

My mother in her feathers of flame  
 Grows taller. Every May Thirteenth  
 I see her with her sister Miriam. I lift  
 The torn-off diary page where my brother jotted  
 “Ma died today” - and there they are. (NSP, p.291)

I can never read the opening lines of “Anniversary” without experiencing the sensation that I knew them before they were written. They acknowledge a distinct body of poems that arise from the cauldron of Edith Hughes’ death and its effect on the poet. Edith Hughes died 13 May 1969 at Halifax Royal Infirmary.<sup>140</sup> Hughes, by candidly and emphatically naming the significance of the date, links “Anniversary” with “the May poems”, its precursors.<sup>141</sup>

His mythologising of his mother has undergone great change. Her reputed “second sight” now figures prominently in “Anniversary”. There are antecedents for it, in “Ballad from a Fairy Tale”, for instance, but these have little of the power of *mythos* found in “Anniversary”. Of course, it is Plath’s story, “All The Dead Dears”, which first raises the nature of Edith Hughes’ “gift”. Thinly disguised as the character Nellie Meehan, she is visited by her dead sister, who is called Minnie in the story:

“What,” Dora Sutcliffe asked Nellie Meehan now in hushed, church-going tones, “was Minnie wearing?”  
 Nellie Meehan’s eyes grew dreamy. “A white Empire smock,” she said. “All gathered at the waist, it was, with hundreds and hundreds of little pleats. I remember just as clear. And wings, great feathery white wings coming down over the bare tips of her toes. (JP, p.184)

In her notes for the story, Plath sets down Minnie’s biographical basis:

Mrs.Meehan-rich-flavoured dialect story set in Yorkshire (Wuthering Heights background) - of present vivid influence of ghosts of those dead on woman who almost

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<sup>140</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>141</sup> See Chapter 1, p.24.

has second sight. Begin - "I saw an angel once" - my sister Miriam ... (JSP, p.149)

Hughes now corroborates the biography in "Anniversary". Anne Skea heard him introduce the poem:

I went to a poetry reading given by Ted on Poetry Day at the National Theatre in London last year (1994). He introduced a couple of poems which would interest you ... And "Anniversary" about which he said that his mother's sister, Miriam, was close in age to her but died when she was 18. She would appear to his mother 2 days before any family death. At each appearance she had changed a little, becoming taller and more angelic each time and clothed in feathers which his mother said she had touched, and which "felt like the taste of honey".<sup>142</sup>

Miriam was Edith's older sister by two years. She died of pneumonia 17 May 1915. On her death certificate her occupation is set down as tailoress (fustian), the occupation of her sister Edith. Miriam was eighteen when she died.<sup>143</sup> In Plath's "All the Dead Dears", Minnie, or the fictionalised Miriam, died of pneumonia.

Hughes has come late, if we compare Plath's 1957 story with his own "Ballad from a Fairy Tale" from *Wodwo* (1967), to the power of mythologising evident in "Anniversary". He now speaks publicly about the autobiographical roots of "Anniversary", which is very different from his denial of the role of autobiography in *Crow to Faas* in an interview a quarter of a century ago. In his autobiographical story entitled "The Deadfall", he writes of his mother's "second sight" and his memories of instances of its occurrence. He remembers his mother's premonition of the death of her brother, Albert Smith Farrar, which he included in the text of his "Sacrifice" (*Wg*, pp.19-21). He recollects his mother's ability, through seeing Miriam, to know that a family member's death was imminent:

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<sup>142</sup>A letter to me from Anne Skea dated 2 June 1995.

<sup>143</sup> See [Appendix C](#).

A few months after her death, Miriam reappeared at night and sat on my mother's bed, just as in life, and held her hand. Without speaking, she seemed to be consoling my mother. Two days later, their baby brother died.

After that, through the years, just before any member of her family died, Miriam would appear at my mother's bedside. But as the years passed, her ghost changed. She became brighter and taller. "Gradually", said my mother, "she has turned into an angel". By the time of the last occasion, when their eldest brother [Walt] died, Miriam had become a tall glowing angel with folded wings. My mother described her as being made of flame. As if she were covered with many-coloured feathers of soft, pouring flame. But it was still Miriam. And on this last visit, as she stood by the bed, my mother reached up a hand to stroke the flame because it was, as she said, "so beautiful". "The feel of it", she told us afterwards, "was like the taste of honey". I remember her telling that, the next day, as if it were only minutes ago. (DB, pp.2-3)

Notice the insistent "my mother" form of reference that characterises Hughes' prose register. The vividness of memory is highlighted by the final sentence of the extract. Throughout the extract, and the entire story, there is a consistent linking of words and imagery with the poetry that Hughes has written, and there is a marked consistency of real-life familial detail.

Miriam was Edith's sister, and she did die "when both were in their late teens" (DB, p.2). Edith was "awakened by a sickening pain across the back of her neck and a terrific banging" (DB, pp.1-2) at the time of her brother's suicide by hanging. She has a premonition of her master builder brother's death, which is set down in "Sacrifice":

When he tripped  
The chair from beneath him, in his attic,  
Midsummer dusk, his sister, forty miles off,

Cried out at the hammer blow on her nape.

Walter Farrar was “her eldest bother” (DB, p.2), and he did die “in Halifax hospital” (DB, p.2). In “The Deadfall”, autobiographical detail is completely candid:

My brother and sister and I also wanted to see ghosts. We lived near Hebden Bridge, in West Yorkshire, in a village called Mytholmroyd. (DB, p.3)

Hughes writes of his brother Gerald, their rambles, and, by implicit reference, of the descent of “The Ancient Briton Lay Under His Rock” (RE, p.84):

On one side of that valley, in a steep wood of oak and birch trees, is an ancient grave. At least, it was always known as a grave. We called it the grave of the ancient Briton. A great rough slab of stone. My brother, much older than me, sometimes tried to dig him up, with the help of a few friends. