him” (22). In Plath’s Racinian conception of love, passion is devouring, a “fatal holocaust” as she puts it in her journal (*Journals* 225).<sup>16</sup> It seems it was under this idea of love that their own love, or at least hers for him, was conceived.<sup>17</sup> The night related in “18 Rugby Street”, her first sexual encounter with Hughes, she described in her journals as a “holocaust night” (*Journals* 552).

This conception of love is also manifested in her letters<sup>18</sup> to Sassoon, with whom she had a self-consciously literary relationship. His ending of their relationship devastated her. As Hughes shows in “Trophies” (18), the panther

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<sup>15</sup> Wagner suitably uses this quotation as an epigraph to her study *Ariel’s Gift*. As shown in chapter one, Hughes’s internalization of Plath’s poetic vision (manifested in *Birthday Letters*) and his love for her both return to the image of a gazing eye or strong visual impression.

<sup>16</sup> This is somewhat tongue in cheek: “I got back my paper on ‘Passion as Destiny in Racine’ with the comment that passion is only one aspect and not the fatal holocaust I made it” (sic).

<sup>17</sup> If Hughes did not specifically regard love as a devouring and demonic force, he did regard the world generally as operated by demonic forces larger than the individual human. His own poem about a panther-like creature, “The Jaguar” (*NSP* 4), is probably his most famous exponent of such a world-view, expressed also in poems like “Ghost Crabs” (*NSP* 58) and “The Bear” (*NSP* 64). In his late works, particularly *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he regards love more specifically as a “possessive” power too large for the individual’s rationalistic discernment and responses.

<sup>18</sup> Extracts of these are included in the *Journals*. See pages 217–223, in which she compares herself to *Phèdre* (222) and uses language that Hughes aptly characterizes here as a bloody outpouring. She writes to Sassoon that she is “appalled that [. . .] you could leave me thus cut open, my heart utterly

had already dragged you  
As if in its jaws, across Europe (18)

and “Crushed” (line 8) her, so that her writing becomes a bloody outpouring:

The Rorschach

Splashing of those outpourings stained  
Your journal pages. Your effort to cry words  
Came apart in aired blood [. . .]. (18)

This writing of hers is not inspired by either Hughes or Sassoon, but by a force far larger and more powerful than them. In “Trophies” Hughes becomes its plaything, though he does not realize it at the time: fancying himself the powerful one, and vaingloriously garnering trophies (her earrings and hairband). Instead, he and Plath are its trophies. Here he links her blood and writing: her writing expresses what is most vital and urgent to her, “the blood-jet is poetry” as in her poem “Kindness” (269). Her expression is so strong and powerful, that forty years later (he must be writing in 1996) Hughes can still detect the force that drove her:

After forty years  
The whiff of that beast, off the dry pages,  
Lifts the hair on the back of my hands. (18)

Driven by this force, she is on a pre-determined course before her meeting with Hughes (to which the poem alludes at its close). If her writings are driven by an animal force, they are also inspired by her reading of a text (*Phèdre*) which touches uncannily on sexual passion and its force and figures it through the bestial (as Hughes argues in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*). Hughes’s allusions aptly contextualize Plath’s poetics of sacrifice (tracing them back to her reading) and suggest that a reading – in this case of *Phèdre* (“my Phèdre with her dark flame and that billowing cloak of scarlet which was blood offered and blood spilt” [*Journals* 564]) – may be inspirational and determinative.

In “18 Rugby Street” Hughes turns at last to describing their own encounter with “I can hear you / Climbing the bare stairs, alive and close” (22), creating a vivid and dramatic recreation as if Plath, whom he is addressing, is present. His focus changes radically from his impersonal view of the auditorium-house to a close-up description of Plath’s face and particular presence:

A blueish voltage –

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gone, without anaesthetic or stitching; my vital blood was spilling on the barren table, and nothing could grow” (220).

Fluorescent cobalt, a flare of aura  
 That I later learned was yours uniquely.  
 And your eyes' peculiar brightness, their oddness,  
 Two little brown people, hooded, Prussian,  
 But elvish, and girlish and sparking  
 With the pressure of your effervescence.  
 Were they family heirlooms, as in your son?  
 For me yours were the novel originals.  
 And now at last I got a good look at you.  
 Your roundy face, that your friends, being objective,  
 Called 'rubbery', and you, crueller, 'boneless':  
 A device for elastic extremes,  
 A spirit mask transfigured every moment  
 In its own séance, its own ether.  
 And I became aware of the mystery  
 Of your lips, like nothing before in my life,  
 Their aboriginal thickness. And of your boxer's nose,  
 Scorpio's obverse to the Semitic eagle  
 That made every camera your enemy,  
 The jailor of your vanity, the traitor  
 In your Sexual Dreams Incorporated,  
 Nose from Attila's horde: a prototype face [. . .]. (22-23)

He focuses foremost on her eyes, which haunt him throughout the text. Retrospectively, he wonders if they are an inheritance, "family heirlooms, as in your son", but at the time they are for him simply "the novel originals". Hughes is as ignorant of her father's eyes<sup>19</sup> (and what makes up her artistic vision) as he is of her previous relationship with Sassoon. Everything exists within a fresh, naïve, brave new world perspective.

With "I got a good look at you" Hughes again stresses the act of looking, linking it with their love. "Roundy" (his particular choice of word rather than "rubbery" or "boneless") becomes the greatest of compliments,<sup>20</sup> describing the shape of the globe – which her face, with its magnificent malleability and possibilities for transformation, is seen to encompass. This malleability renders her face

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<sup>19</sup> The suggestion is that her eyes are like her father's rather than her mother's: in "Life After Death" her son's eyes are described as "So perfectly your eyes [. . .] wet jewels" (182) and in "A Picture of Otto" a direct likeness between Otto and Sylvia and Ted's son, Nicholas, is claimed: "Your portrait, here, could be my son's portrait" (193).

<sup>20</sup> Paulin illuminates the significance of Hughes's choice of "roundy" (rather than "rubbery" and "boneless") by unpacking various allusions to Gerard Manley Hopkins in *Birthday Letters* (qtd. in Byrne 51-52). Paulin notes the occurrence of "roundy" in Hopkins's "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame", a poem which pays tribute to the uniqueness of all things:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
 Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
 Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.* (lines 5-8)

A device for elastic extremes,  
A spirit mask transfigured every moment  
In its own séance, its own ether. (23)

Hughes exalts her face to the source of creation itself, comparing it to the ever-changing sea:<sup>21</sup>

It was never a face in itself. Never the same.  
It was like the sea's face – a stage  
For weathers and currents, the sun's play and the moon's. (23)

His comparison of her face to the sea recalls her "Full Fathom Five" (92) where her father's face elides with the sea's surface:

Old man, you surface seldom.  
Then you come in with the tide's coming  
When seas wash cold, foam-  
  
Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,  
A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves  
Crest and trough. (92)

Later in the poem, the face of the father (whom she is addressing) is explicitly described as the face of the sea:

For the archaic trenched lines  
Of your grained face shed time in runnels:  
Ages beat like rains  
  
On the unbeaten channels  
Of the ocean. (93)

"Surface", in the opening line of "Full Fathom Five", contains within it "face", mimicking the process it describes: the face surfaces in the sea, as the word "face" does in "surface". Hughes uses verbal echoes in a similarly light and allusive manner in *Birthday Letters*. Something of this is seen in the use of the word "play" here. It picks up on earlier occurrences of dramatic imagery, aptly bringing together various connotations. "Play" in "the sun's play" has a double meaning. It suggests the "play of light" upon the surface of water (revealing the changeability of Plath's face) and a "play" as in a performance, because the face is a "stage". Implicitly, the world is a "stage" for the sun's movements, conceived of as a performance.

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<sup>21</sup> If not actually the literal source of creation, the sea is frequently seen metaphorically as the bed of artistic creation. This is how Plath conceived of the sea, seeing it as an image for the artist's subconscious and as a place of metamorphosis, as her journal entry quoted in my introduction (6-7) attests; in it she describes the sea as "a central metaphor for [. . .] my poems and the artist's subconscious".

The sense of the world as a stage underlies this entire description and is connected to his sense of the changeability of her face and the vision of love expressed here.

Now it is not the house that is a “stage”: as Hughes focuses in on his own love-affair, the perspective changes and Plath’s face becomes the stage for love to take possession and “play” itself out.

This love is of a hyperbolic nature: Plath’s face becomes the world itself (if not the cosmos), encompassing sea and heavens (he sees in it various constellations).<sup>22</sup> Compare his description of “Divine Love” as “at bottom simply the *prima materia* of creation and inseparable from it” and “adaptable to every human mask” and “the ectoplasmic or magnetic, vital substance of the Goddess of Complete Being herself” (*SGCB* 24) to his description of Plath’s face as “A spirit mask transfigured every moment / In its own séance, its own ether” (23). And his description of her face as a “prototype face” again makes her seem like “the *prima materia* of creation itself”, and related to ancient fertility goddesses such as the Venus of Willendorf to whom she is compared in “Remission” (109).

His description of her face as a world and then as a stage recalls Prospero’s *theatrum mundi* speech in *The Tempest*, where a briefly staged masque that has just dissolved is compared, in its impermanence, to the world itself:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, thin air;  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.148-158)

In the description of Plath’s face, too, stage and world occupy the same space, yoked into one vision. The world becomes a mask/masque of something greater, and ineffable, personified here by Plath. This is congruent with Hughes’s Schopenhauerian<sup>23</sup> conception of the world as the activity and dramatization of demonic forces which are constantly seeking expression through one form or the other (as in the “love struggle”). Here, though, the world is not driven by a blind, immanent will but rather by a more positive “Divine Love”. After quoting this speech in his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes claims:

<sup>22</sup> Wagner also points out how the different peoples alluded to – Apache, Semites, Huns, Navajo – make her face a world in itself (60).

<sup>23</sup> See Hollingdale for how Schopenhauer’s philosophy relates to Prospero’s speech (22).

This agglomeration of forces, adaptable to every human mask, essentially innocent and amoral until embroiled in the moralizing, distorting passions of human limitation and polarity, unfathomable in existential being, at bottom simply the *prima materia* of creation and inseparable from it, is for Bruno, and, as I shall argue, for Shakespeare too, Divine Love – the ectoplasmic or magnetic, vital substance of the Goddess of Complete Being herself. (24)

Hughes exemplifies a similar understanding of the workings of the world as a drama of possession in his *Phèdre* where he recurrently uses the word “possessed” to describe the state of being in love, where Racine does not.<sup>24</sup> In *Phèdre*, however, this possession by love has a darker shade.

In “18 Rugby Street” Hughes, watching her face, “becomes aware of the mystery / Of your lips, like nothing before in my life”. His perspective has changed completely; whereas the house-stage was an “unmysterious laboratory of amours”, her face-stage is a place of mystery:

It was never a face in itself. Never the same.  
[.....]  
Never a face until that final morning  
When it became the face of a child – its scar  
Like a Maker’s flaw. But now you declaimed  
A long poem about a black panther  
While I held you and kissed you and tried to keep you  
From flying about the room. For all that,  
You would not stay. (23)

The “long poem about a black panther” is Plath’s “Pursuit” (22). Within “18 Rugby Street” the images of “Pursuit” are recalled (though with a shade of comic irony and sceptical indulgence towards the vanity of their younger selves, as in “Caryatids (2)”). Hughes is literally in pursuit of Plath as she flies about the room declaiming her poem; and the sound of her coming up the stairs “Babbling to be overheard” as if in attack, and “coming over the top in your panoply”, recalls the tread of the predatory panther on the stairs at the end of her poem:

The panther’s tread is on the stairs,  
Coming up and up the stairs. (23)

In the penultimate section of the poem Hughes returns to Plath’s scar:

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<sup>24</sup> In the play’s famous confession scene, Hughes uses the word “possessed” to describe the state of love twice in quick succession. He translates Hippolytus’s words to *Phèdre* about Theseus, “Toujours de son amour votre âme est embrasée” (2.5.633), as “his love possesses you”. She responds “Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle Thésée” (2.5.634) which Hughes translates: “Prince, you are right. I am possessed. I sicken for Theseus” (31).

## Falling

In the roar of soul your scar told me –  
 Like its secret name or its password –  
 How you had tried to kill yourself. (24)

He guesses that it is from a suicide attempt and a star, which he dismisses as a “poltroon”, warns him to steer clear. His half serious, half humorous attitude towards the “stars” is reminiscent of the opening astrological catalogue of “St. Botolph’s” where he intimates that they are star-crossed lovers. In “18 Rugby Street” he depicts them as defiantly so:

## And I heard

Without ceasing for a moment to kiss you  
 As if a sober star had whispered it  
 Above the rumbling, revolving city: stay clear. (24)

At the close of the poem Hughes picks up on the suggestion of Plath as an entire world to him, hinted at in his earlier description of her face:

You were a new world. My new world.  
 So this is America, I marvelled.  
 Beautiful, beautiful America! (24)

The poem closes with an allusion to Donne’s “Elegy XIX”<sup>25</sup> with its conceit about exploration and physical possession, and also with an echo of Miranda’s naïve<sup>26</sup> exclamation “O brave new world” in *The Tempest* (5.1.186) (an echo reinforced by Hughes’s characterization of himself and Plath as Ferdinand and Miranda in “Setebos” [132]). Ending the poem thus, Hughes links the labyrinth-search motif with that of the new world and its exploration. The myth of an Edenic new world (derived from literary tradition as much as anything else) is another myth that will recur throughout the text. America, in the person of Plath – “she was America, and American literature in person”<sup>27</sup> – will be for Hughes representative of his “new world”. The image of the new world also occurs, poignantly, in Plath’s letter to her mother about Racine and her poem “Pursuit”. Speaking of her love for Sassoon, she claims

until someone can create worlds with me the way Richard can, I am essentially  
 unavailable

<sup>25</sup> O my America! my new-found-land,  
 [.....]  
 How blest am I in this discovering thee! (lines 27, 30).

<sup>26</sup> Her enthusiasm is contextualized by Prospero’s response of “ ’Tis new to thee” (5.1.184).

<sup>27</sup> Hughes in an interview in 1995, qtd. in Hunter (132).

and

All the growing visions of beauty and new world which I am experiencing are paid for by birth pangs. The idea of perfect happiness and adjustment was exploded in *Brave New World*; what I am fighting for is the strength to claim “the right to be unhappy” together with the joy of creative affirmation. (*Letters Home* 250)

In retrospect this has the same irony as Hughes’s being dumbfounded at twenty-five by his ignorance; the capacity for wonder is the basis of both their visions.

In “18 Rugby Street”, Hughes appears to have entered upon a new world, but this is placed together with his entry into a “Knossos”, where he will become “possessed”. The “new world” imaged in Plath’s face is shadowed by the “scar / Like a Maker’s flaw” that lies across it. “Falling”, as they defiantly kiss, taking a transgressive step with full knowledge, they become inheritors of a fundamentally flawed world rather than the inhabitants of a “new world”. The myth of the fall, so often alluded to in the text, is linked here with “possession” (by a haunted house that is a metaphor for fate more than a particular abode): original sin, man’s curse, which links him to all other men, becomes an inescapable haunting. It is akin to a curse which passes itself down a genealogy, possessing the members of a family, in classical tragedies such as *Phèdre*. This curse is in turn linked with love in “18 Rugby Street” – it is this which possesses Hughes at the end of the poem. The notion of love as a curse is continuous with the idea of it as painful yet redemptive; in Plath’s “Poem for a Birthday” (131), an allegorization of her psychic rebirth after her attempted suicide, “Love is the uniform of my bald nurse. / Love is the bone and sinew of my curse” (137).<sup>28</sup>

The labyrinth and new world motifs introduced in “18 Rugby Street” are brought together again in “Fishing Bridge” (87), which, like “18 Rugby Street”, also has at its metaphoric centre a vision of Plath’s face. The poem describes an incident during a visit to Yellowstone on their journey across America in 1959, a journey in which they are “naïve pioneers”. The poem opens with an image of a threshold which is as metaphoric as it is literal: they are “nearly” somewhere, “Nearly happy” but not quite. Similarly happiness seems just out of grasp in “9 Willow Street” (71) and in “Flounders” (65).

Naively, they have no idea what they are seeing, when they see “cut-throat” (Yellowstone cut-throat trout<sup>29</sup>) beneath their boat. “Cut-throat” retrospectively sounds a note of danger and the fact that they have no idea that what they are seeing is “cut-throat” is

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<sup>28</sup> The notion of love as a curse also seems to be behind Hughes’s understanding of Divine Love in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, where he traces its workings through a cursed dynasty. His interpretation of *Phèdre* is not simply that Phèdre is cursed by her mother’s sin, but that she is a vessel of Divine Love, which works its way through her and her family.

<sup>29</sup> An American trout that has a red splotch across its lower jaw.

ominous. This combination of professed ignorance and retrospective knowledge (which casts a sense of bad omen over the past) recurs throughout *Birthday Letters*.

The image that crystallises for Hughes from this time is a vision of Plath, happy and carefree, walking along the shore of a lake:

What I remember

Is the sun's dazzle – and your delight  
 Wandering off along the lake's fringe  
 Towards the shag-headed wilderness  
 In your bikini. There you nearly  
 Stepped into America. You turned back,  
 And we turned away. That lake-mouth  
 Was only one of too many thresholds – [. . .]. (87)

“America” is made a mythic entity of its own, and pictured as positive and full of potential. They turn away, though, and they have only a glimpse of its promise, just as they have only a momentary visitation of happiness, represented as an American oriole in “9 Willow Street” (71):

Happiness

Appeared – momentary,  
 Peered in at your window  
 Like a wild migrant, an oriole,  
 A tanager, a humming-bird – pure American,  
 Blown scraps of the continent's freedom –  
 But off course and gone  
 Before we could identify it. (73)

In “Fishing Bridge” this vision of them turning away is emblematic of “too many” opportunities or potential futures lost. The shining lake offers a vision of an alternative fate which is lost, like the blue jewel in “Red” (197). Plath standing on a threshold is a ghostly figure, and the image echoes other instances of her doing so, particularly one in “You Hated Spain” (39) where the figure of her on a threshold becomes explicitly that of a soul wandering along the banks of the Styx, waiting to be ferried to the dead:

Spain was what you tried to wake up from  
 And could not. I see you, in moonlight,  
 Walking the empty wharf at Alicante  
 Like a soul waiting for the ferry,  
 A new soul, still not understanding,  
 Thinking it is still your honeymoon  
 In the happy world, with your whole life waiting,  
 Happy, and all your poems still to be found. (39-40)

And here again, happiness, naively, seems just round the corner rather than irreparably out of grasp. In "Fishing Bridge" this image is reversed: it is beyond the threshold that all the enticement of life (rather than death and the underworld) is held. Turning away from America (which represents all that is hopeful and vital) they turn away from its promise and towards darkness and death. Already in "9 Willow Street" (71), which describes their first home in Boston, and is placed five poems before "Fishing Bridge", they are seen to have sleepwalked into a myth of "death":

The myth we had sleepwalked into: death.  
This was the bat-light we were living in: death. (74)

In "The Bird" (77), which also recounts their time in Boston, Hughes has described himself as inhabiting a mysterious, dream-like "fairy tale" of hers:

You told me  
Everything but the fairy tale. Step for step  
I walked in the sleep  
You tried to wake from. (77)

In "Fishing Bridge" too they continue in their sleepwalk:

We half-closed our eyes. Or held them wide  
Like sleepwalkers while a voice on a tape,  
Promising, directed us into a doorway  
Difficult and dark. The voice urged on  
Into an unlit maze of crying and loss. (87-88)

Their recurrent figuration as sleepwalkers in *Birthday Letters* indicates that the world they inhabited frequently seems to Hughes in retrospect either nightmarish or dream-like. It also gives an impression of their single-minded determination and subsequent blinkeredness. Each moves towards their destination as if in sleep, or possessed by a dream. In "A Dream" (118) the sleeper is seen to proceed with the inevitability and necessity of the "fixed stars" of fate:

Not dreams, I had said, but fixed stars  
Govern a life. A thirst of the whole being,  
Inexorable, like a sleeper drawing  
Air into the lungs. (118)

There is an evident irony in supposedly contrasting "fixed stars" and "dreams", while depicting the "fixed stars" through the image of a sleepwalker (who clearly is possessed by a dream). In effect, Hughes makes "fixed stars" and "dreams" equivalent. The phrase, "Fixed stars" is taken from Plath's poem "Words" (270) where words, unmanageable and always echoing, are set up against the "fixed stars" that "Govern a life". Here, in "A Dream", Hughes

makes the literary and dream-like as determinative as the “fixed stars”. (Indeed the “fixed stars” are themselves literary, invoking Dante and *Romeo and Juliet*).

The courses of their lives are similarly pictured as occurring in a dream/nightmare in “Stubbing Wharfe” (106) and “Error” (122), both of which deal with their return from America to England and figure it as a wrong move, a dead-end in a labyrinth. In “Stubbing Wharfe” the language of “Fishing Bridge” is clearly echoed. Plath has flung off “The sparkle of America, pioneer / In the wrong direction” (106). The trajectory of their lives is that of a train described here as a “sleeper”, thus connecting the train image with the pervasive sleep-walking imagery:

Our flashing inter-continental sleeper  
Had slammed into a gruesome, dead-end tunnel. (106)

The “dead-end tunnel” chimes with many other references to dead-ends and tunnels in the text, all part of the labyrinth motif (including in “Fishing Bridge”). In “Error”<sup>30</sup> Hughes sleepwalks Plath into his dreamland:

I brought you to Devon. I brought you into my dreamland.  
I sleepwalked you  
Into my land of totems. Never-never land:  
The orchard in the West. (122)

As “Stubbing Wharfe” (106) has implied, her mythic dreamland is America, specifically the coast of Nauset. His Edenic “orchard in the West” parallels her American promised land (as it is described in “The Prism” [186]) and “shag-headed wilderness” (“Fishing Bridge”). This “orchard in the West” carries composite mythical echoes: of the mythical Westcountry of England with all its Arthurian associations, of the Garden of the Hesperides (the garden in the West) and of Aeneas’s search for the western lands in order to found a mythical homeland and restore lost Troy. In *Birthday Letters* the dreamlands of Hughes and Plath are akin insofar as both are “never-never” lands, the province of myth. Already in “Stubbing Wharfe” (106) it has been suggested that the America she is homesick for is more literary than real, a “Lawrentian globe”<sup>31</sup> (107). In “Error” they are shown to be on different trajectories,

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<sup>30</sup> The title itself suggests the labyrinth motif; Hughes would have been aware of the simple classical meaning of “error” as “a wandering”. In Book VI of the *Aeneid* the Cretan maze is described as “inextricabilis error”, “a maze inextricable” (line 27).

<sup>31</sup> Hughes claimed that the works of D.H. Lawrence were among Plath’s “sacred books” (“Sylvia Plath and Her Journals” 179).

possessed by differing visions, and here in Devon (where he tries to establish his “orchard in the West”) hers slams to a “dead-end”:

The flashing trajectory,  
The trans-continental dream-express  
Of your adolescence – had it  
Slammed to a dead-end, crushing halt, fatal,  
In this red-soil tunnel? (122)

The labyrinth motif suggested by the tunnel image is made explicit in the description of the place in which they (particularly Plath) are trapped as a “labyrinth / Of brambly burrow lanes”. “This was Lyonesse” Hughes writes, alluding both to Plath’s poem “Lyonesse” (233) and its legendary associations in English myth and poetry (including in Thomas Hardy’s “When I set out for Lyonesse”).<sup>32</sup> Her poem laments the irreversible drowning of the mythical Lyonesse, with which she has identified their own domestic dream home in Devon, irretrievably sunk after the break-up of their marriage and her discovery of his affair with Assia Wevill: “No use whistling for Lyonesse!”.<sup>33</sup>

The “dead-ends” described in “Stubbing Wharfe” and “Error” pun on the end of their joint quest and life together – Plath’s death. They are awakenings to death (the crashing end of their dreams and joint sleepwalk) that are intimations and variations of the dead-end course described in broader perspective in “Fishing Bridge”. Retrospectively, their journey is seen as in “sleep” because what they are greeted by has the traumatic quality of an awakening. If they are awakenings then, they continue to be now: the effects of trauma are always delayed (Caruth 4). Recurrently at the end of a poem, Hughes will come to a realization or awakening that is concurrent with his realization that she is not present, and that the “current”<sup>34</sup> that links them has failed. This awakening to the continual trauma of her death is the dead-end present which Hughes now meets in the labyrinth of his writing – a searching out of his past and

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<sup>32</sup> Hardy’s poem relates his first meeting with his late wife, Emma Gifford. Hardy’s collection of elegies for his wife, *Poems of 1912-1913*, is one of the few generic precursors of *Birthday Letters*.

<sup>33</sup> “Lyonesse” was written on the same day as “Amnesiac” (232) and originally formed part of the same poem; “Amnesiac” clearly registers the recent demise of their own domestic dream: “No use, no use, now, begging Recognize! / There is nothing to do with such a beautiful blank but smooth it. / Name, house, car keys, / The little toy wife – / Erased, sigh, sigh.”

<sup>34</sup> In a letter to Moulin, Hughes wrote of the poems:

Each one was an attempt to find the live current of feeling between her & [sic] me and then to hold it till the words ran out. But never to lose that current. That was the sole principle. And never to lose, of course, the person I was communicating with – her. (qtd. in Moulin, “Disappearance of the Inapparent in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*” n.pag.)

certain “mythic” images which haunt him.<sup>35</sup> The dead-end image recurs in Hughes’s writings. In “The Poetic Self”, his essay on T.S. Eliot, he speaks of Eliot in his early writing as reaching “dead end after dead end” (273). Hughes said of his own work *Gaudete* that

what I held in focus as I wrote was a sense of the spirit energy staggering through the crassness of the living cells...the battery image of the poem was of transcendental energy jammed – unconscious and deformed in the collision – into dead-end objects, dead-end claustrophobic egos... (sic) (qtd. in Wagner 135).<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, he described the characters of *Gaudete* as themselves meeting dead-ends, unable to redeem their situation, “the whole situation being impossibly crystallized in the immovable dead end forms of society and physical life” (qtd. in Faas 215). Here, as in *Birthday Letters*, the imagery and content of the work self-reflexively mirror Hughes’s own method and purpose, what he “held in focus as I wrote”. His image of “transcendental energy” driving his words (so that his characters might find some redemption) in his statement about *Gaudete* also chimes with his purpose in *Birthday Letters* of writing letters to Plath and thus forming, or re-connecting, a “current” between them.

In “Fishing Bridge” (87) they are impelled by a “voice” which pushes them

Into an unlit maze of crying and loss.  
 What voice? ‘Find your souls,’ said the voice.  
 ‘Find your true selves. This way. Search, search.’  
 The voice had never heard of the shining lake.  
 ‘Find the core of the labyrinth.’ Why? What opens  
 At the heart of the maze? Is it the doorway  
 Into the perfected vision? Masterfully  
 The voice pushed us, hypnotized, bowing our heads  
 Into its dead-ends, its reversals,  
 Dreamy gropings, baffled ponderings,  
 Its monomaniac half-search, half-struggle,  
 Not for the future – not for any future— [ . . . ]. (88)

The voice, insofar as it personifies what motivates them, is like a possessive “demon”. This notion of a “voice” articulating itself through their poetry is consistent with their own poetics. Plath explored anthropological accounts of demonic possession in her own search to find her “voice”, and at an early age articulated the ancient idea that the writer is driven by a particular

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<sup>35</sup> These metaphors are in accordance with Hughes’s own: he claimed his method of writing was “to find a thread and draw the rest out of a hidden tangle” (qtd. in Bere n.pag.).

<sup>36</sup> Wagner aptly relates this sense of “transcendental energy jammed” to the poem “The Pan” (121).

voice or daemon.<sup>37</sup> As Hughes's epigraph to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (quoted on page 15) suggests, he too conceived of poetry as literally vocational, elsewhere describing poetry as the "voice of Eros" ("The Poetic Self" 268) and talking of the emergence of the "voice of *Ariel*" in Plath's poetry ("Sylvia Plath and Her Journals" 183; "On Sylvia Plath" n.pag.; "Sylvia Plath: The Evolution" 202).

In "Fishing Bridge", as in "18 Rugby Street", Hughes links the maze and possession. But here, rather than entering a maze and becoming possessed, being possessed they find themselves in a maze of "loss". Hughes here suggests an equivalence between "possession" and "loss", which gathers a greater resonance in the volume.

The voice is akin to "poetry" in "Flounders" (65), where they only do what poetry "told" them to. Here too they have only a glimpse of happiness, an experience of it that becomes emblematic, a miniaturized version of what might have been:

How tiny an adventure  
To stay so monumental in our marriage,  
A slight ordeal of all that might be,  
And a small thrill-breath of what many live by,  
And a small prize, a toy miniature  
Of the life that might have bonded us  
Into a single animal, a single soul—

It was a visit from the goddess, the beauty  
Who was poetry's sister – she had come  
To tell poetry she was spoiling us.  
Poetry listened, maybe, but we heard nothing  
And poetry did not tell us. And we  
Only did what poetry told us to do. (66)

The voice tells them to find their "souls" and "selves". In both of their conceptions of poetry, self and writing are inseparable. In "9 Willow Street" (71) Hughes points to the link between his development of self and his writing by his description of his method of writing in virtual darkness (the windows blocked) while looking for "Jung's nigredo", in Jungian theory an early stage in the individuation of the self (a process aimed at the perfection of the self, its terminology made on the analogy of alchemical transfiguration) (Jung 12: 229, par. 333). Plath's poetry is also seen as part of a quest for self, and in *Birthday Letters* their journey across America becomes an emblem of Plath's (and his) search for her poetic self. In "The Badlands" (82) this trip is explicitly described as a journey in search of Plath's self: "Right

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<sup>37</sup> See her journal entry dated 27<sup>th</sup> August 1958 for her notes on her reading of *Possession: Demoniactal and Other* by Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich (*Journals* 415). In "Why do I write?" (composed at sixteen) she replies "There is a voice within me / That will not be still" (qtd. in the introduction of *Letters Home* 31).

across America / We went looking for you”, the poem begins. They do not discover Plath on this quest, but instead are presented with a negative vision of America:

Empty, horrible, archaic – America.  
Planetary – before the eye touched it.  
A land with maybe one idea – snake. (84)

This itself (because of the structure of the poem, which starts out with a quest for Plath) seems in some sense a vision of her, or to offer a discovery of her. Also, the landscape is described as if a masked face – “the whole landscape wore it / Like a plated mask” – and it elides with other images of her face as a mask and recalls the description of her face in “18 Rugby Street” as a “spirit mask”.<sup>38</sup> The vision of America offered in “The Badlands” is a direct reversal of the America he envisages in “18 Rugby Street”: “Beautiful, beautiful!” (24). Insofar as Plath herself is “America”, it is a reversal of his vision of her in that poem. In “The Badlands”, the supposedly new world is again “flawed”, it has “one idea – snake”. The place is unnerving: its emptiness intensifies every sound, like that of the mouse that moves with such ferocity in its “maze” of thorn-bush (85), an emblematic universe.

At the end of “The Badlands” Plath suggests that what is terrifying is life itself. The sheer will to survival, the wonder of a mouse’s finding “dewdrops enough for eyes” in the “iron hearth” landscape of the desert (85), amazes and frightens them. “The Badlands” presents a terrifying vision of basic, palpable life. The darkening sky is described as

Oozing out of the earth like ectoplasm,  
A huge snake heaping out. ‘This is evil,’  
You said. ‘This is real evil.’ (86)

Significantly, Hughes uses here the same word, “ectoplasm”, to describe the sky as he does to describe the basic material of life in his comment on Prospero’s speech (quoted above, page 68). This vision is akin to the “*prima materia*” (SGCB 24) vision of prototypical life which her face embodied in “18 Rugby Street”, except that now the *prima materia* is the basic material not of love, but of evil. The repetition of the word “evil” echoes “The Earthenware Head” (58), where love and evil were set in a dichotomous relationship. The basic substance of life is neutral, able to be manifested either in love or in evil. Hughes suggests that the eye is redemptive – the America of “The Badlands” is “before the eye had touched it” (84).

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<sup>38</sup> In “The Beach” she sits behind her “mask” (156). In “Remission” she becomes death’s mask (110). In “Moonwalk” she is described as writing a poem which she wears like a mask (43).

In “Fishing Bridge” the voice that drives them (the objectified figure of their poetic ambitions) pushes them away from the shining lake, being ignorant of it. Retrospectively, this search for self is seen negatively as too close-focussed: “monomaniac”.

The voice tells them to find the “core” of the labyrinth. They do not know why or what lies there, but are simply driven to what is central. It is another apt image of their focus and determination. Hughes recurrently evokes the unwavering quality of Plath’s focus in his critical writings on her: she “faced” a task in herself,<sup>39</sup> and went straight for what was “central”.<sup>40</sup> They want to get to the “heart” of things, “the heart of the maze”. Hughes wonders hopefully if the destination of all their searchings will be “the doorway into the perfected vision”. This is ironic in “Fishing Bridge” but doubly so within the text as a whole. In “Fairy Tale” (159) – the culmination of their sleepwalk in the “fairy tale” she does not tell him about that is described in “The Bird” (77) – Hughes finally finds the key to unlock the door of the “forty-ninth chamber” in their “palace” (perhaps reminiscent of Knossos) and is greeted by a gruesome vision of death.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in “The Table” (138) Plath’s writing desk becomes a “door” down to her grave. As in “Fairy Tale” and “The Table”, so too in “Fishing Bridge” this imaginary doorway opens onto a vision of Plath dead. The notion of a “doorway into the perfected vision” has an added irony in the context of Plath’s death, in that “perfected” recalls the opening statement of her poem “Edge” (272), which describes a dead woman who appears as if a work of art (almost a bas-relief) as “perfected”. Possibly her final poem,<sup>42</sup> it might literally be said to be the perfection of her own vision. Together with her suicide (to which it has an uncanny correlation) the poem has helped to transform Plath herself into a mythic figure. In light of “Edge”, the notion of a perfected vision, and being driven by one, takes on sinister overtones.

The notion of a “perfected vision” at the end of a journey puts one in mind of Dante. Hughes constructs their own quest as if in search of love and perfection, and Dante is repeatedly alluded to, notably in “Karlsbad Caverns” (99). This poem is similar to “Fishing Bridge” and “Flounders” in that it too presents an incident which in retrospect appears emblematic. Here, ironically, the blind bats seem more sensible than the humans; unlike the sleepwalking, closed-eyed Hughes and Plath of “Fishing Bridge”,

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<sup>39</sup> “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poetry” 187.

<sup>40</sup> Hughes qtd. in the preface to Rose’s *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* xiv.

<sup>41</sup> “Fairy Tale” is clearly an ironic reworking of the “Bluebeard” fairytale. This poem, too, demonstrates the text’s allusiveness.

<sup>42</sup> “Edge” is frequently cited as her last poem and is placed last in her *Collected Poems* but “Balloons” (271) was also written on the same day, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1963.

Those bats had their eyes open. Unlike us,  
 They knew how, and when, to detach themselves  
 From the love that moves the sun and the other stars. (101)

Not only is the poem written in an approximation of Dante's *terza rima*, its final line is borrowed from the ultimate vision of love at the close of his *Paradiso*:<sup>43</sup> this presumably is their guiding goal. In "Karlsbad Caverns" Hughes does not reject Dante's vision, rather he reviews their own "monomaniacal" hubris in reaching so fixedly after it. Their simplistic notion of everything working in perfect harmony (a sort of parody of Dante's vision – "the bats' meaning / Oiled the unfailing logic of the earth" being "A rebuke to our flutter of half-participation") is clearly ironic in its context: shortly the bats will turn around, upset by a storm, and appear more prosaically with "Wings above their heads like folding umbrellas" (100).

The penultimate section of "Fishing Bridge" ends powerfully with the broken-off sentence "Not for the future – not for any future –". As in "The Earthenware Head", the clock is "stopped", and the retrospective knowledge of the past has frozen all hope for any other future. Time is arrested as Hughes is confronted by the traumatic image of Plath's dead face.

Hughes asks now if where everything halted was the maze's centre:

Till it stopped. Was that the maze's centre?  
 Where everything stopped? What lay there?  
 The voice held me there, by the scruff of the neck,  
 And bowed my head  
 Over the thing we had found. Your dead face.  
 Your dead lips, pale. And your eyes  
 (As brown-bright, when I lifted the lids,  
 As when you gazed across that incandescence)  
 Unmoving and dead. (88)

Where everything stops is presumably Plath's death, and what stops is their life together, their joint search in the name of poetry (impelled by the voice that tells them to find their true selves). The voice pauses, freezing Hughes and bowing him over "the thing we had found", Plath's dead face. It is a vision of terror and the voice is akin to the bellow in the voice in "Setebos" (132) (and "The Minotaur" [120]) which makes the hair of his nape prickle. Curiously this vision is not something that Hughes finds but that they both find – it is not

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<sup>43</sup> Already my Desire and Will were rolled –  
 Even as a wheel that moveth equally –  
 By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.  
 (Hughes's translation, quoted at the close of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* [504]).

simply a vision of Plath's death (literally the ultimate "dead-end" of their search) but a sinister joint creation of their poetic quest.

It is a grim irony that this vision is what all they work for should result in. This is, however, the centre of the maze he now inhabits: what he inescapably returns to again and again in the text is the image of Plath's eyes, as haunting now as then:

your eyes  
 (As brown-bright, when I lifted the lids,  
 As when you gazed across that incandescence)  
 Unmoving and dead. (88)

This (Plath's dead face) is what he now metaphorically "faces" on his suddenly halted poetic quest, and he responds by addressing her in these poems. His use of apostrophe is a means of metaphorically facing her by conjuring her own face.<sup>44</sup> In "Fishing Bridge" the picture of him bowed over her dead face recalls the closing lines of "The Blue Flannel Suit" (67):

But then I sat, stilled,  
 Unable to fathom what stilled you  
 As I looked at you, as I am stilled  
 Permanently now, permanently  
 Bending so briefly at your open coffin. (68)

Here, his confronting of, and transfixion by, her face is, through his blurring of time tenses, explicitly made his act of present writing. He is transfixed by her face, and it becomes what he faces in the labyrinth of his fate. His confrontation of her face at the close of "Fishing Bridge", the dead-end that he meets, is made powerful by its placement at the end of the poem: it chimes with the sense of Hughes's "current" failing, her death realized. These two temporal layers (an imaginary description of what happened in the past being shadowed by what Hughes is doing in the present) double the poem's impact.

"The Minotaur" (120) ends with a grim vision of Plath dead at the centre of a maze like that in "Fishing Bridge", and again they are led here through poetry. The poem takes as its starting point an incident in which Plath, angry with Hughes, smashed a table with a high stool. This incident is clearly emblematic for Hughes, for he refers to it again in "The Bird" (78) and "Telos" (176). In "The Minotaur" he tells her this fury is what is lacking in her poems, and that if she could harness it, "we'll be away". "We" would seem odd, except that Plath's poetry is repeatedly seen as a joint enterprise in *Birthday Letters* – its development something both poets work at assiduously – and Hughes is cast as both muse and a quasi-

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<sup>44</sup> Hughes claimed that the *Birthday Letters* poems were addressed to Plath in an attempt to "evoke" her and "feel her there listening" (qtd. in Churchwell, "Secrets and Lies" 102).

parental figure (either mid-wife or husband) to it. It does seem that in Plath's own psychodrama Hughes was muse and father figure; writing of the "father image" in *The Tempest* she relates it, in one breathless rush, to "my own father, the buried male muse and god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted" (*Journals* 381; quoted in full in my introduction [6-7]).

In retrospect Hughes views his advice to her with horror. He says "Deep in the cave of your ear / The goblin snapped his fingers". The image is sinister: something imperceptible and demonic is set in action – what happens is "deep in the cave of your ear", beyond Hughes's perception or cognition, and "goblin" suggests a malevolent demon. Its being deep within her ear suggests that it is a part of her consciousness, and the mention of the ear suggests that it is particularly her poetic consciousness. The image of a dark cave, particularly one in which a goblin lurks, evokes the motif of the dark maze (the "unlit maze of crying and loss" figured in "Fishing Bridge") and the Minotaur that inhabits it. Otto has already been suggested as ominously conceived in the Knossos-house of 18 Rugby Street by Hughes's shifting of the date of the consummation of their relationship to Otto's birthday. Plath had herself suggested that Otto was a part of her poetic inspiration when she described him in the journal entry quoted above as submerged in the sea, and the sea as an image of the artist's subconscious. Here it is intimated that the goblin that lurks in her ear is Otto, insofar as he personifies a particular aspect of her poetic inspiration.

Hughes "gives" the goblin something that acts as catalyst, setting off an unstoppable chain. He asks "So what had I given him?" and the answer unravels across two stanzas in one sentence that ends with the image of Plath's dead body:

The bloody end of the skein  
That unravelled your marriage,  
Left your children echoing  
Like tunnels in a labyrinth,

Left your mother a dead-end,  
Brought you to the horned, bellowing  
Grave of your risen father –  
And your own corpse in it. (120)

Once again, as in "Fishing Bridge" and "The Blue Flannel Suit", the poem's closing with an image or intimation of Plath's death is central to its impact.

There are a number of reversals from the standard story of the labyrinth and the Minotaur: the skein is bloody rather than golden and it leads Plath to the centre of the maze (where she will find death) rather than out of it. Hughes casts himself as Ariadne, the giver of the thread, and Plath as the quester, Theseus. Given Hughes's affair and the precipitative effect it had on Plath's poetry, it would be more likely to see Plath as Ariadne, an iconic

figure of the abandoned woman,<sup>45</sup> and Theseus, the notorious adulterer, as Hughes. Of course, though, Hughes was more finally abandoned by Plath with her death, to which the poem alludes.

Within the text as a whole, the “table-top” in “The Minotaur” is proleptic of the table Hughes is seen to give to Plath in “The Table” (138) and there are a number of echoes between these two poems. Hughes provides the mysterious end to the skein as he does the “writing-table” which he makes for her:

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. (138)

Both the table-top and the end of the thread lead Sylvia down to Otto’s grave and both are provided by Hughes. In “The Minotaur” her “smashing” of the table-top anticipates her “opening” of the table-door-lid in “The Table”, something she is able to do by harnessing the rage that enabled her to smash the table. Her pen becomes the instrument of her anger as the stool had been in “The Minotaur”, and anger is seen as her inspiration. What Hughes provides in both instances is assistance in and inspiration for her writing, but this writing summons up her father. In “The Table” Hughes writes:

It did not take you long  
To divine in the elm, following your pen,  
The words that would open it. Incredulous  
I saw rise through it, in broad daylight,  
Your Daddy resurrected [. . .]. (138)

The image of the father rising recalls the “risen father” at the end of “The Minotaur” –

the horned, bellowing  
Grave of your risen father – [. . .]. (120)

– and also anticipates Otto “rising” from his coffin (and finding himself “tangled” with Hughes) in “A Picture of Otto” (193). All carry, too, an echo of Plath’s own description of her

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<sup>45</sup> There are innumerable representations of Ariadne abandoned on the island of Naxos throughout the history of visual art in the West. As Taylor makes clear in *Girgio de Chirico and the Myth of Ariadne*, she was an obsessive figure for de Chirico, one of Plath’s favourite painters, as a symbol of melancholy. Aurelia Plath notes that “The beginning of the appeal of the tragic muse is heard” in “To Ariadne, Deserted by Theseus”, a poem Sylvia wrote at age sixteen (*Letters Home* 32).

father “risen” through her art, risen particularly through the form of Hughes, her muse and aid (*Journals* 381; quoted in full in my introduction [6-7]).

The “skein” of blood becomes a metaphor for Plath’s writing – in the reading Hughes provides here it is this that leads her to the grave of her father, and in turn to her own grave. Elsewhere in *Birthday Letters* her writing is described both as leaving a trail of blood behind it and as feeding on blood. The images of a blood-trail and of a kitchen stool used as a hammer that occur in “The Minotaur” recur in “Telos” (176). Here the blood specifically denotes the writing she left behind her after her death and its reception, the combination of which has caused her writing to haunt Hughes like furies. There is a blurring here between Hughes’s hounding after her death and what he imagines is her own prior to her death. Arguably, the fantastical scenario he provides speaks as much of his own experience as of hers. The poem catalogues the brilliance of Plath’s “alpha career”, the summation of which was her final poetry:

Bloodprints  
Of your escaping heel  
Signed the street-scene snowscape Alpha.  
Anyhow,  
Anywhere to lose  
The Furies of Alpha [. . .]. (176)

In “The Minotaur”, the word “skein” (stanza five, line one), in the context of the labyrinth motif, recalls Plath’s “Full Fathom Five” (92). Here the speaker addresses her dead father and alludes to her own impossible quest to recover him and the “myth of origins” he represents:

Miles long  
  
Extend the radial sheaves  
Of your spread hair, in which wrinkling skeins  
Knotted, caught, survives  
  
The old myth of origins  
Unimaginable.  
[.....]  
  
Waist down, you may wind  
One labyrinthine tangle [. . .]. (lines 6-11, 33-34) (92-93)

“Bellowing” (“The Minotaur”, stanza six, line two) anticipates the “bellow” in Plath’s voice (a bellow both hers and her father’s) in “Setebos” (132):

I heard  
The bellow in your voice

That made my nape-hair prickle when you sang  
 How you were freed from the Elm. I lay  
 In the labyrinth of a cowslip  
 Without a clue. I heard the Minotaur  
 Coming down its tunnel-groove  
 Of old faults deep and bitter. King Minos,  
 Alias Otto – his bellow  
 Winding into murderous music. (133)

This poem again returns to Plath's "Full Fathom Five" (92) and the inspiration behind it, *The Tempest*. The penultimate line of her poem – "Father, this thick air is murderous" – is echoed in the description of Otto/ Minos's bellow winding into "murderous music". Hughes's echo of "Full Fathom Five" is apt here: for Hughes this poem was the first in which she treats her father in his "mythic role" as sea-god (*Collected Poems* 287, note 75), and it is this emergence of Otto from the sea of her subconscious that he pictures in "The Minotaur" as murderous of her. The "bellow", especially in its association with the bestial Minotaur, echoes the "whiff of the beast" that is still perceptible to Hughes in her poetry forty years after its composition in "Trophies" (16). This "whiff", perceptible in her early *Phèdre*-influenced writings, is more fully realized in the bellow of the Minotaur which sings through her later poetry.

Both "The Table" and "The Minotaur" end with similar images of abandonment. In "The Minotaur" Plath's children and mother are "Left" (the word is repeated twice, and both times placed first in the line) behind by the unravelling of the skein which leads her to her grave and of which Hughes has given her the tangle end. In "The Table" Hughes describes himself as helping Plath find her father and then "Leaving you to him" (139). Here again the heaviness of this abandonment is emphasized by the word's placement first in the line. Here, though, it is made even heavier by being placed in the final, short line of the poem, taking its cumulative weight.

The description of Plath's children left "echoing" like "tunnels" tallies with the description of Frieda in "Life After Death" (182) as a wound, and also recalls the description of her as suspended in an "echo-chamber" in "Grand Canyon" (96). In "Grand Canyon" the sound that goes "PAUM!", making the unborn Frieda quake in her echo-chamber, haunts Hughes, and is compared to the stunning effect of the voice of "your daughter" (the description "your" making it sound as if Frieda's voice echoes her mother's) (98).

As at the close of "Fishing Bridge", Plath is led to a vision of her own death with the help of Hughes. The composite image of Plath's corpse and her father's grave suggests that the Minotaur she finds is part of herself rather than something extraneous. What Hughes figures here corresponds with his impression, expressed in his overview of Plath's final poems in " Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog' ", of Otto's body as "the Chrysalis

of the voice [the “Ariel” voice]” (202). This is a voice Hughes recurrently represents himself as nurturing, and “A Picture of Otto” (193) will suggest that the Otto-Minotaur figure is also a part of Hughes’s self, and not only Plath’s.

This poem echoes the explicit labyrinth motif of “The Minotaur”, as well as its overt linking of writing and the labyrinth. Moreover, the two poems are linked by their identical stanzaic form (unusual in *Birthday Letters*),<sup>46</sup> which helps to reinforce thematic associations between them.

“A Picture of Otto” takes as its starting point a picture referred to in Plath’s “Daddy” (222), itself a “picture of Otto”. Hughes’s opening words “You stand there at the blackboard” repeat nearly verbatim a line from “Daddy”: “You stand at the blackboard, daddy”. “Daddy”, insofar as it is read literally, with a simple identification between speaker and poet, and within a biographical context, is also a picture of Hughes. Written on 12th October 1962, the day after Hughes moved out of their home, Court Green (Wagner-Martin 218), it seems to have stemmed as much from her anger at his affair as at her “Daddy”.

The daddy figure is obviously larger-than-life, but biographical contextualization has encouraged readings which identify him with the historical Otto. Moreover, the picture Plath refers to in “Daddy” (of Otto standing “at the blackboard”) was reproduced in *Letters Home*, and has since been widely reproduced, providing extratextual ballast for literalist readings. In Plath’s poem her mention of this picture leads almost immediately to her introduction of the surrogate father-husband figure – the husband made in the father’s image – that has so frequently come to be identified with Hughes:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less the devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

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<sup>46</sup> Of the eighty-eight poems in the volume only seven are stanzaic: “Karlsbad Caverns” (99), “The Minotaur” (120), “A Short Film” (134), “The Bee God” (150), “The Blackbird” (162), “The Ventriloquist” (181) and “A Picture of Otto” (193).

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do. (223-224)

This “black man” of the picture becomes the model for the “man in black” (who has since been identified with Hughes). In “A Picture of Otto” Hughes returns to “Daddy” and to the photograph of Otto standing at the blackboard and confronts this picture as if it were his own double or ghost.

In the first stanza Hughes addresses Otto as “Lutheran minister manqué”: Otto studied for the priesthood but, convinced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, considered heretical by the Lutheran church, he left this study and pursued his early interest in bees, becoming an expert entomologist and academic. In his depiction of Otto here, Hughes focuses on aspects of Plath’s background – “an atmosphere of tense intellectual competition and Germanic rigour” (“*Sylvia Plath: Ariel*” 162) and her parents’ Puritanical religious and cultural affiliations – which he repeatedly associates with her difficulties.

Hughes imagines himself as confronting the ghost of Otto in the course of an attempt to find and face Sylvia:

A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone  
As can be conjured into poetry  
To find yourself so tangled with me –  
Rising from your coffin, a big shock

To meet me face to face in the dark adit  
Where I have come looking for your daughter. (193)

Conjuration is by now a familiar metaphor for the magical workings of poetry.<sup>47</sup> It is Plath’s poetry – specifically “Daddy” – which conjures the ghost of Otto from his grave (as “The Minotaur” (120), “The Table” (138) and “The Cast” (179) all make clear) and tangles him with Hughes. Here, however, it is also Hughes’s poetry that self-consciously conjures Otto, addressing him and calling him up from the dead. The scenario Hughes imagines here, of the two men meeting, can only take place on the page. The “dark adit”, the means by which, Hughes tells Otto, “I have come looking for your daughter”, is both Plath’s poetry and his own: for the text has recurrently entailed a search for her that takes place through a return to her words. Implicitly, Plath’s poetry becomes a labyrinthine tangle-tunnel in which both he

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<sup>47</sup> Compare the last lines of “Portraits” (205) where Plath is described as “conjuring” the snake’s doppelgänger onto her page. In “A Picture of Otto”, Hughes’s “doppelgänger” is conjured.

and Otto are caught, imprisoned in the discourse of others (as she in turn had depicted herself through similarly Gothic motifs).<sup>48</sup>

“A Picture of Otto” is the fourth from last poem in the *Birthday Letters* sequence, which has repeatedly described and enacted a search for Plath. Through the volume’s structuring and the complex temporality of the poems, they simultaneously enact the search for Plath that they so often describe – in the Strand, across America, and here in the underworld (the consequence of his journey across the Strand). The first poem has made this clear: Hughes, on the Strand, undertakes a journey which entails his attempting to get Plath back into the picture, so to speak: attempting to see her, and re-create her image. Here, near the end of his quest, Hughes encounters his double and recognizes it as a part of himself. He does not see Plath, but is confronted only by a ghost that is his own double and he presents himself, like the speaker of Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting”, as if alone. Doing so, he suggests that the Otto/Minotaur figure is as much a part of his consciousness as it is of hers. He too rests in the underground with a figment of his own haunting, as he depicts her as doing at the close of “The Minotaur” (120).

The word “tangled” (line 7) is again reminiscent of Plath’s poem “Full Fathom Five” (92) and its “labyrinthine tangle” (see above, page 83). Here, writing – first Plath’s and now Hughes’s – is labyrinthine, a mesh in which he and Otto are inextricably entangled. “Rising” recalls the “risen” grave in “The Minotaur” and also (as in “The Minotaur”) Plath’s journal entry in which she identifies Hughes and Otto (*Journals* 381, quoted in part on page 81). Otto’s “shock” at seeing himself entangled with the stranger Hughes is akin to the surprise which Hughes feels when confronted with the sense of himself becoming the object of a photograph (and therefore alien to himself) and invaded by Otto in “Black Coat” (102). The “shock” (the word appears twice, itself doubled, and frames the second stanza suggesting that it is the predominant feature of this meeting), together with their coming “face to face” (third stanza), suggests a recognition scene. It is a culmination of a shock of self-recognition that is suggested at the end of so many of the poems – for instance in “Your Paris” (36), which ends with the word “me”, and “St Botolph’s” (14) which closes with “The me beneath it for good”. These poems become glimpses in the mirror, making the work an autobiography – and the poems “self-portraits”, in accordance with Hughes’s description of the mythic artist’s work as an unfolding of successive “self-portraits” of his “mythic personality” (*SGCB* 40, 36).

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<sup>48</sup> Britzolakis claims that

For Plath, as for Poe, and the early Eliot, poetic discourse is haunted by the threat of imprisonment in the words of others. Literary tradition itself becomes a tortuous and labyrinthine structure, a crypt or haunted house. (110)

Compare this sense of being trapped in the language of others’s with Hughes’s words about poetic tradition having a “magnetic” and shaping force in chapter one (page 21).

In the second stanza, Hughes “face to face” with Otto recalls “The Earthenware Head” (57). Here he had imagined Plath reconciled with her dead father, as “Face to face” with “the Father” (58). Hughes’s imagined reunion of Plath and her father in “The Earthenware Head” is an indirect imagining of a reunion of himself and her. This notion is reinforced by the depiction of Hughes and Otto as doubles in “A Picture of Otto”. As in “The Earthenware Head”, the reconciliation with the father is here imagined as taking place after death, the “tunnel” being the Plath family’s “vault” (line 11). Hughes’s poem looks forward to his own death<sup>49</sup> and wonders at his own possible reconciliation with Plath, on the page or in the afterlife (one thinks of Aeneas and Dido meeting in the underworld, and Dido’s return to her former husband Sychaeus and lack of communication with Aeneas).<sup>50</sup> This is clearly the realm of the afterlife: here Hughes meets Otto, who in “Setebos”(132) was alias “King Minos”(133), the legendary judge of the underworld (and also the father of *Phèdre*, with whom Plath identified).

The image of walking down a tunnel recalls a passage in “Setebos”, the only other poem in which Otto is named:

I heard the Minotaur  
Coming down its tunnel-groove  
Of old faults deep and bitter. King Minos,  
Alias Otto – his bellow  
Winding into murderous music. (133)

The mention of the tunnel also signals Owen’s “Strange Meeting”, a poem which haunts this one. It opens:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel [. . .].

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<sup>49</sup> Hughes died on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1998, nine months after the publication of *Birthday Letters*. His knowledge that he was terminally ill with cancer undoubtedly impelled him to publish the volume (Churchwell 21). Incidentally, his poems publicly addressed to Plath followed a year-long cycle shaped by her birthday – the first of his poems addressed to her, “The City”, was printed in the *Sunday Times* on the 26<sup>th</sup> October 1997 (the day before her birthday – the 27<sup>th</sup> October) and the last, “The Offers”, also in the *Sunday Times*, nine days before her birthday. Hughes died on the day after her birthday.

<sup>50</sup> Book VI of the *Aeneid*, lines 450 – 476. The palimpsest of the story of Dido and Aeneas is not entirely arbitrary. For Hughes the story of Dido is the “ur-tragedy behind *The Tempest*” (SGCB 441), which, according to Hughes, shows Shakespeare attempting to come to terms with the rejected Goddess, of whom the suicidal Dido is an embodiment. The model of Aeneas descending to the underworld and there facing Dido and accepting his separation from her and thence returning to the upper world might be a better model for Hughes’s project here than the descent of Orpheus and his attempt to regain his wife. Orpheus, famously, is a failed mourner (Sacks 6, 71-72), while Aeneas is one of the few to make a successful return to the land of the living, having been warned by the Sybil before he descends how much more difficult is the ascent from the underworld than the descent to it: “to recall one’s steps and pass out to the upper air, this is the task, this is the toil!” (lines 125-129). The labour of this journey is one of love – after the Sybil has warned Aeneas of the difficulty, she relents: “But if such love is in your heart [. . .] hear what must first be done” (lines 133 – 135).

The speaker of “Strange Meeting” finds himself in hell: “And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall – / By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell” (lines 9-10). Here he meets a dead man (a German soldier, and supposed enemy) who stares at him with “piteous recognition” (line 7). This man, whom the speaker addresses as “strange friend”, and who he learns is someone he recently fought against and killed, turns out – in Hughes’s words – “to be himself” (“Unfinished Business” 43). “A Picture of Otto” offers a similar scenario:

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.  
Your portrait, here, could be my son’s portrait.

I understand – you never could have released her.  
I was a whole myth too late to replace you.  
This underworld, my friend, is her heart’s home.  
Inseparable, here we must remain,

Everything forgiven and in common –  
Not that I see her behind you, where I face you,  
But like Owen, after his dark poem,  
Under the battle, in the catacomb,

Sleeping with his German as if alone. (193)

Many features recall “Strange Meeting”: the acknowledgement that Hughes’s shadow and Otto’s ghost are inseparable (that they double, or have become so through her writing), as well as the imagined scenario of him and Otto (“his German”) meeting, “Everything forgiven and in common”, and destined to inhabit the same place, death. So too does the phrase “my friend” recall Owen’s “I am the enemy you killed, my friend” (line 40).

The syntax of the last stanza of “A Picture of Otto” is ambiguous: it is uncertain whether Hughes sees Sylvia or himself as “like Owen”.<sup>51</sup> Following directly on from “This underworld, my friend, is her heart’s home” the “we” in “Inseparable, here we must remain” presumably refers to all three: Hughes sleeps with his German (Sylvia) and she with hers (Otto). It is suggested here, in a continuation of what Hughes intimated in “The Minotaur”, that Otto is part of their shared consciousness.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hunter reads it as Hughes: “Hughes, comparing himself to the World War I poet-soldier in Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’, prepares to sleep with ‘his German’ Otto Plath, the Minotaur ogre ‘in the catacomb’ ” (138). Wagner sees it as Plath: “Plath is again in her ‘soldier crypt’, a poet killed in battle like Owen.” (193). Wagner, however, misreads the final words of “The Gypsy” (116) as “soldier crypt” instead of “solider crypt”.

<sup>52</sup> Hunter pursues this argument in her article, claiming that “Otto Plath as Prince of the Underworld controlling the living was a shared, interpersonal encrypting between Ted and Sylvia” (130-131).

In claiming that Plath could hardly tell them apart, Hughes cannot be literal but seems to be drawing on what Heaney describes as Hughes's view of

Sylvia Plath's psychology/pathology, in which the poet sees himself reincarnated by his wife in her unconscious as her dominant father, Otto Plath, a figure who also represents at that dream level her first betrayer (he had died and left her when she was a child). ("A Wounded Power" n.pag.)

This "dream level" in which Plath's father has taken on mythic significance for her is the "myth" referred to in "A Picture of Otto" which cannot be replaced or dislodged. Hughes can only become a part of it.

Hughes not only compares himself/Sylvia to the *speaker* of the poem but to the *writer*,

Owen, after his dark poem,  
Under the battle, in the catacomb

Sleeping with his German as if alone. (193)

"Strange Meeting" closes "Let us sleep now..." (149); by imagining Owen "Sleeping with his German" Hughes places Owen within his own poem (that is Owen's): so that in Hughes's reading (or re-writing) Owen's poem and life overlap, becoming mythic.

Owen was killed in war not long after the writing of "Strange Meeting",<sup>53</sup> and, tragically, a week before the armistice. This rendered the poem (which describes a journey beyond death) strangely prophetic and gave extra power to its central message of the horror and pity of war:

'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'  
'None,' said the other, 'save the undone years,  
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,  
Was my life also; I went hunting wild  
After the wildest beauty in the world,  
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,  
But mocks the steady running of the hour,  
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.  
For by my glee might many men have laughed,  
And by my weeping something had been left,  
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled. (lines 14-25)

Not only does this vision of death retrospectively seem a premonition of Owen's own imminent and untimely death, but the poem's message was one which gained an uncanny

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<sup>53</sup> The poem was drafted between January and March 1918 (Stallworthy 149) and Owen died on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1918.

valency from it: the years “undone” for Owen and the consequent loss to English poetry. Like Plath’s poetry, Owen’s acquires a “blood-jet, autobiographical truth” (*SGCB* 43). Both Plath and Owen have become iconic figures on account of the perceived overlap between their poetry and their lives. And the two poets are alike, too, in that both died early, with much of their potential unrealized, making it unsurprising that Hughes has Owen in mind here.

Another reason why Hughes should hold Owen in mind now, when he confronts his own poetic fate, is that the allusion brings with it the memory of the First World War. In his confrontation with Otto’s ghost, Hughes also confronts one of the most haunting spectres of his own life and work: the Great War. This he described, in a discussion of the work of Owen and other war poets, specifically as a “ghost”: “The First World War goes on getting stronger – our number one national ghost” (“National Ghost” 70). He also made this war a central part of his own poetic myth in his autobiographical piece “The Rock”, and made an attempt to exorcize himself of its ghost in his poem “Out” (*NSP* 72). His linking of Otto’s ghost with that of the First World War is suggestive. Hunter argues that Plath’s Germanic heritage (emphasized here in “Sleeping with his German”) was part of Hughes’s fascination with her (130–145). Through a brief allusion, “A Picture of Otto” touches more sensitively on Hughes’s own poetic fate, and what drew him to Plath, than it might at a cursory reading suggest.

Formally, “A Picture of Otto” is striking in that it is one of the few *Birthday Letters* poems not addressed to Sylvia. Furthermore, it is still an address, but to Otto. Here too it recalls “Daddy” (one of Plath’s many apostrophic poems).<sup>54</sup> Hughes’s use of apostrophe might seem explicable from his comments on the origins of the poems. He claimed that he wrote them simply to “evoke” Plath’s presence and to feel her as present and “listening” (qtd. in Churchwell, “Secrets and Lies” 102). Hence, one supposes, his description of them as “letters”: they are a means of communicating with her but take place through writing rather than speech (and as such powerfully dramatize her absence).<sup>55</sup> His use of apostrophe in “A Picture of Otto”, a poem oddly entitled “A Picture of” the addressee, indicates a more complex situation than a simple attempt to communicate with an absent person.

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<sup>54</sup> Britzolakis cites Richard Matovich’s *A Concordance to the Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* as listing sixty-nine instances of apostrophe (106).

<sup>55</sup> Both “letters” as in the individual letters of the alphabet, the basic components of writing, and “letters” as in epistles, signify absence:

There exists an entire tradition subordinating the written to the spoken word. One may write, for example, a letter to an absent person, or a will to be read after one’s death. Writing is considered as a means of signification in the absence of the speaker or the listener, whereas in the presence of the listener one would simply speak. The definition of writing is thus as “sign of a sign”. (Descombes 146)

The chief effect of Hughes's apostrophising of Plath is to create the illusion of her presence. This fiction of her presence is frequently undercut at the ends of the poems. They double back upon themselves self-reflexively – they are just poems – and Hughes is left feeling alone, as if the “current” linking them, supposedly created by the poems, fails.

In “A Picture of Otto” this is thematized and dramatized. Hughes in his search for Plath (via the “dark adit” of her poetry) meets only Otto's ghost, who turns out to be his double, and is left with him “as if alone”. He does not “see” or recognize Plath (line 22) but instead faces Otto. He faces him in the metaphorical, colloquial sense of confronting him too (a sense reinforced by Hughes's use of apostrophe) so that this becomes a confrontation with the self and an acceptance of his own poetic fate: remaining entangled with Sylvia and Otto on the page.

These “letters” seem not simply attempts to communicate with an absent person, but rather with some shadowy and inarticulate region of the self, of which Sylvia is a part. They are “letters” in the more general sense in which Hughes described poems:

In the end, one's poems are ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings and one thing and another. (qtd. in Faas 205)

It is fitting that the workings of the poems in general should be mirrored in “A Picture of Otto”, the fourth from last poem in the sequence. By having “A Picture of Otto” dramatize what occurs in each poem, Hughes structures his volume as if it itself enacts a drama, here of reconciliation and an acceptance of his own poetic fate.

## Chapter Three

### Possession and Loss

Possession is a multivalent motif, connoting ownership, artistic inspiration, haunting and demonic possession, and connects to broader themes of inheritance, *dispossession* and loss. The word “possession” recurs across the text in different forms and contexts, accruing “mythic” resonances.<sup>1</sup> It also crops up repeatedly in Hughes’s critical writings and translations: in “Poetry in the Making” Hughes claims that art arises from what he describes as “man’s principal occupation”: the “struggle truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self” (24). Possession here indicates an understanding articulated in language – transitory and fleeting perhaps, but once articulated in poetry having a life independent of one’s own: something permanent and outside of oneself. Hughes’s above-mentioned claim about art in general could easily be taken to describe what he is doing in *Birthday Letters*, as he attempts to come to terms with his past and also to reassert an identity and history which, arguably, he has been dispossessed of through the public’s enquiry into and interpretations of Plath’s life and history. Issues of “ownership” gather, too, on the debate surrounding Hughes’s inheritance of Plath’s estate: in a letter to the *Guardian* (one of a series debating Hughes’s executorship of her estate and his maintenance of her grave) Hughes wrote: “I hope each one of us owns the facts of his or her life” (qtd. in Rose 65)<sup>2</sup>. Elsewhere he has expressed the “simple wish 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” (letter to Stevenson, qtd. in Malcolm 142). For Malcolm, “It is Hughes’s bitter fate to

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<sup>1</sup> The resonances are “mythic” in accordance with Hughes’s discussion of myth and words in “Myth and Education” quoted in my introduction (5). Notably, already two articles have appeared which both have the word “possession” in their title, yet do not look at the recurrence of it in Hughes’s writings, and at how it acquires a packed richness from its use in different contexts: Hunter’s “Poetics of Melancholy and Psychic Possession in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* and Other Haunted Texts” and Whitehead’s “Refiguring Orpheus: The Possession of the Past in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*”. Whitehead points out that what Hughes figures, really, is a possession *by* the past, and this is in accordance with Caruth’s claim that trauma is always belated, taking the form of a haunting. Hunter turns to Abraham and Torok’s theory of intergenerational haunting and discusses how the Otto-Minotaur figure of *Birthday Letters* could be a figure of both Hughes’s and Plath’s shared haunting by the World Wars that largely preceded their generation and impinged on their formative childhoods. What they suffer is a type of *folie-à-deux*. Hunter emphasizes Plath’s Germanic heritage, and in turn Assia Wevill’s (who was half Jewish, as well), arguing that this was part of their fascination for a Hughes haunted by Germany’s involvement in the two World Wars.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Rose, writing in 1991, noted of this statement, a secondary meaning of to “own”: to “confess” (67). Hughes’s “ownership” of the facts of his life is asserted in *Birthday Letters*, where he tells his story in what has widely been regarded as a “confession”, and which *is* confessional in the older sense of the word as a religious rite – that is in its ritual and reconciliatory aspect.

be perpetually struggling with Plath over the ownership of his life, trying to wrest it back from her” (140).

In *Birthday Letters* the motif of possession tends to attach itself to two main groups of images – houses, and jewels/riches. These images are themselves linked in the final poems of the book, particularly “Robbing Myself” and “Red”. In this chapter I focus mainly on “55 Eltisley”, “Robbing Myself”, “The Prism” and “Red”, also making a significant digression to discuss “Night-Ride on Ariel” (whose colour symbolism prefigures “Red”) and “The Cast”, which reflects Hughes’s own choices in the drama of loss and possession he constructs.

Like “18 Rugby Street”, “55 Eltisley” (49) takes as its title an address they lived at, and the house is seen to have a special power over its inhabitants: the story of its previous occupants prefigures their own. As in “18 Rugby Street”, where the motif of possession was first explicitly introduced, Hughes again uses the motif of the haunted, or “possessed”, house. 55 Eltisley in Cambridge (England) was their first home together as a married couple. Hughes moved in during November 1956, a few weeks before Plath did.<sup>3</sup>

The opening line is immediately ironic: Hughes, remembering the house, becomes aware of how it has “forgotten” them. Returning mentally to the memory of the house, and physically – driving past it – he is struck by the disinterested relationship of the house to their own fates:

Our first home has forgotten us.  
I saw when I drove past it  
How slight our lives had been  
To have left not a trace. (49)

The house has a certain inscrutability, and does not speak at all of their past. Their “lives” are “slight”, leaving no mark upon it. Hughes recalls looking for omens when he first moved in; he found a bloodstained pillow left behind by the previous occupants. From this stain and his knowledge that the house was vacated by a widow, Hughes infers a particular story:

Vacated by a widow gathered to her family  
All it told me was: ‘Her life is over.’  
She had left the last blood of her husband  
Staining a pillow. Their whole story  
Hung – a miasma – round that stain.  
Senility’s sour odour. It had condensed  
Like a grease on the cutlery. (49)

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<sup>3</sup> She had not yet informed the Fulbright Commission of her marriage, and only moved to 55 Eltisley Street when she had done so.

The story inferred from the stain is seen to seep out from it, itself bloody and contagious: “miasma” is the Greek word used to denote blood pollution (and it is a word Hughes preserves in his translation of *The Oresteia*). In retrospect, this story (of death and bereavement) resembles their own fate, and is linked to it by place (the house) – so that it can aptly be seen, as in the case of blood-pollution, as a type of contagion.

Hughes detects in the house “Senility’s sour odour”, which “had condensed / Like a grease on the cutlery”. The description recalls the opening line of Plath’s poem “The Jailer” (226): “My night sweats grease his breakfast plate”. Her poem conveys the sense of a nightmarishly claustrophobic space, in which two people sharing it feel imprisoned in each other’s fantasy worlds. Its opening line aptly objectifies the process of the one’s nightmares becoming part of the other’s everyday, domestic world. “The Jailer” is an apt allusion here: its motifs of ghostliness, claustrophobia and entrapment surface in “55 Eltisley”.

Hughes sets the bloodstain and the stain of grease in parallel – just as he infers a story from the bloodstain, so the story of “Senility’s sour odour” is pictured in its vivid presence as materialized in the grease (out of thin air – as “condensed” suggests). Indeed “It” in “It had condensed” would appear not only to refer to the immediately preceding phrase (“Senility’s sour odour”) but to the entire story which Hughes has inferred and read from seemingly emblematic traces – like the bloodstain. The “whole story” of the previous occupants metaphorically “condenses” in the bloodstain, from which Hughes infers it. The description of an odour condensing into an emblematic sign is a mirror image for how something may be read from as a simple sign, as the bloodstain here is read by Hughes. This process of signification could be a description of the text’s own workings, which have much in common with the “condensation” and “displacement” that Freud describes as typical of dream-work and jokes and puns which all tap into a general context (whether the unconscious or a verbal discourse).<sup>4</sup> In this respect *Birthday Letters* recalls Plath’s poems, which work by a “system of association”:<sup>5</sup> images reflect and refract one another as well as the larger context out of which they emerge. “The Jailer” (226) itself is self-reflexive about such dream-like workings: the phrase “My night-sweats grease his breakfast plate” links the processes of condensation and displacement they describe to dreams, or rather nightmares. In “55 Eltisley” Hughes implicitly describes such workings as “miasmatic” – for he describes the story which appears to materialize itself in the stain as a “miasma” hanging about it. Significantly, the description

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<sup>4</sup> For a concise account by Freud of his theory of “dream-work” see pages 159-165 of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (vol. 8 of the Standard Edition).

<sup>5</sup> This is Hughes’s description of the workings of “The Stones”, a subsection of “Poem for a Birthday”, which he saw as a poetic breakthrough: “The system of association, from image to image and within the images, is quite new, and – as we can now see – it is that of *Ariel*” (“Sylvia Plath and Her Journals” 183).

“miasmatic” has been applied to Plath’s work and the fantasies that have circulated about it; *Bitter Fame*, the authorized biography of Plath, claimed to “dispel the posthumous miasma of fantasy, rumour, politics, and ghoulish gossip” around Plath’s “perverse legend” (qtd. in Malcolm, 24). And Sarah Churchwell has aptly demonstrated that a language of contagion and contamination has accrued around Plath’s work (“Secrets and Lies” 118). By his somewhat awkward allusion to Plath’s “The Jailer”, and its close proximity to the description “miasmatic”, Hughes draws a link between Plath’s “system of association” and the miasmatic tendency of her writings to impact upon his life in the wake of her death. This power of theirs is the result of their working out of a deeper set of associations – their “blood-jet, autobiographical truth” and the mythic totality they acquired with her death.<sup>6</sup> In Hughes’s discussion and explanation of his term a “system of association”, coined to describe the workings of “The Stones”, he speaks of the *cost* of her dreams and images, indicating the direct relationship between her images and her emotions and psychology:

In another poet, ‘The Stones’ might have been an artistic assemblage of fantasy images. But she was incapable of free fantasy, in the ordinary sense. If an image of hers had its source in a sleeping or waking ‘dream’, it was inevitably the image of some meaning she had paid for or would have to pay for, in some way – that she had lived, or would have to live. (“Sylvia Plath and Her Journals” 184)

In “55 Eltisley” the stain confirms Plath’s idea of England as a place of death and mouldering – “part / Nursing home, part morgue”– inhabited by ghosts and the dying. And she is revolted into a “fury of scouring”. England is similarly portrayed and contrasted with an image of “scouring” (the word occurs, in different variants, three times within two lines) in “The Beach” (154):

England was so filthy! Only the sea  
 Could scour it. Your ocean salts would scour you.  
 You wanted to be washed, scoured, sunned.  
 That ‘jewel in the head’ – your flashing thunderclap miles  
 Of Nauset surf. (154)

In “55 Eltisley” the word “fury” echoes the motif of blood-pollution alluded to with “miasma”. In Greek myth the furies are spirits who honour blood relationships by avenging blood-kin murders and betrayals. Images of fury recur throughout the text and the notion of avenging furies (as in “Telos”) is connected with her anger in general, which is frequently

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<sup>6</sup> See Hughes’s discussion of Plath’s “mythic” use of images and the “blood-jet, autobiographical truth” of her work quoted in my introduction (5, 4).

described as a fury.<sup>7</sup> The word “fury”, or variants of it, is punned on in *Birthday Letters* – not only is Plath frequently depicted as “furious”, but this anger is portrayed as the result of, and a response to, her father’s “raging death” (“God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark”). Plath is also described as writing “in a fury”: her fury comes to be seen as a type of demonic possession of the artist and, insofar as it is a response to her father’s angry death, the work of the “furies”. As something inherited from her “raging” father, her anger is also a type of demonic possession by him. Much of this is drawn together in “God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark” (26), where the motif of the cursed house again appears. Here Hughes links Plath’s anger and the avenging fury of her “bloody” writing (it is recurrently depicted as such) with her upbringing, as well as what he elsewhere described as her “genius

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<sup>7</sup> “The Shot” (16):

You ricocheted  
The length of your Alpha career  
With the fury  
Of a high-velocity bullet [. . .]. (16)

“Trophies” (18):

Your effort to cry words  
Came apart in aired blood  
Enriched by the adrenalins  
Of despair, terror, sheer fury – [. . .]. (18)

“Child’s Park” (69): “Your fury / Had to be quenched” (69).

“The Rag Rug” (135):

Your diary confided to whoever  
What furies you bled into that rug. (136)

“The Rabbit Catcher” (144):

Inaccessible  
In your dybbuk fury, babies  
Hurled into the car, you drove. (144)

and

You  
Raged against our English private greed  
Of fencing off all coastal approaches,  
Hiding the sea from roads, from all inland.  
You despised England’s grubby edges when you got there.  
That day belonged to the furies [. . .]. (144)

“Telos” (176):

Bloodprints  
Of your escaping heel  
Signed the street-scene snowscape Alpha.  
Anyhow,  
Anywhere to lose  
The Furies of Alpha [. . .]. (176)

“The God” (188): “Then you wrote in a fury, weeping” (191).

for love” (“*Sylvia Plath: Ariel*” 162).<sup>8</sup> He returns to the criticism of herself and her writing she met with at Cambridge, linking her poetic efforts with her earliest behaviour:

You tried your utmost to reach and touch those people  
 With gifts of yourself –  
 Just like your first words as a toddler  
 When you rushed at every visitor to the house  
 Clasping their legs and crying: ‘I love you! I love you!’  
 Just as you had danced for your father  
 In the home of anger – gifts of your life  
 [ . . . . . ]  
 To sugar the bitterness of his raging death.

You searched for yourself to go on giving it  
 As if after the nightfall of his going  
 You danced on in the dark house [ . . . ]. (26)

The appellation “the home of anger” makes the house seem a fateful place where a curse is inherited and “furies” pursue down the generations, as in Greek tragedy (the motif of the house is used similarly as a trope of fate in “18 Rugby Street”). Fate becomes a psychic habitation, performed across a stage whose parameters are drawn by the family romance. Plath’s dancing prefigures and is a metaphor for her writing (another type of performance), which is here traced back to a formative arena. Metaphorically, and implicitly, this set of circumstances is a stage, akin to the “stage-set” of “18 Rugby Street”, across which certain fates are played out: the inhabitants and their relationships seem arbitrary but all are bound by the same circumstances, seen as defining. In his description of her home as “the dark house” (in “*God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark*”) Hughes suggests it is doomed, an intimation reinforced by its description as dark “after the nightfall of his going”: Otto’s death precipitates a fall which is a “nightfall”, darkening her future. The notion of a fall bringing about a curse is elsewhere linked with the myth of the fall, notably in “18 Rugby Street” (20) where the motif of the possessed house again occurs. In this poem Hughes enters upon a “new world”, identifiable with Plath, and shadowed by a fallen world, represented by the scar that lies across her face like a “Maker’s flaw”. Hughes’s possession by the house in “18 Rugby Street” is a possession by love, and in “*God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark*” love and cursedness are again linked. Hughes stresses Plath’s love as an inspiration prior to any other – it is this which motivates her to “sugar the bitterness of his

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<sup>8</sup> Compare her self-analysis in a letter to her mother, written when she was at Cambridge (9 March 1956): “I parcel out the love I have, the enormous desire to give (which is my problem, not ‘being loved’ so much: I just have to ‘give out’ and feel smothered when there is no being strong enough for my intensity), in homeopathic doses to those around me” (*Letters Home* 250). Hughes repeats the word “homeopathic” in “*God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark*” (27).

[Otto's] raging death". She is inspired by a "fury" prior to that of her "anger": love of her father, which the furies demand.

The motif of the fall is alluded to in "55 Eltisley", too. Hughes studies the blood with a detachment that in retrospect seems ironic. He infers from it a wound from "some fall". "Fall" is resonant: Plath's death is repeatedly registered by Hughes as a "fall" of some sort ("The Dogs are Eating Your Mother", "Telos"), and Hughes himself is repeatedly seen as falling, particularly in the wake of her fall as he trips up against her fallen body ("Sam", "Fairy Tale").

In "55 Eltisley" Hughes describes himself as taking "possession" of the house. "Possession", although here denoting ownership, occurs in relationship to a seemingly haunted house, and also recalls the possession of the inhabitants of 18 Rugby Street. "Possession" here becomes ironic: Hughes is entering a haunted house, taking possession of "That crypt of old griefs and its stale gas / Of a dead husband", and in doing so is becoming possessed, or haunted, himself. The relationship between possessor and possessed is blurred here. That Hughes is entering a haunted house, which is not just a physical house, but the haunted house of the Plath family, will be made manifest in "The Lodger" (124), the first poem in which he describes their Devon home, Court Green. Here Hughes becomes possessed by a "lodger" in their house, intimated as Otto,<sup>9</sup> who threatens to "evict" him.

In "55 Eltisley" the grief remains in a ghostly fashion like a lingering odour, as of "stale gas", which will come to pollute them. The intimation that the gas is polluting is accurate in its context, for Plath would kill herself by gas, as would Assia Wevill, the woman for whom he left her. The mention of gas in the context of a haunted house also recalls "18 Rugby Street" (20), where the Belgian woman is described as gassing herself in the same year as Plath. In "55 Eltisley" the grief is shortly imagined as like a ghost materialized as a "guest" in the house, prefiguring the guest-ghost of "The Lodger"(124).

Hughes fears breathing in a "ghost" from the bloodstain. Now it is not a "story" that lingers about the stain like a miasma, but a "ghost". Stories and ghosts are set up in parallel – both are haunting and contagious and, in this respect, "possessive". He imagines "his death and her bereavement" as "guests" (the emotions objectified/materialized, like the stain) at their "house-warming" – the death and grief as ghostly presences that oversee the "ritual

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<sup>9</sup> The lodger appears to have motivated their decision to keep bees – Hughes asks

Who positioned our bee-hive and planted,  
With my unwitting hands, to amuse himself,  
Nine bean rows? (126)

Otto Plath was an expert on bees. Plath's desire to keep bees is coterminous with her confrontation with her father's death in her poetry at this time.

launching of our expedition". They are like godparent figures at a christening, akin to Plath's "Disquieting Muses" (74), and like these haunting figures are seen to have a fateful, even baleful, influence. The notion of the joint life of the newly-married couple as an expedition in a ship, a sort of voyage, is recalled in the description of Plath's life as an ocean liner in "Blue Flannel Suit" (67), where Hughes sees himself passively going along with her psychodrama: "Your life / Was a liner I voyaged in". In "55 Eltisley" too he seems simply to drift along:

One mirage  
Of the world as it is and has to be  
Seemed no worse than another.  
[.....]  
I had accepted  
The meteorological phenomena  
That kept your compass steady. (50)

He follows the dictates of her internal compass, any mention of other women (bar Dorothea Krook and Wendy Campbell, academics at Cambridge) kept in check by her possessiveness. Although he accepts this jealousy, he secretly regards it with pity as a "delirium of suspicion". Though walking "Hand in hand" they are still strangers to one another, and their life together is launched in "darkness".

Hughes closes the poem by setting up their two differing experiences and perceptions of their first Christmas together:

For me, that home  
Was our first camp, our first winter,  
Where I was happy to stare at a candle.  
For you, it was igloo comfort.  
Your Bell Jar centrally heated  
By a stupefying paraffin heater.  
But you were happy too, warming your hands  
At the crystal ball  
Of your heirloom paperweight. Inside it,  
There, in miniature, was your New England Christmas,  
A Mummy and a Daddy, still together  
Under the whirling snow, and our future. (50)

For him it is simply a camp, a station on their journey. For her, it is claustrophobic, like *The Bell Jar* she would write about in 1961, her novel which takes its title from the heroine's recurrent vision of herself and the people around her as trapped behind glass.

The odd image of Plath "warming her hands" is slightly sinister. The bell jar-cum-paraffin heater elides with the crystal ball-cum-paperweight. She seems to take reassurance from her vision of her home (in the crystal ball). She sees within the heirloom paperweight-crystal ball a vision as of the past rather than the future: a "New England Christmas" with

A Mummy and a Daddy, still together  
Under the whirling snow [. . .]. (50)

“New England” (the N in uppercase) is clearly a pun, suggesting the *old* Christmases of Plath’s childhood in Massachusetts, New England, rather than simply a new Christmas in England. So too, does the whirling snow, which is not suggestive of an English winter.<sup>10</sup> In Hughes’s retrospective vision, Plath has her own vision – knowingly or not – of her and Hughes as miniatures of Otto and Aurelia when “still together” at a happier time before his death when Sylvia was eight. It is this that warms her and makes her “happy”. Just so, Hughes here presents a vision of himself and Plath at an earlier happier time, before “our future”. By tacking “our future” onto the end of the vision he portrays as Plath’s, he coalesces it with his own, and makes it a vision of them – creating a sort of double-exposure.

The poem is written in retrospect, their future sealed, and Hughes aptly envisages them as if trapped behind glass. The “whirling snow” recalls the snow that fell at the time of her death,<sup>11</sup> and also the whirling snow of an American Christmas. The Christmas Hughes records in “55 Eltisley” was not a snowy one. This snow looks back to her New England vision and also towards their future – Plath would die in the worst winter England had had in fifteen years, and, she claimed in “Snow Blitz”, the first truly snowy winter she experienced in England (and also the last).

The vision Hughes portrays Plath as having – of a “Mummy and a Daddy” still happy and together – elides with his vision here, as he writes, of the two of them as together. And the paperweight becomes an image of the poem (“55 Eltisley”) itself. Hughes, with the distance of time, has portrayed himself and Plath in miniature, as it were. And as he closes the poem he sees them at that Christmas as trapped and not knowing it – the paperweight becoming a bell jar. This sense of entrapment is doubled by the finality of the “future” which it looks forward to – Hughes is unable to help or warn them, or to change the past, which is aptly figured as behind glass.

To be trapped is to be, as it were, possessed, rather than possessing. If Hughes’s comments on Douglas Dunn’s *Elegies* (one of *Birthday Letters*’s very few generic

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<sup>10</sup> In “Snow Blitz” Plath wrote how the winter of 1962/1963 was the first in which it snowed during her years in England: “In London, the day after Christmas (Boxing Day) – it began to snow: my first snow in England. For five years I had been tactfully asking ‘Do you ever have snow at all?’ as I steered myself to the six months of wet, tepid grey that make up an English winter. ‘Ooo I do remember snow,’ was the usual reply, ‘when I were a lad’. Whereupon I would enthusiastically recall the huge falls of crisp and spectacular white I snowballed, tunnelled in and sledged on in the States when I was young” (125). In a letter to her mother, dated 2 January 1962, she repeats the assertion that this was the first time she had experienced snow in England (*Letters Home* 581).

<sup>11</sup> Already alluded to at the close of “Caryatids (2)” (5).

precursors)<sup>12</sup> are anything to go by, part of his task in writing these elegiac “letters” is to gain self-possession, control over his life:

It means the world becomes yours – whereas if you don’t do it, it drifts away and takes a whole piece of yourself with it, like an amputation. To attack it and attack it and get it under control – it’s like taking possession of your own life, isn’t it? Otherwise, it means whole areas of your life stand in front of you and stop you.  
(qtd. in Wagner 27)

In *Birthday Letters* Hughes repeatedly describes himself as imprisoned by Plath’s poetry and the myth it has created. Here, at the very end of “55 Eltisley”, he presents the very image of his (present) entrapment with an image (the “paperweight”) which Plath had used to describe a poem – specifically the sort of poem she wrote:

a door opens, a door shuts. In between you have a glimpse [. . .]. I think of those round, glass Victorian paperweights [. . .]. This sort of paperweight is a clear globe, self-complete, very pure, with a forest or village or family group within it. You turn it upside down, then back. It snows. Everything is changed in a minute.  
(“A Comparison” 56-57)

The snow, the paperweight, the family group are all repeated in “55 Eltisley” (50), and with its sudden abrupt ending, too, “55 Eltisley” is reminiscent of Plath’s description of a poem. By tacking on “our future” to the vision in the “heirloom paperweight” he presents as Plath’s, Hughes changes utterly the nature of the vision; he makes it negative, inverting it (as if he has turned the paperweight over), changing everything in a minute, as, according to Plath, a poem should do.

The contrasting images of haunted house and idealized home in “55 Eltisley” are repeated in “Robbing Myself” (165), as is the reference to the snow that fell at the time of Plath’s death. In “Robbing Myself” the motif of possession by a haunted house, begun in “18 Rugby Street” (20), becomes one of *dispossession*. Here the fall motif is more explicitly echoed and more directly linked to her death.

The poem describes a journey back to Court Green in the December of 1962, once Plath had left the house (she moved out in December, two months after he had).<sup>13</sup> The road back, covered in ice, is “unnatural and familiar”, a set of circumstances that define and anticipate the uncanny feeling Hughes will have when back in the house itself. The road is

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<sup>12</sup> Dunn’s poems are elegies to his dead wife.

<sup>13</sup> Plath discovered in mid-July that Hughes was having an affair with Assia Wevill. Hughes moved temporarily to London and he and Plath stayed together on and off until, in late September, Plath decided to file for a divorce. Hughes now made London his proper home. On 12<sup>th</sup> December Plath, preferring city life, also moved to London.

described, oddly, as a “road back into myself / After the cosmic disaster”, as if some cataclysm has separated himself from himself and precipitated an inner division or exile. The “cosmic disaster” is given a more literal explication in the next two lines: “The worst snow and freeze-up for fifteen years, / Twenty miles an hour, over fallen heaven”. The winter of 1962/1963 was a terrible one, and almost certainly contributed to Plath’s suicidal depression.<sup>14</sup> From the first it was clearly connected for Hughes with her death. In one of the few poems he wrote in the aftermath of her death, “The Howling of Wolves” (*NSP* 84), the snow represents the collapse of the firmament: “the sky snows stars”. “Life After Death” (182) also demonstrates the deep impression the snow made on him at the time. He describes the circumstances of himself and their children in the weeks that followed:

We lay in your death,  
In the fallen snow, under falling snow. (183)

Here, her death and the falling snow are equated: the collapsing sky mirrors the collapse of his world that her death brings about.

“Fallen heaven” (“Robbing Myself”, line 8) is a potent phrase, recalling several other images of falling and of heaven or paradise, and ironically inverting their heaven-on-earth paradisaic state. If anything, the snow, as fallen heaven, is an ironic literalization of this state.

The phrase “fallen heaven” recalls particularly the close of “Caryatids (1)” (4), the second poem of the book. Here Hughes retrospectively re-reads the first poem of Plath’s that he ever saw, “‘Three Caryatids Without a Portico’ by Hugo Robus”, asking “What were those caryatids bearing?”. “Bearing” is a pun – literally he asks what were the caryatids carrying (the function of caryatids is to hold up an entablature); figuratively he asks what her poem portended. Reading now, he sees what he “missed then”: a “massive, starless, mid-fall / falling / Heaven of granite”. Plath’s poem is an ecphrasis of a modernist sculpture of three “caryatids” which are freestanding torsoes and do *not* hold up an entablature. The caryatid image Hughes evokes, though, is that of classical caryatids, like the iconic ones of the Erechtheum, and his retrospective vision of a “granite” heaven, which suggests an entablature, is an imaginary recreation. His knowledge of her death enables him retrospectively to prophetically glimpse her fate, pictured as “fallen heaven”, in her poems, by seeing now a “heaven of granite” propped by their hair.

The image of a “starless” heaven in “Caryatids (1)” also recalls one of Plath’s last poems, “Sheep in Fog” (262). In this poem the speaker anticipates a threatening fate of being let through to a “heaven / Starless and fatherless, a dark water”. In “Sylvia Plath: The

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<sup>14</sup> She described it with what in retrospect is an astoundingly staunch and stoic sense of humour in “Snow Blitz”.

Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’”, Hughes reads this poem as her internal death-knell. Reading her poetry in retrospect, he sees her life and poetry as tracing a fall akin to those of Phaeton and Icarus,<sup>15</sup> another reason why in *Birthday Letters* he should so frequently describe her death in images of falling, or through some variant of the word “fall”.

In “Robbing Myself” the phrase “fallen heaven” more immediately recalls the countless daffodils which keep on coming “As if not from the sod but falling from heaven” (“Daffodils” 127). They are the bounty of the garden in which they invest so much and on which they place so much emphasis: in “Stubbing Wharfe” (106) Hughes, envisioning their ideal home (which Court Green was meant to embody), has a vision of a mythic, Edenic garden: “Yes, the garden. The garden / Swelled under all our words” (107). “The Lodger” (124) begins with a focus on how Hughes works with ambitious hope and bookish naïveté on the garden: “The books! I was a student / Gluttonous to swallow all horticulture, / The whole cornucopia” (124).<sup>16</sup> In “Daffodils” the flowers are a “treasure trove” that can be turned to profit through sale (which in retrospect seems sacrilegious). Their attitude to the flowers is an ominously detached one – they are unsuspecting of their full import, being

still strangers  
To our whole possession. (127)<sup>17</sup>

In retrospect, daffodils are a “fleeting glance of the everlasting” (127); flowers famed for their brevity of existence, they retrospectively represent “The nuptial flight of the rarest ephemera – Our own days!”. They themselves were to have only a brief nuptial existence (less than a year) at Court Green, the place they had envisioned as an established family

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<sup>15</sup> See 205-206 particularly for Hughes’s discussion of Plath’s affinity for the Phaeton and Icarus myths. He presents a shortened version of this argument in the introduction to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (40-43).

<sup>16</sup> This sense of Hughes working with a bookish naïveté is reinforced by his claim that he planted “Nine bean rows” (126), an allusion to Yeats’s “Lake Isle of Innisfree”: “Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee” (line 3). Yeats’s poem, which evokes a mythic place felt in the “deep heart’s core” (line 12), is an apt allusion at this point, where Hughes is describing his own idealized home, a notion of which is perhaps as formed by myth, literature and poetry as it is simply archetypal, or felt in the “deep heart’s core”.

<sup>17</sup> Hughes’s statement here recalls Wordsworth’s words in “I wandered lonely as a cloud”, where he claims of his vision of the daffodils that: “I little thought / What wealth to me the show had brought”. Wordsworth’s poem provides a bitterly ironic context: whereas for him the flowers remain in memory to flash upon “that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude”, Hughes’s daffodils are “Wind-wounds”, “A flamy purification of the deep grave’s stony cold” – painful reminders of Plath and the solitude of his own memory of her. Moreover, the sense that Wordsworth’s vision is a “wealth” to the poet problematizes notions of poetic legacies, and of what may justifiably and ethically be turned to poetry. This is an issue which returns to Hughes’s literal, and inadvertent, profiting by her death with his inheriting of her vastly valuable literary estate. The most vicious attack on Hughes, Robin Morgan’s poem “Arraignment”, accuses him among other things of “making a mint by becoming her posthumous editor” (qtd. in Churchwell 115).

home. The description of the flowers as “falling from heaven” and as “treasure” recalls Plath’s words of hopeful omen at their wedding, as she alludes to Caliban’s vision of the isle in *The Tempest*:<sup>18</sup>

You said you saw the heavens open  
And show riches, ready to drop upon us.  
(“A Pink Wool Knitted Dress” 35)

The snow that falls at the time of her death, through the linking of similar word images, becomes a bitter and ironic inversion of the opening heavens she glimpses at the time of their marriage. Everything in their world (all their hopes and expectations) is turned on its head. Such irony is characteristic of *Birthday Letters* and is manifested here in the ironic detachment with which Hughes in “Robbing Myself” returns to his own home as if a thief or outsider. The phrase “fallen heaven” is an example of the text’s habit of literalization, how it condenses a verbal conceit out of its mythic/dream hinterland (which here is also that of cultural cliché and colloquial language): the snow is a literal image of the metaphoric state of “heaven-on-earth” and, in the context of *Birthday Letters*, inverts its metaphoric meaning. Perseus holding up a mirror to the Medusan face of Plath’s death becomes an apt image for Hughes’s poetics in *Birthday Letters*.

In “Robbing Myself” Hughes arrives in “the blue December twilight”, an eerie in-between time that sets the tone for the feeling of ghostliness which possesses him. This light makes everything slightly luminous (in the dusk the corridor glows like a sapphire), imbuing it with significance.

He reviews his budding potatoes (recalling the potatoes of last year’s harvest mentioned in “The Lodger” [124], “first fruits of our own ground”, and the enthusiasm with which he prepared the planting of this year’s batch), symbols of his hope for the garden, which “exhaled the sweetness / Of the hopes I’d dug into them”. They are viewed with proprietorial pride and tenderness:

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<sup>18</sup> Caliban tells Stephano and Trinculo:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open, and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked,  
I cried to dream again. (3.2.138-146)

It was a nest  
 Secret, living, the eggs of my coming year,  
 Like my own plump litter, my secret family,  
 Little earthen embryos, little fists  
 And frowning brows and the old, new sleep-smell of earth. (165)

They are like babies, vulnerable and cherished, and they represent all that is incipient. They reflect his own new family, and his secret hopes for them, intimately bound up with this house and his vision of a home there. He surveys his apples:

My Victorias, my pig's noses,  
 In the dark outhouse, and my fat Bramleys.  
 My spring prayers still solid,  
 My summer intact in spite of everything.  
 I filled for you  
 A sack of potatoes and a sack of apples. (165)

The firm solidity of his still-healthy apples confirms that what he had hoped for last year has in some sense come to fruition. Again, they are “my” apples, linked firmly to his identity and existence. The transition from the metaphorical description of them as his “prayers” to “I filled for you” makes it seem that everything he does, all his hopes and labour, are for her. The statement’s apportionment to a single line of its own makes it emphatic. And the delicacy and tenderness of feeling towards the produce is transferred to her. The air of careful hopefulness is undercut at the end of the section by a parenthesis informed by hindsight:

And I inspected my gladioli bulbs  
 In the dusty loft, in their dry rags, hibernating  
 (I did not know they were freezing to death). (166)

What he thinks is a temporary hibernation has the finality of death. Unlike the “living” potatoes, “eggs of my coming year” (line 18), the bulbs are not safely in keeping but are dying. Clearly, they reflect Plath: she too (“the treasure” of his home) is not safe and secure but will kill herself, her depression prompted amongst other things by the fierceness of the winter which freezes these gladioli. Throughout *Birthday Letters* animals or objects reflect or personify Plath; moreover, the parenthesis also recalls another, in “Daffodils” (127), where Hughes, with the same retrospective knowledge, speaks of their grocer: “(He would die in the same great freeze as you)” (127). In “Robbing Myself” his aside about the fate of the bulbs is also an answer to Plath’s late poem “Wintering” (9 October 1962) (217). Here, she wanders into the cellar of her house with a sense of the strange and the proprietary somewhat similar to that which Hughes experiences in “Robbing Myself”. She inspects “my honey” in the dark cellar where the faint torch-light breeds an atmosphere of “Black asininity. Decay. / Possession” and the strange feeling that “It is they who own me”. This dark atmosphere is

forcibly overcome at the end of the poem, as she sees all this simply as a “wintering”, a time for recovery rather than a death. (Hughes’s misidentification of the freezing gladioli as “hibernating” clearly echoes her “Wintering”). She closes with a question about the gladioli’s survival, implicitly answering it on a positive and affirmative note:

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas  
Succeed in banking their fires  
To enter another year?  
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?  
The bees are flying. They taste the spring.<sup>19</sup> (219)

“Wintering” was particularly important to Plath; she had meant to close her volume *Ariel* with it, and thus on the word “spring”, making the volume one which stressed rebirth and regeneration (Churchwell 111). One of her cycle of bee poems, it was bound up with her own search for identity and rebirth (van Dyne 156). In his poem too, the survival of the gladioli is implicitly identified with her own. In “Robbing Myself” the irony and pathos of the gladioli freezing is enhanced by the fact that his poem answers her question in “Wintering”, and undercuts the deliberate note of hope on which hers ends.

In “Robbing Myself” Hughes then examines the house, silently creeping through it as if he should not be there:

You never knew  
How I listened to our absence,  
A ghostly trespasser, or my strange gloating  
In that inlaid corridor, in the snow-blue twilight,  
So precise and tender, a dark sapphire.  
The front room, our crimson chamber,  
With our white-painted bookshelves, our patient books,  
The rickety walnut desk I paid six pounds for,  
The horse-hair Victorian chair I got for five shillings,  
Waited only for us. It was so strange! (166)

He is a “ghostly trespasser” and stranger rather than owner: this is the culmination of the process of (dis)possession begun in “The Lodger” (124), where the lodger, intimated as Otto, threatens to evict Hughes and Plath from their home and take possession of Hughes.

In “Robbing Myself” their absence is palpable because their presence is so strong in the way they have decorated the house— each belonging Hughes reviews with care, giving it a personal and particular context that links it to him, or them. His attitude here is akin to that expressed towards his potatoes and apples, and is as proprietorial. These are very firmly his (or their) belongings. They all seem to belong peculiarly to them, to fit no-one or nothing else

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<sup>19</sup> The preceding stanza of “Wintering” ends with a comparison of a woman’s body to a “bulb”. Hughes clearly has “Wintering” in mind when he writes “Robbing Myself”.

– no other destiny. The books are “patient”, the absence of their owners seems simply a hiatus, as if all will be restored to an order which the poem intimates is a lovely one. On the other hand they seem quite peripheral to the centuries-old house, with its “twelfth-century silence / We had hardly disturbed, in our newness”. In the intimation here of the house’s indifference to them there is an echo of the house in “55 Eltisley” (49) which, when Hughes drove past it, bore no trace of their existence. Like the house in “18 Rugby Street” (20) these houses become figures of blind fate, impervious to them.

Listening in the stillness of the house is “like listening to the sleeping brain-life / Of an unborn baby”. This is an image of hope and anticipation and recalls the comparison of the potatoes (into which Hughes had dug all his hopes) to babies. In the larger context of the text as a whole, however, the image of the “sleeping brain-life / Of an unborn baby” portends a horrible awakening that elides with ones described elsewhere in the text, especially one in “Suttee” (147) where the awakening is also a “birth”; Hughes describes himself

Laying my ear to our unborn and its heartbeat,  
 Assuaging your fears. Massaging  
 Your cramps into sleep with hypnosis  
 And whispering to the star  
 That would soon fall into our straw –  
 Till suddenly the waters  
 Broke and I was dissolved.  
 Much as I protested and resisted  
 I was engulfed  
 In a flood, a dam-burst thunder  
 Of new myth.  
 In the warp of pouring glair,  
 Me bowled under it, I glimpsed  
 Your labour cries refracted, modulating –  
 Just as in a film [. . .]. (148)

Hughes also sees his experience as if it is outside of himself (“as in a film”) in “The Afterbirth” (130). Here he feels like “somebody’s shadow on a cave wall” after a birth which precipitates a “fallen Eden”. This “afterbirth” elides with that of Plath’s death elsewhere in the text.<sup>20</sup> Repeatedly Hughes’s sense of possession/dispossession blurs with his feeling of self-dispossession and possession by Otto’s ghost in the wake of Plath’s death and the

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<sup>20</sup> In *Birthday Letters* Plath’s death is frequently rendered as a bitterly ironic “birth” – the culmination of their attempt to find her true “self” (compare the course traced in “Fishing Bridge”, which closes with the image of Plath’s death as something of their own making on their poetic quest). This birth/death irony is made explicit in “Suttee” (147), which opens “In the myth of your first death our deity / Was yourself resurrected. / Yourself reborn “ and closes with an evocation of the horrors of her death, and its repercussions. These repercussions are a metaphorical afterbirth of her death, a byproduct of it.

reception of her poetry. Compare his description of himself in “The Afterbirth” as a shadow on a wall to his words to Al Alvarez:

It is infuriating for me to see my private experience and feelings re-invented for me, in that crude, bland, unanswerable way, and interpreted and published as official history – as if I were a picture on a wall or some prisoner in Siberia.<sup>21</sup>  
And to see her used in the same way. (qtd. in Malcolm 125)

In “Robbing Myself” Hughes describes the house as “made newly precious to me / By your last lonely weeks there, and your crying”. It is her presence, which he senses from his surroundings, that makes the place so important to him. It is “precious” like a jewel, and is described as “tight as a plush-lined casket / In a safe”. Ironically, everything seems safe, tightly sealed and inviolable – “intact in spite of everything” like Hughes’s “summer”, embodied in his apples. But the example of the treasured gladioli, thought to be safe but in fact freezing, shadows his assurance here, making it naïve and tenuous.

In the last section, he is still attentive and “listening”,

as I sealed it up from myself  
(The twelve-hour ice-crawl ahead).  
I peered awhile, as through the keyhole,  
Into my darkened, hushed, safe casket  
From which (I did not know)  
I had already lost the treasure. (166)

The act of closing the house to himself is ominous, mirroring the reverse action of driving along a road “back into myself”. Hughes is now shut out from his own home and in some sense from his self; the image of the “sealed” house recalls his description of the mind as a mansion full of locked doors, the unlocking of which is the business of poetry (“Poetry in the Making” 21). Hughes peers like a voyeur, as if spying, and there is a secret delight in the intimacy of this. His feeling of happiness, of everything being safe and snug, is undercut by the final line which states that what was central to this “darkened, hushed, safe casket” is lost. He does not know that she will never return to the house, and it will not be the same. His last view of it as a place imprinted with her living presence, and belonging to both of them, he mythicizes in this poem. The idea that the “treasure” is linked with her is subtended by the earlier assertion that the traces of her presence make the house “precious”. The “treasure” also recalls his description of their corridor in the blue December dusk as a “dark sapphire”; implicitly, Plath is the jewel at the heart of their joint home.

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<sup>21</sup> Compare, too, the comparison drawn between being “some prisoner” and being “a picture” to the notion expressed in “Drawing” (44) of Plath’s “portraits” as imprisoning.

The title “Robbing Myself” is odd, bespeaking the sense of division (of Hughes being a stranger to himself and to his own home) that haunts the poem. Hughes is “robbing” himself in the sense that he takes potatoes and apples from his own property, but there is a hint that he is implicated too in the loss of the “treasure” which is somehow stolen from him. Moreover, his attitude towards the apples and potatoes has repeatedly shaded over into his attitude towards his family. The act of robbing also recalls his odd description of his marriage to her:

I had not even confided my theft of you  
To a closest friend. (“A Pink Wool Knitted Dress” 35)

The secrecy and intimacy of the wedding described in “A Pink Wool Knitted Dress” is recalled in Hughes’s attitude towards his belongings in “Robbing Myself”, as is the jewel imagery of “A Pink Wool Knitted Dress”. This poem closes with an image of Plath, at their marriage, making to Hughes an offer which still confronts him:

I see you  
Wrestling to contain your flames  
In your pink wool knitted dress  
And in your eye-pupils – great cut jewels  
Jostling their tear-flames, truly like big jewels  
Shaken in a dice-cup and held up to me. (35)

The act of theft and the mention of apples, followed by exile into a postlapsarian universe, recall the story of Eden. The story of the loss of the treasure (which echoes the language of “Daffodils” [127]) is one of dispossession and exile from their Edenic garden (which is freezing, becoming a frozen idyll like that of the remembered and irretrievable past of their Grantchester pastoral) as they become the inheritors of a fallen world. It is this legacy which is their “whole possession” in “Daffodils” with its thousands of flowers as if not from the sod, but fallen from heaven (127).

The enigmatic image of the treasure/jewel, hinted at as blue in the description of the interior of their house as a “dark sapphire” (“Robbing Myself” [166]), recurs in “The Prism” (186). In this poem Hughes does not speak of a jewel that *he* has lost, but rather one that she has lost, and which he inherits and takes possession of.

The poem opens with a line from Plath’s “Daddy” (222), “The waters off beautiful Nauset”. As she wrote in “Ocean 1212-W”, an essay commissioned by *The Listener* as part of a series by writers on their childhood landscapes, her childhood seascape at Nauset was formative of her poetic vision. This vision of the sea was in turn intimately linked with her

vision of a mythic father,<sup>22</sup> partly based on her vision of her own father and partly derived from various cultural and literary traditions – this father is a “god-creator” figure, and prototype of the artist as creator.<sup>23</sup> This linking of her father and the sea is seen in “Daddy” too; here he resides “in the freakish Atlantic / Where it pours bean green over blue / In the waters off beautiful Nauset” (222). One of Plath’s earliest<sup>24</sup> and most haunting linkings of the sea, her poetic vision and her father’s death is “On the Decline of Oracles” (78):

My father kept a vaulted conch  
 By two bronze bookends of ships in sail,  
 And as I listened its cold teeth seethed  
 With voices of that ambiguous sea  
 Old Böcklin missed, who held a shell  
 To hear the sea he could not hear.  
 [. . . . .]

My father died, and when he died  
 He willed his books and shell away.  
 The books burned up, sea took the shell,  
 But I, I keep the voices he  
 Set in my ear, and in my eye  
 The sight of those blue, unseen waves  
 For which the ghost of Böcklin grieves.<sup>25</sup> (78)

Hughes alludes to this poem in “The God” (188); Plath, immersed in her writing, shakes “Winthrop shells for their sea-voices” (190). At the close of the poem Plath has become a vehicle of possession for a god who “speaks” through her. Here the “voices”, which in “On the Decline of Oracles”, she vowed to “keep” – her possession – become a form of destructive demonic possession, overwhelming her. As in “The Minotaur” (120) and “The Table” (138), Hughes explicitly links her dead father, her writing and his own encouragement of it, to her own death (“The God” closes with an image of Plath’s death).

<sup>22</sup> See the close of “Ocean 1212-W” quoted in chapter one (42). Here her vision is shown to be determined by her father’s death.

<sup>23</sup> From Plath’s journal entry on the importance of *The Tempest* to her, already quoted in my introduction (6-7).

<sup>24</sup> It was written in 1957. Hughes claims that “Full Fathom Five” (1958) is “her first poem about her father in his mythic role as ‘father-sea-god-muse’ ” (*Collected Poems* 287, note 75) but this poem already mythicizes her father in a similar role. There is an echo here, too, of *The Tempest*, particularly of Prospero, in “He willed his books and shell away” (line 10).

<sup>25</sup> The Swiss painter Böcklin was a great influence on Giorgio de Chirico, whom Plath in turn admired. This poem, “On the Decline of Oracles”, is based on de Chirico’s painting “The Enigma of the Oracle” (*Journals* 359). De Chirico’s affinity with Böcklin may be traced to the distinctive air of melancholy in his work, the most famous example of which, “The Isle of Dead”, made a strong impression on Plath (*Journals* 332). And the melancholy of de Chirico’s own painting is generally ascribed to the death of his father when he was an adolescent – Plath here inscribes herself into a particularly apt line of inheritance.

In “The Prism” Hughes aptly relates her vision of the sea to her longing to write. The “waters” are the “ocean sun, the sea-poured crystal / Behind your efforts”, presumably including her writing, at which *Birthday Letters* shows her continually striving. The waters are her “self’s cradle” in an echo of “Ocean 1212-W” where she describes the sea that surrounded her in her childhood as a “watery cradle” (119).

In “Ocean 1212-W” her vision of the sea is seen not only as a formative experience, but as an emblem of her creative vision. She treats it as a treasured possession:

I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own. I pick it up, exile that I am, like the purple ‘lucky stones’ I used to collect with a white ring all the way round [. . .] and in one wash of memory the colours deepen and gleam, the early world draws breath. (117)

Clear, manipulable (she can pick it up and turn it about) and tangible, and providing a glimpse into an intact, self-enclosed world (here the mythologized past), it is comparable to the clear, self-complete paperweight globe she describes in “A Comparison” (56-57) and which is alluded to in “55 Eltisley” (50).<sup>26</sup> As a treasured possession, the vision described in “Ocean 1212-W” recalls that bequeathed to her on her father’s death described in “On the Decline of Oracles” (78), and which, like the paperweight of “55 Eltisley” (50), is an heirloom.

In “The Prism” (186) Hughes describes as a “sea-poured crystal” what lies “behind” her “efforts”. It is a crystalline vision of her youth at the seaside, her childhood preserved as myth. In Hughes’s view certain images become “luminous” at the “core” of the poet’s mind, and it is these that inform all he does (“Context” 2) – they are, as it were, a prism through which everything he does and experiences is refracted. Although he repeatedly uses the word “crystal” in discussing her works,<sup>27</sup> this crystallization is not confined to her poetic processes. In “The Beach” (154) he describes himself having a vision of the mythic Avalon (in English myth, the isle of the blessed where King Arthur was taken after death and also etymologically the place of *apples*) as having a “crystal” attuned to its wavelength inside his head (155).

In “The Prism” Hughes immediately asks, after the introduction of the crystal:

What happened to it all that winter you went  
Into your snowed-on grave, in the Pennines? (186)

<sup>26</sup> Her comparison, at the close of “Ocean 1212-W”, of her vision of the irrevocable past to “a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth” (124), something sealed behind glass, also makes it comparable to the paperweight of “55 Eltisley”.

<sup>27</sup> In “The God” (188) her works are “crystalline spectra” (189) – they are crystalline in their clarity and intricacy and many facets. He also uses the image of a “crystal ball” in discussing her work, so that it is seen as prophetic: “her internal crystal ball was helplessly truthful [. . .]. It determined her lack of freedom” (“Sylvia Plath and Her Journals” 184).

Her death in the English winter and her vision of an American summer (“the ocean sun”) are utterly at odds, making him ponder the fate of her vision. He seems to ask not only “What happened to it?” but “how could it have failed you?” in an echo of “The Beach” (154), where she stares at the ocean that has “failed” her: “the reverse of dazzling Nauset” (156). The contrasting images of “sea-poured crystal” and “snowed-on-grave” early in “The Prism” recall his description of her homesickness in “Stubbing Wharfe” (106). “Homesick”, having flung off the “sparkle” of America, she sits at Stubbing Wharfe (not far from Heptonstall, where she would be buried). Hughes envisages his ideal home but

You had no idea what I was talking about.  
 Your eyes were elsewhere –  
 The sun-shot Atlantic lift, the thunderous beaches,  
 The ice-cream summits, the whisper of avalanches,  
 Valleys brimming gentians – the Lawrentian globe  
 Lit the crystal globe you stared into  
 For your future – while a silent  
 Wing of your grave went over you. (107)

The mythic nature of both their visions of “home” suggests a more primary “homesickness” than a simple longing for a childhood home. What is suggested is an originary wound, an “exile” (from a mythic realm) that has been repeatedly detected in Hughes’s writing and which *Birthday Letters* suggests is central to Plath’s writing, too.<sup>28</sup>

In answer to “What happened to it?” (“The Prism”) Hughes immediately responds:

It goes with me, your seer’s vision-stone.  
 Like a lucky stone, my unlucky stone. (186)

Like the “lucky stones” she spoke of in “Ocean 1212-W” it is something he can “pick up” and hold and examine. (Here it becomes clear that he is referring to her vision as described in “Ocean 1212-W”, for he repeats her description of it as a “lucky stone” nearly verbatim). It is of an ambivalent nature, though: when he picks it up, it becomes an “unlucky stone”.

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<sup>28</sup> For Paulin

Hughes is an intensely uncomfortable writer – driven and earnest like a street preacher – and the sense of strain that underpins his lunging, extempore lines is a type of homelessness, a hungry sense of not belonging anywhere. [. . .] His aesthetic primitivism embodies this wounded search for a primordial wholeness. (254)

For Heaney

Hughes’s is a primeval landscape [. . .]. It is King Lear’s heath which now becomes a Yorkshire moor where sheep and foxes and hawks persuade “unaccommodated man” that he is a poor bare forked thing [. . .] and the poet is a wanderer among the ruins, cut off by catastrophe from consolation and philosophy. (“Hughes and England” 16)

As with her “lucky stones”, “one wash of memory” (“Ocean 1212-W” 117) makes the colours of the past return vividly:

I can look into it and still see  
 That salty globe of blue, its gull-sparkle,  
 Its path of surf-groomed sand  
 Roaming away north  
 Like the path of the Israelites  
 Under the hanging, arrested hollow of thunder  
 Into promise, and you walking it  
 Your sloped brown shoulders, your black swim-suit,  
 Towards that sea-lit sky. (186)

Her “seer’s vision-stone” also seems to be a “crystal ball” into which Hughes can gaze, akin to that in “55 Eltisley” (50) or the “crystal globe” she stares into for her future in “Stubbing Wharfe” (107) (and these associations are reinforced by its description as a “globe of blue”). Like the crystal ball in “55 Eltisley”, though, it offers a vision of the mythic past rather than the future. Also as in “55 Eltisley”, he starts by describing a vision which supposedly is hers but ends by enclosing her within the vision. Retrospectively, she appears trapped. In both poems, written after her death, the future is known and the vision of the past poignant because the people in it are ignorant of their future.

He speaks as if literally transported back into the past, from the perspective of the figure imagined within the “vision-stone”: the horizon is endless and the path roams away, providing a sense of great distance and (ironically) freedom. His reminiscence is vivid, the globe “salty” as if he can taste as well as see it. “Sparkle” conjures up images of cleanliness that echo those associated with America in “55 Eltisley”, “The Beach” and “Stubbing Wharfe”. In “The Prism” his vision of her walking off “Into promise”, like the Israelites seeking the Promised Land, is shadowed by the mention of the “Promising” voice which urged them along on a doomed quest in “Fishing Bridge” (88).

Here, too, the sense of promise is shadowed by something darker: what *is* promised is a storm. Plath walks beneath a “hanging, arrested hollow of thunder”. “Hollow” suggests not just the imminent rumbling sound of thunder, but also the shape of the “globe” in which this scene is envisaged. It is as if the sky is about to fall in, and the crystal to crack. “Globe” is elsewhere<sup>29</sup> used to describe the world, and here it is as if her entire world (her “Lawrentian globe” [“Stubbing Wharfe”107]) is to be shattered.

The image of a globe of blue also recalls Otto’s eyes, explicitly blue in *Birthday Letters*<sup>30</sup> and in Plath’s writings. In “Daddy” (222) he has “an Aryan eye, bright blue”; in

<sup>29</sup> “Wuthering Heights” (59) and “Freedom of Speech” (192).

<sup>30</sup> “The Table” (138) and “Dream Life” (141).

“Among the Bumblebees”, a story whose protagonists are clearly based on Plath’s family, the eyes of Alice’s father are vividly blue: “in the blue blaze of his eyes was concentrated the color of the whole overhead dome of sky” (259).

In “The Prism” Hughes first envisages what is supposedly her vision-stone and then, as in “55 Eltisley” (49), places herself within the scene: “and you walking it / Your sloped brown shoulders, your black swim-suit, / Towards that sea-lit sky” (186). Here what was her vision-stone becomes his.

She walks towards the sky as if it were her destination. The phrase “sea-lit” evokes the time before a storm (reinforced by the “arrested hollow of thunder”), or dusk, when the sky darkens and sea and sky seem a similar colour. It does not tally with “gull-sparkle”, which evokes bright sunshine on white gulls. The vision darkens as it proceeds. The oft-noted “musculature” of Hughes’s writing here takes on a cinematic kinesis.

The image of her “walking it”, with steady determination (the phrase conveys a sense of concentration and steady purpose), alone in a vast landscape, and with her back to Hughes, resonates with other images in the volume where he watches her from behind. This faintly apocalyptic scene, with its imminent storm, chimes especially with his vision of her walking off

fearless

To meet your Father,  
His Word fulfilled, there, in the nuclear core. (“Child’s Park” 70)

The mention here of the “Word” alludes to “Among the Bumblebees” which opens: “In the beginning was Alice Denway’s father” (259) playing on “In the beginning was the Word”. Alice Denway is clearly based on Plath herself and the story could form a setpiece with “Ocean 1212-W” as the tale of a prelapsarian existence ended by her father’s death. In “Among the Bumblebees” Alice’s father’s presence is a comfort and support:

Alice believed that he was somehow connected with the miracle of fury beyond the windows, and that through him, she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety. (264)

At the close of “Among the Bumblebees”, the image of the lone walk in “The Prism” is echoed:

That was the last time that Alice Denway saw her father. She did not know then that in all the rest of her life there would be no one to walk with her, like him, proud and arrogant among the bumblebees. (266)

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In “Being Christlike” (153) Hughes has Plath walk “in the love of your father”, in an echo of the story, and this walk prefigures her steady walk towards the distant sky in “The Prism”. In “The Prism”, her vision-stone (inherited from her father [“On the Decline of Oracles” 78]) becomes a similar constant to her father’s “love”.

Wherever you went  
It was your periscope lens,  
Between your earthenware earrings,  
Behind your eye-brightness, so lucidly balanced,  
Such a flawless crystal, so worshipped. (186)

With this description he sets the “vision-stone”/ “periscope lens” in her head, dramatically restoring it by envisaging it “Between your earrings, / Behind your eye-brightness”. Doing so, he conjures up her face, and there is a drastic change in perspective from a Plath who is a speck in the distance. The effect is to bring the image of her eyes to the fore, so that she herself seems to peer out suddenly from behind her “eye-brightness”, the “eye-brightness” and the “vision-stone” elided. This is suitable as her “seer’s vision-stone”, her writing and her eyes (frequently described as bright jewels) are all metonyms for each other in the text.

The “periscope lens, / Between your earthenware earrings, / Behind your eye-brightness” is clearly “the jewel in the head” referred to in “The Beach”:

That ‘jewel in the head’ – your flashing thunderclap miles  
Of Nauset surf. The slew of horse-shoe crabs  
And sand-dollars. (154)

The phrase is a quotation from Hans Christian Andersen’s fable “The Toad”, which draws on the myth of the toadstone, a gem of positive magical properties reputed to reside in the head of the toad. The little toad, Andersen’s hero, although she is unaware of it, possesses this jewel:

That jewel was the continual striving and desire to go upward – ever upward. It  
gleamed in her head, gleamed in joy, beamed brightly in her longing. (n.pag.)

When she dies, the narrator asks “and the jewel in the head?” and describes it as a spark flying out of her eyes towards the sun, exhorting the reader to “seek it there if you can” (n.pag). It is unsurprising that Hughes should return to this story; he continually pictures her as striving towards the sun, an Icarus or Phaeton figure. Plath’s eyes are themselves repeatedly described as bright jewels and it is unsurprising that this “jewel” should seem to elide with her “eye-brightness” .

The phrase “Such a flawless crystal” echoes “flawed into crystals” in “The Bird” (77). In this poem Hughes’s memory of Plath’s death and the snow that lay about (the “fallen heaven” of “Robbing Myself”) elide with the notion of Plath’s “panic bird”<sup>31</sup> inhabiting a glass dome that is shattered and also with a vision of a tumbler of coins smashed, the glass “flawed” into myriad crystals:

Every crumb  
Of smithereen that I peered into  
Was flawed into crystals infinitely tiny

Like crumbs of the old, slabbed snow  
That all but barricaded London  
The day your bird broke free and the glass dome  
Vanished [. . .]. (78)

This echo between the two phrases in “The Bird” and “The Prism” reinforces the sense that the crystal ball of “The Prism” is on the verge of shattering.

In “The Prism” Hughes claims to keep her vision now:

I still have it. I hold it –  
‘The waters off beautiful Nauset’. (186)

He repeats the line he opened with (“The waters off beautiful Nauset”), except that he now places the words in quotation marks – explicitly and self-consciously exemplifying this process of “holding” her vision as his allusion to and quotation of her work. Throughout *Birthday Letters* his internalisation of her vision is made clear through, and allegorized by, his subtle integration of, and allusion to, her words.

Similarly, in “Fingers” (194) and “Drawing” (44) images of holding and carrying self-consciously describe his memorialization of Plath through his writing. In “Fingers” the fingers of their poet-daughter, Frieda, “remember” and “honour and obey your fingers”. That Hughes is specifically alluding to Frieda’s remembrance of her mother through writing poetry is confirmed by Hughes’s statement in “Daffodils” that Frieda “cannot even remember you” (127). Plath’s fingers are described as “The Lares and Penates of our house”, like the household gods Aeneas took with him from burning Troy in order to found a second Troy, and remembrance becomes a type of carrying. In the same poem Hughes says “I remember your fingers”, using the same verb “remember” as he does for the action of Frieda’s fingers: his remembrance is through his writing of this poem (as the present tense of his statement indicates) and these “fingers”, as in “The Rabbit Catcher” (144), are self-reflexively seen to

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<sup>31</sup> The “panic bird” recalls the figure of “Johnny Panic” in her story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams”.

be “Fingers of your verse” (146). The opening statement of the final section of “Fingers” – “I remember your fingers” – through its placement and present tense is explicitly self-reflexive about the present act of writing as a type of remembrance and about the importance of this. It is a dutiful response to the opening question, “Who will remember your fingers?”. The placement of the poem third last in the collection self-consciously indicates and asserts that it is a work of remembrance through writing: “fingers of verse” which are haunted by her own, themselves described as “Possessed” (line 20).

In “Drawing” (44) his memorialization of her through his writing elides with his memory of carrying her clothes, and becomes a substitute for “holding” her hand. As his pen “travels on” in “Drawing”, the crystal in “The Prism” goes with him; in both poems images of journeying speak for what Hughes is doing on the page – picking up where her writing left off as if continuing a tradition. Hands, holding and tradition are repeatedly linked in *Birthday Letters*. In “The Hands” (184) Plath is held and dandled by two great hands which are formative of her and everything she writes, and which come to leave their fingerprints on what he writes too:

The fingerprints inside what I did  
 And inside your poems and your letters  
 And inside what you did  
 Are the same.

The fingerprints  
 Inside empty gloves, these, here,  
 From which the hands have vanished. (184-185)

Hughes’s claim that their works bear the same fingerprints alludes to and contradicts an early (1957) statement of hers in which she claimed that their works were as different as their “fingerprints themselves must be” (“Four Young Poets” n.pag.). Notably, his claim is made long after her own, as he attempts to inscribe them both into a common tradition, continually returning to her words. This poem, again, is self-reflexive – the use of the deictic, “these, here”, suggests that the gloves indicated are the lines of the poem. And again the poem ends with a sense of a current closed: what motivates or “possesses” the gloves – “the hands” – disappear.

Sacks notes that mourning and inheritance (a way of negotiating one’s relationship with the dead) are closely linked and that inheritance, particularly of a poetic legacy, is an established and familiar feature of elegy (37). The placement of “The Prism”, the seventh last poem in the collection, suggests that Hughes self-consciously structures *Birthday Letters* as a work of mourning. He approaches the close of his work with an affirmation of the importance

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of what he is doing in it – inheriting and continuing her poetic vision. The poem thematizes questions of inheritance, especially inheritance of a poetic legacy, which by virtue of the poems’ constant allusions to other texts (especially Plath’s) have been implicit throughout.

What he holds in “The Prism” is

Your intact childhood, your Paradise  
With its pre-Adamite horse-shoe crab in the shallows  
As a guarantee, God’s own trademark. (186)

The description of her childhood as “intact” – self-complete and perfect – recalls her self-conscious mythicization of it in “Ocean 1212-W” as a time apart, sealed off (124). Her vision is as of a mythic, prelapsarian time and Hughes aptly describes the childhood as “a Paradise”, the image eliding with numerous other allusions to paradise and the myth of the fall. The word “intact” also recalls his own Edenic “summer intact” (embodied in his apples) envisioned in “Robbing Myself” (165), a mythic vision which, as the apples suggest, is Edenic.

The “horse-shoe crab” is a sign of election – “God’s own trademark” – and echoes earlier mentions of horse-shoe crabs. In “Flounders” (65) Hughes finds

a horse-shoe crab’s carapace, perfect,  
No bigger than a bee, in honey-pale cellophane (65)

and in “The Beach” (154), Nauset has a “slew of horse-shoe crabs / And sand-dollars”. Suitably the urchins are *sand-dollars* and the place is one of riches and abundance like their garden in “Daffodils” (127) with its countless flowers that appear as if “fallen from heaven”, Caliban’s “riches”.

In “The Prism” the stone is ambivalent; held at different angles it offers a variety of perspectives:

I turn it, a prism, this way and that.  
That way I see the filmy surf-wind flicker  
Of your ecstasies, your visions in the crystal.  
This way the irreparably-crushed lamp  
In my crypt of dream, totally dark,  
Under your gravestone. (186-187)

It is a lucky/unlucky stone in which the good and the bad may be seen. It can be held “this way and that”, like the vision-stone in “55 Eltisle” (49), where the vision is at first positive and then metaphorically “turned” and inverted, by the simple addition of the phrase “under our future” (50).

In "The Prism" Hughes, turning it "that way", sees the "filmy surf-wind flicker" of her "ecstasies". He sees imperfectly: as if through a film of water, sprayed up by the surf wind (as if the paperweight/prism has been shaken), or as if watching an old movie with a flickering picture, like that in "A Short Film" (134) where the vision is made up of "mist and smudge". Hughes's vision here is dark, and modifies his earlier description of the beach with its "gull-sparkle" and "surf-groomed sand". The vision becomes progressively darker, until on turning the prism still further ("this way") it is "totally dark" and he sees the lamp that lights his dreams as "irreparably-crushed" by her death. The closing image of the gravestone picks up on the earlier image of the "snowed-on grave"; it is as if Plath walking off into the distance walks not into dusk, but into the grave, going from the beach to her "snowed-on grave", the glass dome of the vision fallen in.

The darkening seascape of "The Prism" echoes "The Beach" (154) where Plath's vision of the ocean (which subtends her "seer's vision-stone") "fails her" and Hughes's vision of the ocean is also crushed. He expects to see at Woolacombe Sands a little "Avalon" (a mythic English vision rivalling her American Paradisal vision) but is disappointed:

The blue-black heap of the West collapsed slowly,  
 Comfortless as a cold iron stove  
 Standing among dead cinders  
 In some roofless ruin. You refused to get out.  
 You sat behind your mask, inaccessible –  
 Staring towards the ocean that had failed you.  
 [.....]

So this was the reverse of dazzling Nauset.  
 The flip of a coin – the flip of an ocean fallen  
 Dream-face down. And here, at my feet, in the suds,  
 The other face, the real, staring upwards. (156)

The blue-black heap of the West is an inversion of the mythical "orchard in the West", Hughes's destination and "dreamland" in "Error" (122). The vision of it "collapsed" and the image of the fallen coin (the ocean as a coin flipped heads down) echo distantly the collapse of the coins in "The Bird" (78):

The coins collapsed in a slither. But the table  
 Was suddenly white with a shatter of tiny crystals.  
 A cake of frozen snow  
 Could have crashed in from space. Every crumb  
 Of smithereen that I peered into  
 Was flawed into crystals infinitely tiny

Like crumbs of the old, slabbed snow  
 That all but barricaded London  
 The day your bird broke free and the glass dome

## Vanished [. . .]. (78)

The one image of the ocean as the flip of a coin fallen (an image which trivializes the once mythicized ocean) is a variant (magnified) of the disillusionment signified by the sudden shattering of the tumbler of coins in "The Bird". The snow referred to in "The Bird" is that which fell at the time of her death, the "fallen heaven" which signified the collapse of Hughes's world and dreams.

In "The Beach", the description of her face "staring" at the sea and then of the "face of the real" "staring" out from the sea draws a parallel between the two "faces", suggesting that the face of the real that stares out at him is her dead face, as at the end of "Fishing Bridge". The two images in "The Beach", of "the face of the real" and of Plath's face as masked and "inaccessible", blur and are conflated. This "Dream-face down" is the reverse of his mythic image of her face in "18 Rugby Street", where it was Edenic, a "new world". This is a vision of the paradisaical (his and hers) inverted: the reverse of the "dreamland" "orchard in the West" he walks her into in "Error" (122) (and which here is seen to collapse: "the blue-black heap of the West collapsed slowly"). The last section powerfully recreates the collapse it describes: the repetition of "flip" and the heavy line ending of "ocean fallen" recreates the thud of a wave crashing. And this heavy emphasis on "fallen" reinforces the strength of the fall motif of the text and the sense that images of falling convey disillusionment, a disillusionment occasioned by her death.

"The Prism", too, closes on an image of disillusionment – Hughes, turning the crystal "this way", sees

the irreparably-crushed lamp  
In my crypt of dream, totally dark,  
Under your gravestone. (187)

His dreams are destroyed by her death. And the description of the lamp "under" the "gravestone" elides with the image of them in "55 Eltisle" "Under the whirling snow, and our future" (50), and with other images of Hughes's dreams shattered by Plath's death and the fallen snow that recurrently represents it.

The image of Hughes contemplating what visions the crystal ball holds – Plath's "ecstasies" and his own quashed dreams, his poetic fate – calls to mind a description of Walter Benjamin's, in which he notes the self-reflexivity of Calderon and later romantic dramatists, namely

the unparalleled virtuosity of the reflection, thanks to which the heroes are always able to turn the order of fate around like a ball in their hands, and contemplate it now from one side, now from the other. (87)

“The Prism” presents a self-reflexive image of the crux Hughes reaches in his own drama of mourning and inheritance: a recognition of the determination of his poetic fate by her death. Here Hughes accepts that his poetic fate is determined by her death by picking up her lost jewel – continuing her vision. He does so through quoting her works, as “The Prism” self-consciously demonstrates, making an allegorical conceit of it. It is fitting that this is articulated through a poem: for Hughes poetry represents “the place of ultimate suffering and decision in us” (qtd. in Heaney, “A Wounded Power” n.pag.). As a response (to the question “What happened to it?”), Hughes’s keeping of her prism/vision-stone, so recurrently elided with her jewel eyes (like the prism, metonyms for her creative vision) recalls “A Pink Wool Knitted Dress” (35), and the offer made to him at his marriage with Plath of her jewel-like eyes,

great cut jewels  
Jostling their tear-flames, truly like big jewels  
Shaken in a dice-cup and held up to me. (35)

And in “The Prism” he does accept her vision: “the jewel-in-the-head” which is also an unlucky stone, a burden-“toad-stone”, like that of which the speaker of her poem “The Rival” claims: “I see I must wear you in the centre of my forehead / And let the dead sleep as they deserve” (291).

The prism/vision-stone which recalls the “jewel in the head” (“The Beach”) is echoed again in the enigmatic image of the “blue jewel” upon which “Red”, the final poem of the volume, closes. Here Hughes returns to Plath’s frequent identification with the colour red and his own insistent depiction of her writing as bloody and red, and winds up the volume’s pervasive colour imagery.

Plath’s poems are full of colour symbolism, with red, white, black and blue predominating. This symbolism is linked with her construction of self, particularly after her separation from Hughes in September 1962, when she was trying to forge a new identity for herself through her poetry (van Dyne 156). On her last birthday (27th October 1962), she wrote two poems in which she identifies with red: “Ariel” (239) and “Poppies in October” (240). The two differ greatly in their identification: the one is triumphant, the other despairing. At the close of “Ariel” the speaker (whom Hughes identifies with Plath), on her horse, flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red  
  
Eye, the cauldron of morning. (240)

The Eye here is also the “I” of the speaker, and the rising sun (the red Eye of the morning) an article of identification. In “Poppies in October” she asks

O my God, what am I  
That these late mouths should cry open  
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers. (240)

– contrasting the red of the poppies (to which she is drawn) with the blue of the cornflowers.

Hughes reads “Ariel” as an identification with, and a commemoration of, a transcendent self; for him

It is the quintessential Plath *Ariel* poem in that the speaker, the I, hurls herself free from all earthly confinement and aims herself and her horse – as the poem says, ‘suicidal’ directly into the red, rising sun. The overt sense here is that the liberation from earthly restraints (earthly life) is a rebirth into something greater and more glorious but which is still some kind of life – a spiritual rebirth perhaps. She wrote it on her thirtieth birthday. (“Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’ ” 199)

There is a similar identification with red, and a literal image of transcendence, at the close of “Stings” (214), one of Plath’s cycle of bee poems in which she identifies with the queen bee. Here the triumphant queen escaping from the hive has a body which is emphatically red:

I

Have a self to recover, a queen.  
Is she dead, is she sleeping?  
Where has she been,  
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her –  
The mausoleum, the wax house. (215)

Once again, as in “Ariel”, red symbolizes a new self. Although Hughes perceives the speaker of “Ariel” as aiming at a type of transcendence through her identification with the rising sun, he himself reads this identification as a doomed over-reaching, akin to those of Phaeton and Icarus (“Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’ ” 200-201, 206).

White is also used symbolically in Plath’s work, and its blankness is often contrasted with the vitality of red, as in “Moonrise” (98):

Death whitens in the egg and out of it.  
I can see no color for this whiteness.  
White: it is a complexion of the mind. (98)

Frequently in her writings the white moon is an alter ego of Medusa, a figure of paralysis, emblematic of her writer's block. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (172) the moon is "White as a knuckle and terribly upset [. . .] quiet / With the O-gape of complete despair" (173), a round open mouth, frozen and dumb. In "Elm" (192) the moon is even more explicitly Medusan:

What is this, this face  
So murderous in its strangle of branches? –  
  
Its snaky acids kiss.  
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults  
That kill, that kill, that kill. (193)

The round, white moon is a disembodied Eye/I and ambivalent article of identification as much as the "red/ Eye" of "Ariel". In the mythic schema Hughes reads in Plath's work, the "Moon, as always, corresponds to the nucleus of the artificial ego in its matriarchal regime" ("On Sylvia Plath" n.pag.), while the sun is identifiable with her father and is "patriarchal" ("Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog' " 199). In "Night-Ride on Ariel" (174) Hughes repeats this reading: "Your moon was full of women" – women who obstruct a quest towards the sun that recalls the stories of Icarus and Phaeton. The women are

White-faced bolts  
Of electrocuting moonlight –  
Masks of the full or over-full or empty  
Moon that tipped your heart  
Upside down and drained it. As you flew  
They jammed all your wavelengths  
With their criss-cross instructions,  
Crackling and dragging their blacks  
Over your failing flight,  
Hauling your head this way and that way  
As you clung to the sun – to the last  
Shred of the exploded dawn  
In your fist –

That Monday. (175)

The poem alludes to, and provides an account for, Plath's death by naming the end of the journey recounted as "That Monday".<sup>32</sup> This ending is in a symmetrical relationship with the opening of the poem, which describes Plath's "moon-mother" with the line "It was always Monday in her mind" (174). Hughes here attributes blame for Sylvia's death to her mother, or other mother figures in her life, insofar as they are representative of, or responsible for, her

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<sup>32</sup> Plath killed herself on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> February 1963.

own harshly critical super-ego. "It was always Monday in her mind" alludes to Plath's "An Appearance" (189): "It is Monday in her mind: morals / Launder and present themselves". According to Hughes this poem is "her point-blank portrait of the presiding genius of her false-ego that she was about to escape from at last", an ego which he viewed as "matriarchal" ("On Sylvia Plath" n.pag.). "Night-Ride on Ariel" (174) also names Plath's death by returning to the final lines of her two last poems: "Crackling and dragging their blacks" alludes to "Edge" (272), which closes on the image of the moon triumphant –

The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.  
Her blacks crackle and drag. (273)

And "the last / Shred of the exploded dawn / In your fist" alludes to "Balloons" (271), which closes on the image of the speaker's son holding a "red / Shred" of a popped balloon in "his little fist". Hughes clearly interprets the "red shred" as an image of the remnant of an attempt to reach after her father, an ideal now despaired of (burst like the balloon).

In "Night-Ride on Ariel", which describes a reverse horse-ride to that portrayed in *Ariel*,<sup>33</sup> Plath is pictured as if torn apart by horses: "white-faced bolts of lightning" (175) suggests bolting horses and recalls "Sam" (10), in which she is pictured on a headlong course, dragged by Sam, her emphatically white horse.<sup>34</sup> In Hughes's mythology she becomes a Hippolytus figure – like Phaeton<sup>35</sup> – in other words an image of the "sacrificed god", whose death and dismemberment were penultimate to his rebirth<sup>36</sup>. The imagery of red versus white

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<sup>33</sup> Her poem describes a ride on her horse, Ariel, at dawn and marks her birthday (27 October). "Night-Ride on Ariel" describes a horse-ride into darkness and death.

<sup>34</sup> "Sam" returns to her account of this incident in her poem "Whiteness I Remember" (102).

<sup>35</sup> Hughes writes that

The name Hippolytus means 'torn to pieces by horses' [. . .]. This particular personification of the 'sacrificed god' – torn to pieces by horses, either directly or at the tail of a chariot – is the nucleus of other myths, including those of Phaeton [. . .].  
(*SGCB* 71)

<sup>36</sup> In order to illustrate the myth of the "sacrificed god" (which Hughes believed to be universal), he tells the story of Marduk, an Assyrian-Babylonian god, and of the commemoration of this myth in the Babylonian New Year festival (*SGCB* 15-17). It is unsurprising that Hughes should find this variant of the myth the "most impressive" (15), for the story has a number of parallels with Plath's mythic interpretation of her attempted suicide. In the festival "the sacred King (the earthly Marduk) pretended to be killed [. . .] and entered his tomb" (16); after three days the king emerged from his tomb "gloriously triumphant" (17). Plath herself made much of the religious weight of her "three days" spent in the tomb/underworld after her attempted suicide, when she had taken an overdose of pills and hidden herself in the crawl-space of her basement, remaining unfound for three days and miraculously surviving.

in “Night-Ride on Ariel” has an added resonance in the context of Hughes’s interests: it represents the final stage of the alchemical opus – that of the *rubedo* (the reddening) where the solar king and lunar queen<sup>37</sup> are brought together in the *coniunctio oppositorum* (the union of opposites), in the hope of producing the philosopher’s stone, interpreted by Jung as a symbol of the rebirth of the self. “Night-Ride on Ariel” prefigures “Red” in its contrasting of red and white.

In “Red” (197), Hughes repeats this sense of Plath as divided between two extremes represented by red and white:

Red was your colour.  
If not red, then white. But red  
Was what you wrapped around you. (197)

He asks if the red was blood, if this is what it symbolized – life and vitality; or if it is rather

red-ochre, for warming the dead?  
Haematite to make immortal  
The precious heirloom bones, the family bones. (197)

He suggests, sinisterly, that the red is a means of bringing the dead back to life: the image of “warming” the dead links with earlier images in “Black Coat” (102) and “The Table” (138) of Otto emerging from the cold (a cold sea) and seeking warmth in their marital bed (“The Table”). In “Red” this “warming” of the dead is blurred with a desire to immortalize “the precious heirloom” family bones. Hughes here explicitly links her fascination with red and her panic-stricken defences with her remembrance of her father in her poetry. Her poetry is explicitly the work of the furies (who fed on blood and have recurrently been connected with the colour red in *Birthday Letters*) insofar as it honours family bonds and memory.

In the second section of “Red” Hughes describes their bedroom, recalling the “crimson chamber” of “Robbing Myself” (166):

When you had your way finally  
Our room was red. A judgement chamber.  
Shut casket for gems. The carpet of blood  
Patterned with darkenings, congealments.  
The curtains – ruby corduroy blood,  
Sheer blood-falls from ceiling to floor.  
The cushions the same. The same

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<sup>37</sup> Compare here Hughes’s identification of Plath’s father with the sun and the patriarchal and of her mother with the lunar and the matriarchal.

Raw carmine along the window-seat.  
A throbbing cell. Aztec altar – temple. (197)

The room oddly is a “judgement chamber”, and this is seen as the triumph of her will. It recalls the courtroom of “Brasilia” (178), “your arena”, and also the town square of “The Cast” (179). Both poems derive their primary image of a place of public judgement and vengeance from “Daddy” (222), which closes:

Daddy, you can lie back now.

There’s a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always *knew* it was you.  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through. (224)

Plath described the poem as spoken by a girl with an Electra complex who has to “act out” the “awful little allegory” of her life before she can be “free” of it (*Collected Poems* 293, note 183). Reviewing “Daddy” and her introduction to it, it is difficult to separate entirely the poet and the speaker. As “The Earthenware Head” (both her poem and his) makes clear, Plath herself worked out of a tradition of poetry as a magic. And the speaker’s dramatic exorcism of her father in “Daddy” blurs with the poet’s own methods and processes. In its repetitive rhythm and rhyme and its dramatic use of the first person, the poem itself feels like a type of primitive “acting out”. As Freud notes in *Totem and Taboo*, child’s play and art are akin to primitive magic, controlled by the “omnipotence of thought”, in that they are areas in which affects may be made real.<sup>38</sup> they receive an expression that is therapeutic or transformative.

“The Cast” (179) returns to “Daddy” (222) and its logic of vengeance and supposed exorcism, and by its title connects this with the dramatic: Plath’s family are players in a psychodrama which, being cast “in the bronze of immortal poesy”, extends beyond her own life. The poem has “Daddy” come back from the dead – raised by Plath’s poetry – to hear all she has against him:

Helpless  
As weightless, voiceless as lifeless,  
He had to hear it all

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<sup>38</sup> Freud writes that in art, man,

consumed by his wishes, produces something similar to the gratification of these wishes and this playing, thanks to artistic illusion, calls forth affects as if it were something real.

This is quoted in fuller context in chapter two (page 62). The oft-noted similarity of the rhyme of “Daddy” to nursery-rhyme reinforces the sense that the poet is engaging in a kind of child’s play.

Driven into him up to the feathers,  
 Had to stand the stake  
 Not through his heart, but upright  
 In the town square, him tied to it  
 Stark naked full of those arrows  
 In the bronze of immortal poesy.

So your cry of deliverance  
 Materialized in his  
 Sacrificed silence. (179)

In “The Cast”, there is an obvious echo of the public trial of enquiry Hughes withstood for so many years, while remaining, as he described it, “silent”.<sup>39</sup> (This is reinforced by his identification and blurring with the “Daddy” figure throughout *Birthday Letters*). The vilification of Hughes has itself depended on readings of his life with Plath which treat the two as if they were characters in an allegorical drama, and the title of “The Cast” aptly links the saga of Plath’s family after her death, as well as the importance of the speaker in “Daddy” “acting out” the allegory of her life, with the dramatic. Hughes’s linking of vengeance and the dramatic is apt: as Kerrigan notes:

In pursuit of retribution, the avenger must manipulate a fluid and contingent world with a dramatist’s inventiveness and authority. He must be, in the play, an image of its author, transmuting creative ambition into narrative and stage action. (17)

The speaker of “Daddy” is arguably a reflection of its author, and a parallel may be drawn between the exorcism the speaker attempts as a transmutation of her feelings into action, and the exorcism the poet perhaps attempts by transmuting her driving energies into poetry. For

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<sup>39</sup> See Hughes’s description of the public’s curiosity and interference in his own life in a letter (1989) to Plath’s biographer Anne Stevenson. He uses images of a public arena, bloodsport and the “village” all reminiscent of “Daddy”:

I have never attempted to give my account of Sylvia because I saw quite clearly from the first day that I am the only person in this business who cannot be believed by all who need to find me guilty. 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 for the higher entertainment of the hundred thousand Eng Lit Profs and graduates who – as you know – feel very little in this case beyond curiosity of a quite low order, the ordinary village kind, popular bloodsport kind, no matter how they robe their attentions in Lit Crit Theology and ethical sanctity. If they do feel anything more vigorous, it is generally something even lower: status anxiety, their professional angst on the promotion scramble. (qtd. in Malcolm 141)

Kerrigan violence has an aesthetic as well as an ethical component (19),<sup>40</sup> which may be satisfied (if temporarily) through or in art. For Hughes this is part of the purpose of art, to “possess”, and thus bridle or contain the universe’s (or the soul’s) recalcitrant energies, themselves “*dramatis personae*” seeking expression/manifestation in what is characterized as a drama of possession – thus making them manageable; for Hughes art is a “ritual”, in the way that religion once was (Faas 200).<sup>41</sup> In *Birthday Letters* Hughes himself is engaged in a drama that is a “ritual manipulation of the soul”<sup>42</sup>, his poems “letters” that are manifestoes of “the battles and weddings” of his inner life.

By describing the crimson room in “Red” as a “judgement chamber” Hughes links the colour and all it symbolizes with the dynamics of retribution and vengeance. These follow the same circular logic as the words described as “phagocytes” in “The Cast” – Hughes compares her words (it is probable from the context that he is alluding specifically to “Daddy”) to blood cells which, as the etymology of “phagocyte” suggests, are self-devouring: so that, in the end, “it was / Your blood that dried on him” (180). Plath herself is the real victim of her anger, not her father or Hughes, and this victimization extends beyond her literal suicide<sup>43</sup> to the treatment she/her memory has received: herself a projection post for the myriad fantasies of

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<sup>40</sup> According to Kerrigan this is the principle on which revenge tragedy, his subject, is founded:

that violence can provide satisfactions which are, at least in prospect, bound up with form and signification, and so with the aesthetic as well as the ethical (19).

<sup>41</sup> Hughes’s perception of a “drama of possession” at work variously in the world or the self is constantly reiterated. In his 1970 interview with Faas he speaks of the energies of the “universe” (200) working like this, in “Myth and Education” he speaks of the inner life behaving in this manner (145), and in his comment that poems are “letters from the self” (qtd. in chapter two, on page 92), he suggests that poetry behaves so. The last claim seems the most accurate: his worldview appears to reflect his own poetic processes.

<sup>42</sup> This is the phrase Hughes uses to describe in his account of Occult Neoplatonism in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (33).

<sup>43</sup> In “Night-Ride on Ariel” Hughes repeats the very image in *Mourning and Melancholia* that Plath identified as pertinent to her first suicide attempt:

An almost exact description of my feelings and reason for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the “vampire” metaphor Freud uses, “draining the ego”. (*Journals* 447)

In Hughes’s poem the moon-mothers “tipped your heart / Upside down and drained it”. He repeats the image of “draining” and suggests that this is a draining of her “heart”, hence her blood. Doing so, he coalesces Freud’s vampire metaphor with his image of “draining”. The vampire image reappears at the close of “Daddy” (“If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two – / The vampire who said he was you”), and is alluded to in “The Cast” with the image of the “stake”. In *Birthday Letters* Hughes suggests that her attack on, and willed exorcism of, him and Otto rebounds: her anger towards them is internalized, so that “it was your blood that dried on them”.

critics and biographers.<sup>44</sup> The image Hughes uses in “The Cast” of Plath cleaning her wounds, and thus ridding herself of “Daddy”, as though he were a piece of shrapnel, he uses elsewhere to describe the poetic process behind Eliot’s “The Waste Land”<sup>45</sup> and it chimes with his fundamental view of poetry as the “psychological component of the auto-immune system” (qtd. in my introduction [3]) and fundamentally healing in its origin and purpose. In “The Cast”, though, such “healing” (through a return to the wound) is bitterly ironic: Plath’s words

Healed you vanished  
From the monumental  
Immortal form  
Of your injury [. . .] (180)

The image of the wound/injury reflects images elsewhere in the text of Hughes being wounded by her, as though she, or her words, were a bullet: in “The Shot” (16), “The Inscription” (172), and even “Black Coat” (102), where her gaze, even if unbeknown to her, holds a “paparazzo sniper”. It is not just Plath’s death which is traumatic: this trauma is doubled by her words, which remain fresh, alive, as “The Cast” bitterly suggests, immortal. It is suitable that Hughes returns to her words in his tending to his own wound. The response to a wound that he figures Plath’s writing as is a self-reflexive image of the workings of his own poetry. And the “The Cast”, ostensibly describing Plath’s “angry roar”, with its short, sharp lines, turning on puns and double meanings, itself reflects his own anger. The poem reflects the poetic choices available to him, and shows an awareness of the self-defeating outcome of anger and revenge, while at the same time managing to express anger.

The red hearts of “Totem” (163) follow a similarly self-defeating logic to the “phagocytes”: they are “The spoor / Of the one that caught and devoured you”. “Spoor” explicitly links the hearts with the blood-pollution motif of Greek drama. The word recalls Plath’s “Aftermath” (113), in which she refers to Medea –

No deaths, no prodigious injuries  
Glut these hunters after an old meat,  
Blood-spoor of the austere tragedies (113)

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<sup>44</sup> One of the most fascinating aspects of Plath’s work is the polarized responses it engenders. Rose’s book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* premises itself on a study of critical responses to her work, asking if it induces a “psychotic criticism” (14). Rose’s first chapter, “She”, gives a good reading of various readings of Plath/her work (part of the problem is the elision between these two: the quickness of the reader to pathologize her on account of her work).

<sup>45</sup> In an interview, Hughes said of Eliot’s composition of “The Waste Land”:

I can’t believe that he took the disintegration of Western civilization as a theme which he then found imagery and a general theme for. His sickness told him the cause. [. . .]. He cleaned his wounds and found all the shrapnel. (qtd. in Faas 204)

– and it occurs in Hughes’s *Oresteia* in the chorus’s description of Orestes’s flight from the furies:

His trail glows clear – like a track of fire.  
Invisible and silent – the spoor  
Of the polluted man (163).

In “Totem” (163) the little “hearts” that remain as “spoor” elide with her writing, her “heart-coloured book”. Implicitly her writing is a miasma which follows him (a notion reinforced by the comparison of stories, ghosts and miasmas in “55 Eltisle”) and his response to it is to engage with it, by returning to her words. As Heaney notes, to do so would be for Hughes, as a poet, a “spiritual and imaginative responsibility”.<sup>46</sup> Hughes’s short poem “Revenge Fable” (*NSP* 110) reflects his sense of the folly of disregarding one’s kindred relations: “There was a person / Could not get rid of his mother / As if he were her topmost twig”. When he does succeed in killing her, “His head fell off like a leaf”. He becomes like a leaf separated from the tree that gives him sustenance and life.

In “Red”, “Shut casket for gems” recalls “Robbing Myself” (165), where the house itself was a “safe casket” housing a “treasure” (167). The blood-red imagery is repeated with a drumming insistence that luxuriates in a sense of doom – “darkenings, congealments” (197). With all its red furnishings, the room is reminiscent of a blood-spattered Aztec temple. The mention of the Aztecs, who made human sacrifices to the sun, is consistent with Hughes’s identification of Plath’s father with the sun and his linking of her death with her grief for him. This gives the poem a more sinister shade, suggesting that the blood Hughes sees the furnishings everywhere as representating, is Plath’s own. Moreover, the reference to the Aztecs recalls “The God” (188), where he retrospectively envisages her writing as an act of sacrifice to a mysterious Aztec-inspired “God”, seeing

the flames of your sacrifice  
That finally caught you too till you  
Vanished, exploding  
Into the flames  
Of the story of your God  
Who embraced you  
And your Mummy and your Daddy—  
Your Aztec, Black Forest  
God of the euphemism Grief. (191)

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<sup>46</sup> Heaney notes of the context of *Birthday Letters*’s composition that Hughes “was impaled on the horns of a creative dilemma: to write directly about that which most desperately craved expression could seem like an exploitation of something sacrosanct, but not write about it must have felt like an abdication of spiritual and imaginative responsibility” (“A Wounded Power” n.pag.).

As in “The Cast”, the process described is circular and self-defeating, resulting in an unwitting self-sacrifice and, as in that poem, Plath is pictured as suddenly “Vanished”. In “The God” her god is “Grief”, and her writing is linked back to her father’s death, and her mourning of it – or lack thereof. The notion that a god objectifies an emotion – here grief – which possesses or overwhelms someone, recalls a passage from a book, *Possession: Demoniactal and Other*,<sup>47</sup> which Plath copied into her journals:

Although the patient appeared possessed, his malady was not possession but the emotion of remorse. This was true of so many possessed persons, the devil being for them merely the incarnation of their regrets, remorse, terrors and vices.  
(*Journals* 287)

One may be “possessed”, then, by a loss. Plath is clearly working out of this tradition in “Daddy”, where the speaker describes the father figure as a “devil” and attempts to exorcise herself of him.<sup>48</sup> By suggesting, in “The God”, that Plath works out of a similarly magical or primitive/ religious mode of thought, Hughes also suggests that “Daddy” emerges from, and elides with, the poet’s own pain: it draws its power from its “blood-jet” truth.

The “Grief” in “The God” recalls the grief that materializes itself as a ghost/guest in “55 Eltisle”, “That crypt of old griefs” (49). The emphasis on “Grief” in the sixth last poem of the volume, a poem which describes the development of Plath’s writing, again suggests that Hughes is self-conscious about the relationship between writing and mourning, a relationship pertinent to his writing as well as hers.

In “Red” the likening of the room to a “throbbing cell” makes it akin to a prison, or a convent, or a biological cell (blood cell), and all the overtones – particularly of religious devotion and claustrophobia – are suitable. Amidst all the red furnishings listed “Only the bookshelves escaped into whiteness”. The line’s isolation dramatizes both the respite from red that white indicates, and the slightness of this escape, as well as allowing a pause for breath, dramatizing a remission from the cloying claustrophobia of their crimson chamber (with suitably gothic overtones, and again suggesting a prison), a “shut” casket. Like the avenging furies, red seems inescapable except by the sterility of death, represented in Plath’s poetry by whiteness.

The dominance of red is then immediately reasserted. Hughes describes the poppies outside their window as “thin and wrinkle-frail / As the skin on blood,” recalling her own

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<sup>47</sup> See footnote 37 of chapter two (page 76) for more details of this book.

<sup>48</sup> It is made clear from the second stanza that it is the father’s loss that has meant the speaker must exorcise herself of him: “Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time” (222).

more violent description of them as “wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth. / A mouth just bloodied” (“Poppies in July” 203). The poppy appears, too, in Hughes’s poem “Out” (NSP 72), where it is similarly described as a “mouth” and a “wound” (section III, line 1). This poem more obviously presents itself as a work of exorcism than “Red”. In “Out” Hughes attempts to cast out the ghost of the First World War, imbibed from his father (a Gallipoli survivor):<sup>49</sup>

My father sat in his chair recovering  
 From the four-year mastication by gunfire and mud,  
 [.....]  
While I, small  
 and four  
 Lay on the carpet as his luckless double,  
 His memory’s buried, immovable anchor,  
 Among jawbones and blown-off boots [. . .]. (section I, lines 1-2, 15-19)

The young Hughes finds his “neck” held and “bowed”, an experience similar to that suffered by Hughes in “Fishing Bridge” (88) and by Plath in “The Bee God” (150). Both are held by the weight of the past, which possesses them. At the close of “Out” Hughes wills himself to be free of the spell the Great War has cast over him, his father, and so many other English people – this *trauma* (which literally means a wound) is represented here by the traditional Remembrance Day poppy, itself described as a “wound”:

So goodbye to that bloody-minded flower.  
 You dead bury your dead  
 [.....]  
 Goodbye to all the remaindered charms of my father’s  
 survival  
 Let England close. Let the green sea-anemone close. (74)

Hughes explicitly describes his father’s survival as having “charms”, which he wishes to break and bid farewell to: the third person imperative – “Let England close” – makes this an act of will. “Red”, the final poem of *Birthday Letters*, sounds a similar note of closure.<sup>50</sup> Though images of magic and exorcism are not explicit in the poem itself, the collection has been filled with allusions to magic and conjuration which exemplify how Hughes works out

<sup>49</sup>In “Red” Hughes is possibly, through the image of the poppies, deliberately connecting his own haunting by the Great War with Plath’s haunting by Otto, as Hunter suggests he does in “A Picture of Otto” (138).

<sup>50</sup>Also, the valedictory gesture and reference to charms in “Out” evoke Prospero, who seems to hover in the background of *Birthday Letters* too.

of a tradition of art as a magic and of the magus as a figure of the artist. In *Birthday Letters* he attempts, through the magic of poetry, to free himself from the spell Plath's poetry and death have cast over him (her remaindered charms and those of the trauma of his own survival).

In "Red" Hughes labels the poppies "Salvias", identifying her with them by their similar names, and claims that her father named her after them (197). Otto is again linked with her inscription in a cycle of bloody furies.

Hughes then compares the roses to goutts of blood, once again recalling the iconography of her own poems – in "The Swarm" (215)

Jealousy can open the blood,  
It can make black roses. (215-216)

He has described how she wraps herself in red by making their room red, now he records how she does so by wearing red. Their responses to the colour are different. His is also a fascination, but a more pained awareness. His contact with it is like touching a wound:

I felt it raw – like the crisp gauze edges  
Of a stiffening wound. I could touch  
The open vein in it, the crusted gleam. (198)

His connection of the colour with a wound suggests that her excessive use of it stems from some wound. (Likewise in "Totem" [163] the hearts she paints are "splashes of a wound" [164]). It is implied that the wound is that dealt by her father's death, to which the inspiration of much of her poetry may be traced. In "Life After Death"(182) Hughes describes Frieda's loss of her mother as a wound:

Day by day his sister grew  
Paler with the wound  
She could not see or touch or feel, as I dressed it  
Each day with her blue Breton jacket. (182)

The collection itself, although the majority of the poems are addressed to Plath, is dedicated to their children, and the penultimate poem, "The Dogs are Eating Your Mother" (195) – addressed to them – , reflects some consciousness that a process of acknowledgement and grief is required if they are not to suffer as she did after she lost her own parent. Hughes describes them visiting their mother's grave – emphasizing the importance of their mourning her – and advises them to carry on with their own lives despite her public dissection: her continual unburying, the "digging" of her out of her grave so that they cannot bury her. In contrast, Plath's father – in her own work, as well as in *Birthday Letters* – is always a ghostly revenant, unable to be buried. Hughes is standing in a genealogical line, a line of

miasma/blood-pollution that does not simply stop at him, but threatens to become an inheritance, extending to the next generation, as is suggested in "A Picture of Otto" (193), where Nicholas's portrait is compared to Otto's, and again in "Life after Death" (182) where her son's eyes are "wet jewels" like Sylvia's own "heirloom" eyes.

The next section of "Red" –

Everything you painted you painted white  
 Then splashed it with roses, defeated it,  
 Leaned over it, dripping roses,  
 Weeping roses, and more roses,  
 Then sometimes, among them, a little bluebird (198)

– recalls "Totem" (163), which describes her occasionally including among the hearts she compulsively paints an "eight-year-old's bluebird" (163). It is an "eight-year-old's" painting not because Plath cannot paint (she was an accomplished artist) but because Hughes is linking her painting with the story of her childhood and her father's death when she was eight. For him it was her ability to hang onto the emotions of an eight-year old who never properly mourned her father that fuelled much of her poetry (interview with Eilat Negev, qtd. in Wagner 20). In "Blood and Innocence" (168) he again links the "aesthetic primitivism"<sup>51</sup> of her art with her father's death: it is "the nine-year-old howl / Come of age" which unearths "Daddy" (168-169).

As he draws to the close of "Red" Hughes expands on the contrasting significance of blue. Plath herself had contrasted red and blue in "Poppies in October" (240): "a dawn of cornflowers", and blue clearly has for her a symbolism markedly different from that of red. Perhaps her most poignant use of blue is in "On the Decline of Oracles" (78), where it is clearly connected with the ocean and her mythic figure of her father, and not only expresses grief for the dead, but sympathy for the grief of the dead and their loss– "the ghost of old Böcklin" is an unquiet spirit who grieves for the ocean he cannot see. In "Daddy", the line so often alluded to by Hughes (and quoted in "The Prism") – "the waters off beautiful Nauset" – is elaborated by a description of their colours: "where it pours bean green over blue" (222).

In "Red" the little bluebird immediately signifies escape, flight and freedom (reinforced by "Blue was wings"). Blue is like a protective balm or medicine: "better for you" (compare how Hughes "dressed" Frieda – as if herself a wound – with her "blue Breton jacket" in "Life After Death" [182]). The colour is "thoughtful", considered and calm, and

<sup>51</sup> "Aesthetic primitivism" is a phrase Paulin uses to discuss Hughes's art (254), but it is equally applicable to Plath's. As Hughes notes of her poetry, "there is a strange muse, bald, white and wild [. . .] floating over a landscape like that of the Primitive Painters [sic]" ("Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*" 161). Moreover, according to Hughes, she was one of the few poets to be truly influenced by African art and folktales ("Tricksters and Tar Babies" 78) in the powerful manner that visual artists of the previous

provides respite from the insistence of red. It is “the light of the mind”, as in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (172). The blue Plath wore while pregnant (reinforcing the idea of it as nurturing, conducive to creation) is “Kingfisher blue”. The description of it as “electrified” recalls “18 Rugby Street” (20), where she herself,

A great bird, you  
Surged in the plumage of your excitement,  
Raving exhilaration. A blueish voltage –  
Fluorescent cobalt, a flare of aura  
That I later learned was yours uniquely. (22)

“18 Rugby Street” (20) alludes to Hopkins’s “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame” (Paulin, qtd. in Byrne 51-52), and the description of “Kingfisher blue” in “Red” chimes with the description of the blue aura as “uniquely” hers in “18 Rugby Street”. As Paulin points out, Hughes’s allusion to Hopkins’s poem carries with it the full purport of that poem: the honouring of the individual genius or self. In “Red” this motif of the transcendent self is again taken up: the pregnancy image links with with numerous images of birth in the volume, which return to her own use of the birth image as a metaphor for the psychic rebirth of the divine self in the Jungian and mystical sense. In “Red” Hughes links this gestation of the self with the colour blue, and the weight of Jungian and alchemical symbolism behind this is gestured to by the description of the blue silks enfolding her pregnancy as doing so in “crucible caresses”.<sup>52</sup> The colour blue also has broader cultural resonances, being associated especially with grief and mourning, and with the spirit – an association aided by its being the traditional colour of the Madonna. Indeed, in “Red” the pregnant Plath, wrapped in blue, is herself a Madonna figure. This is congruent with the alchemical colour symbolism throughout and the alchemical analogy with sacred incest, of which the immaculate conception is a variation – Jung notes that the *lapis philosophorum*, the outcome of the *coniunctio*, and for him a symbol of the birth of the divine self, was long regarded as an allegory for Christ (13: 123, par. 158). In alchemical tradition blue is associated with the *νοῦς*, the mind or spirit (as it is in Plath’s “The Moon and the Yew Tree”), and is contrasted with red – the colour of “blood and affectivity, the physiological reaction that joins spirit to body”, together with

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generation had been (her vision of the earthenware head was inspired by attending lectures on African art).

<sup>52</sup> This interpretation is reinforced by Hughes’s description of the development of Plath’s poetry up until “The Stones”, a subsection of “Poem for a Birthday” (131), dated the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1959: “It gave the impression of being a secret crucible, or rather a womb [. . .] A Jungian might call the whole phase a classic case of the alchemical individuation of the self. [. . .]. And the Jungian interpretation would fit the extraordinary outcome too: the birth of her new creative self” (“Sylvia Plath and Her Journals” 180-182). “Poem for a Birthday” clearly marks for Hughes the birth of a new poetic self. In “Red” Hughes seems to suggest that Plath’s poetry was moving towards another stage, a new poetic self, a suggestion he reiterates in “Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’ ” (211).

which it makes up the *lapis* (Jung 9: 313, par. 555). Blue is also associated in alchemy with the *quinta essentia*, the divine spirit – Jung cites the conception of it by a famous alchemist, Johannes de Rupescissa, as a “blue liquid and incorruptible like the sky” (11: 100, par. 161). Plath’s own use of the blue, associated as it is with her mystical vision of her blue-eyed father, a vision self-consciously allied to a religious tradition – flowing back “to the paternal source of godhead”<sup>53</sup> – suggests a similar symbolism in her work. In “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (173) the clouds are “blue and mystical” and the saints are “all blue”. All these associations were undoubtedly familiar to Hughes, and inform his own rich and complex use of colour symbolism.

In the final three lines of the book, Hughes winds up the colour imagery as well as making a statement not of his own loss, but of Plath’s:

In the pit of red  
You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.

But the jewel you lost was blue.

He does so deftly, simplifying everything so that these lines come to carry much of the weight of the book, and the final isolated line comes to stand like an epitaph.<sup>54</sup> What is ultimately stressed as important is not his loss, but hers.

This jewel is not literal, but chimes with various other jewel images, metaphors for her poetic vision or for herself in her relationship to him – precious, a treasure. In “Wuthering Heights” (59) she is envisioned as having the makings of a “jewel”, a bright future, but this future is already lost: Hughes is looking at a snapshot, which preserves these positive intimations, but at the same time he claims that the snapshot shows her just where “Emily had stared / Like a dying prisoner”, so that the ghost of Emily Brontë, dead at thirty, seems to stare out from behind her, a double-exposure (60-61). The jewel recalls, too, her poem “The Great Carbuncle”<sup>55</sup> (72), based on Hawthorne’s allegory of the same name, in which a newly-

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<sup>53</sup> This quotation is from the same journal entry alluded to so often in *Birthday Letters*, and quoted in my introduction (6-7), in which Plath refers to her father as an image of the “god-creator” and as a “muse”. The passage continues with a quotation from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (Britzolakis 48):

‘and It’s old and old it’s sad and old it’s sad and weary I go back to you, my cold father, my cold mad father, my cold mad feary father...’ so Joyce says, so the river flows to the paternal source of godhead. (*Journals* 381).

<sup>54</sup> It forms an interesting alternative to her actual epitaph, also dominated by bold colours: “Even among fierce flames may the golden lotus flower be planted”, a quotation from the *Baghavat Gita*. Rising above the mud in which it grows, the lotus flower is a symbol of purity and enlightenment. This epitaph suggests a hope for some kind of transcendence or rebirth.

<sup>55</sup> It appears, like “Wuthering Heights” (her poem and his) to have been inspired by their visit to “Withens”, the Brontë’s home at Haworth, on their first visit to Hughes’s family as a married couple

wed couple are among a group of pilgrims who go in search of the “great carbuncle”, a mythical jewel, and, having glimpsed its tremendous light, are wise enough to relinquish their desire to possess it and be satisfied with ordinary moon- and sunlight. In Plath’s poem it is a “great jewel: shown often / Never given” whose light transfigures people: “the earth’s claim and weight gone out of them”. This poem, like “Ariel”, suggests a desire for transcendence, freedom from the “earth’s claim”.

Of all the jewel images in the text the imaginary blue jewel Hughes speaks of in “Red” corresponds most directly to the equally mythical “jewel in the head” alluded to in “The Beach” (154), of which the little toad has an intimation although she does not realize she carries it herself.

The loss Hughes denotes is not just a loss of her life but of her unrealized poetic talent – the vision he detects in her work, but which was not brought to full completion, or term (the blue jewel is prefigured by the blue silks enfolding her pregnancy, so that, by association, it becomes the product of some birth). He complains in “Totem” (163) that all people see now is “your heart-coloured book” (164) – only evidence of “red” remains. Elsewhere he noted that “the full subjective drama of her fate [. . .] never did get written”.<sup>56</sup> Rather than suggesting Plath’s death was fatally pre-destined and unavoidable, he suggests her true fate was somehow aborted. What he imaginatively sees as the centre of Plath’s poetic vision – the mythic blue sea of her childhood – and which she in turn saw as her father’s vision (“On the Decline of Oracles” [78]) and tried to preserve and realize, he now attempts to communicate – through writing. He picks up where she left off, continuing her story and writing it into his own fate, as “The Prism” indicates.

The image of the blue jewel gains much of its resonance through its placement: the collection closes on it, providing the sense that *Birthday Letters* itself is the blue jewel, or at least that it has allowed the perception of such a jewel. The volume’s statement of loss becomes all the more powerful in that it attests to the real possibility of the realization of this “blue jewel”, symbolic of an alternative fate. And, at the same time, the closing of the book on this note emphasizes the finality of its loss. There is also the sense, as Hughes closes his book, that he is letting go in some way, accepting the loss of the blue jewel.

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(hence, the parallel with the young seekers in Hawthorne’s story). It describes a journey up to a moor-top and its description of the light on the moorland as rendering people “lucent” is echoed in Hughes’s description of Plath as “lucent” in his “Wuthering Heights” (61).

<sup>56</sup> Hughes suggests in “Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’ ” that Plath’s work was moving towards the articulation of an ultimate vision, a “total statement”, but that this was unrealized. He claims of her writing, as it can be traced in “Sheep in Fog”, that “we have glimpsed another kind of poem altogether, a fifth kind that rises into the ‘total statements’ of epic and drama – the mythic poem of the chariot, the full subjective drama of her fate, that was pushed under and sank away, and never did get written” (211).

Hughes clearly uses colour carefully and symbolically in *Birthday Letters*. Intriguingly, as Wagner (194) notes, in “St. Botolph’s” (14) he changes to blue the colour of the headscarf he takes from Plath (15). When she wrote of its loss in her diary, though, she had described it as emphatically *red* –

[Hughes] ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf [. . .] hah, I shall keep, he barked ( *Journals* 212)

– reiterating this further on in the same journal entry:

tonight I lost the red bandeau which I loved with all the redness in my heart.  
(*Journals* 213)

By emplotting himself as the thief of her “blue” headscarf, he implicates himself in the later loss of her “blue jewel”. And the final line of “Red”, “But the jewel you lost was blue”, mirrors “I had already lost the treasure”, the final line of “Robbing Myself” (167), the title of which suggests that this loss is an inadvertent theft. And this poem in turn recalls his “theft” of Plath herself at their marriage (“A Pink Wool Knitted Dress” 35). Contrary to suggestions that he is self-exculpatory in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes deliberately indicates a link between his theft of her blue headscarf, which occurs symbolically enough at their initial, star-crossed meeting, and her later “loss”.

As Wagner points out, the alternative blue self that Hughes suggests for Plath returns to her own words; in a letter to her mother written two months before she killed herself she claimed: “blue is my new colour” (*Letters Home* 579). The opening line of “Red” (197), “Red was your colour”, appears deliberately to echo these words, as if in discussion with them. Ironically, Plath’s letter continues, “Ted never liked blue” (Wagner 195). In *Birthday Letters* Hughes returns to Plath’s metaphor of the reborn self, and rather than turning to the self symbolized as red and commemorated as such on her last birthday with “Ariel”, he suggests a rebirth of a self conceived as blue. This, he suggests, would have gone hand-in-hand with a life without him.

## Conclusion

### Picking Up the Pieces: The Reception of *Birthday Letters*, and its Self-reflexivity

you will never know what a battle  
I fought to keep the meaning of my words  
Solid with the world we were making. ("Fidelity" [29])

*Birthday Letters* is a work of considerably more complexity and self-consciousness than its reception has suggested. Typical of the criticism it has met with is the comment that Hughes's feelings are clear and commendable despite the poetry (Hughes the man is vindicated, though Hughes the poet is a failure) or the converse: that the poetry is good but he is self-exculpatory. Thus Katha Pollit, while generally dismissive of the poems because of Hughes's alleged lack of engagement with the role he played in bringing his relationship with Plath to "its disastrous end", notes finally the curiously emotive power of the poems: "It would be a hard heart and a tin ear that could remain impervious to lines like these" (n.pag). Meanwhile William Logan asserts –

*Birthday Letters*, addressed to Plath, show that keeping silence was a measure of keeping faith. The faith is much more impressive than the poetry (n.pag)

– as if the faith were communicated in some way other than through the poetry, and the two were easily separable. But *Birthday Letters* itself suggests a complex relationship between faith and language. In "Fidelity" (28) words are articles of faith, the basis of the worlds we build. In "The Inscription" (172) faith and language are again linked: Plath begs for Hughes to have "faith" in her, until she opens a book and reads an inscription which renders her unable to have faith in the faith she asks for. The words of the inscription are now faithless and fatally wounding. They are like the titular "Words" (270) of her poem: "axes" (line 1).

In comments elsewhere, too, particularly through allusions to money, Hughes alludes to the relationship between faith and language. Like money, words have meaning and value only in relation to one another, within a system and given a certain faith/belief (or suspension of disbelief) on the part of the users. Both have metaphoric rather than intrinsic value and their use requires an acceptance of the fictitious, symbolic and illusory. When shared faith or illusions that sustain such usage are shattered, as in the face of the disillusionment Plath's death might offer, words become meaningless and empty. In the case of Plath's death, words, so heavily implicated in her life and death, as *Birthday Letters* and her own late poem "Words" (written ten days before her death) suggest, would be doubly suspect.

In *Birthday Letters* images of shattered coins are linked to the snow that fell at the time of Plath's death ("The Bird") and with general disillusionment, as in "The Beach" (154) where the once mythicized sea becomes "The flip of a coin – the flip of an ocean fallen" (156). The beach that "fails" Plath here echoes the mention of her being "failed" by her "faith" in "18 Rugby Street" (22). Images of shattering, Plath's death, the "fallen heaven" it represents, and the disillusionment it precipitates all elide.

Hughes wrote of the *Birthday Letters* poems that

Each one was an attempt to find the live current of feeling between her & [sic] me and then to hold it till the words ran out. But never to lose that current. That was the sole principle. And never to lose, of course, the person I was communicating with – her. (qtd. in Moulin, "Disappearance" n.pag.)

This "current of feeling" is constituted of words. Words, by keeping the "current" between them alive, serve as counters in a system of exchange and circulation, establishing relationships. They become the "currency" in the exchange he attempts to set up between Plath and himself. The analogy between "current" and "currency" is more than merely verbal. Hughes repeatedly speaks of language in terms of circuits and systems of exchange – language "pays" or "costs". As to why he eventually published *Birthday Letters*, Hughes claimed: "In the end I couldn't go on sitting on it. Costs too heavy in the currency I can least afford to pay" (qtd. in Patterson n.pag.). Hughes here suggests relationships between language and affects which are central to the volume as a work of mourning and as one which, like much elegy (Sacks 4), is self-reflexive about language itself. In *Birthday Letters* the standard elegiac distrust of language and the task of re-accommodation to it are compounded by the role of poetry in Plath's own life

Keeping alive the "current of feeling" which links him with Plath, Hughes ranges over myths, allusions and references of wide general use and pertinence (in "currency" and "having currency", as it were). He does so for the most part in simple and colloquial language, renewing the currency of the words (making him, as Hughes says of Keith Douglas, a "renovator of language" ["Keith Douglas" 72]), and adapting his story to many others – so that it becomes mythic, transcending the self, enriching the meaning of his experience so that it becomes something "permanent" and "outside" of himself.<sup>1</sup> In effect he is picking up the

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes writes that

Words are tools, learned late and laboriously and easily forgotten, *with which we try to give some part of our experience a more or less permanent shape outside ourselves.* They are [. . .] far from being ideal for their job. For one thing, a word has its own definite meanings. [. . .]. Yet we are wanting it to carry some part of our meaning, of the meaning of our experience, and the meaning of our experience is finally unfathomable [. . .]. (emphasis added, "Poetry in the Making" 19)

pieces of their shattered common world – a world built of “words” as “Fidelity” suggests. His image in “Moonwalk” (41) of Plath arranging shards to form a poem to be worn like a mask (43) could be a description of his own poetic process in *Birthday Letters*. Likewise in “The Table” (138) Hughes wakes up in an empty theatre, with the script torn up, things having gone other than to plan, and needs to construct his own drama from the fragmented shards of what remains (139).

The collection clearly evinced a public duty and the poems were chosen and arranged with publication and all that Hughes imagined it would entail in mind. Select poems were first serialized in the *Sunday Times*, and Hughes insisted that the volume be published on 29th January 1998, a date he considered favourable for public awareness (Wagner 25). The later poems of the volume, which explicitly deal with Hughes’s life after Plath’s death, and his experience of the public reception of her work, seem to be addressed as much to the public as to Plath, and almost to issue a directive. They emphasize the importance of the remembrance of her work and the continuing of a tradition (and are self-conscious about this as part of their purpose). The penultimate poem, “The Dogs are Eating Your Mother” (196), while it is fiercely critical of Plath’s (particularly academic) readers, suggests that the work they do might be labour for the one who will “roll her back into the sun” – leaving to the reader the completion of the task of mythic rebirth – a rebirth out of the sun, as it is put in “Child’s Park” (70) – which Hughes repeatedly describes her as striving after, and a type of transcendence for her which he seems to be aiming at in *Birthday Letters*.

*Birthday Letters* is in some sense Hughes’s re-working of *The Tempest* and his adaptation of that play to his own life – just as he relates Owen’s “Strange Meeting” or Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud” to his own story. But *The Tempest* is a far more resonant palimpsest, a “totemic” text for Plath (Britzolakis 46), and in turn an obsessive text for Hughes, whose entire argument in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* works towards it as the telos of Shakespeare’s output. In his reading of the play Hughes focuses on the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda, seeing it as an alchemical *coniunctio*. This he shows Plath as coming close to, but just missing, in “Red” (196). For Hughes, the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda represents an attempt at the resolution of the tragic story of Dido’s rejection by Aeneas: according to Hughes, “the ur-tragedy behind *The Tempest* is the story of Dido, the beloved rejected by Aeneas” (*SGCB* 441). This is a rejection of the Goddess of Divine Love and Complete Being, of which Dido is an embodiment. In “Setebos” (132) Hughes describes his and Plath’s marriage as one that plays at that of Ferdinand and Miranda, but this goes horribly wrong: the story of *The Tempest* is not their own: “which play / Were we in?” (133) he asks. What eventuates from their marriage is not a rebirth of the divine self, the outcome of the *coniunctio*, but a more ominous creature-creation: the minotaur/Daddy figure, conceived in the Knossos-house of “18 Rugby Street”.

If the story of *The Tempest* is not made their own within *Birthday Letters*, it is one which makes an apt palimpsest for the story of the volume's publication and reception. The whole phenomenon of the volume's publication and public reception had the quality of a public confession with the public playing their part in the drama (as audience) by accepting Hughes's confession and validating its emotional worth. It is as if *Birthday Letters* had coded into it an epilogue akin to Prospero's in *The Tempest*, where he asks the audience that they free him so that he may be returned to Naples, away from exile on his island.<sup>2</sup> And there is a sense in which it does: Hughes recurrently depicts himself as silenced and imprisoned by Plath's poetic portraits of him, but at the same time, through the text's self-reflexivity, it is engendered in the reader's mind that this is not simply the effect of Plath's writing, but of the public's reading: it is they who sanction and make real the power of art. Hughes works out of the same tradition, as when he and Plath met, of the notion of art as a magic and from a position of "the omnipotence of thought": this is revealed through his use of apostrophe – Britzolakis notes that

within a psychoanalytical rather than purely figural perspective, of course, apostrophe appears as an obsessive gesture, a magical charm which wards off the narcissistic fear that one will *not* see oneself reflected in objects, and therefore an instance of what Freud calls 'the belief in the omnipotence of thought.'<sup>3</sup> (107)

Moreover, Hughes emphasizes how a suspension of disbelief itself is necessary to reading: the volume starts on a note of wonder (with the eating of the peach) and in "18 Rugby Street" (20) Hughes and the reader enter, with "amazement", the maze of the Knossos-house of possession, the labyrinth of the text – writing being emphasized as labyrinthine. This is suggested not only in "18 Rugby Street", where daemonic possession and writing are overtly linked, but repeatedly and self-consciously throughout the text – notably in "A Picture of Otto", where Hughes "rests" on the page with Otto, and without "seeing" Plath, accepting his lack of communication with her. As suggested in Chapter Two, the model for his mourning here might be that of Aeneas rather than Orpheus. Hughes's successful mourning depends on the acceptance of Plath's irrevocable loss (his loss of her, as well as her loss). This acceptance is perhaps the achievement of *Birthday Letters* – not a mythicization of Plath, or the realization of a hope to restore her – but an acceptance of her loss, and a psychological release

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<sup>2</sup> Prospero's epilogue is quoted on page 57 of chapter two.

<sup>3</sup> For Freud this is the basis of magical thought (see page 62 of chapter two).

and escape (a type of transcendence) for Hughes – as his post-publication writings suggest.<sup>4</sup> This sea-change comes about from his use of language – his making his story go down the “full five fathoms”<sup>5</sup> and its consequent translation into words of “mythic” resonance, thus opening the way for contemplation, reconciliation and understanding, which Hughes suggests, in “Myth and Education” (138-139), is the value of stories.

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<sup>4</sup> In his translation of *Alcestis*, only undertaken after the publication of *Birthday Letters* and published posthumously, Hughes makes an addition to the text which suggests that he once again uses translation therapeutically and interactively. Admetos’s wife, Alcestis, has been magically wrested from the dead and returned to him, transformed yet the same – Hughes’s chorus are prompted by this to close the drama on the injunction “Let this give man hope” (83).

<sup>5</sup> This phrase “the full five fathoms”, a variation on Ariel’s “full fathom five”, is Hughes’s own: he explains Plath’s internalization of the Icarus and the Phaeton myths and their centrality to her poem, “Sheep in Fog”, despite their being no overt references to them, as a process of the myths going down “the full five fathoms” (“Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’ ” (SGCB 42).

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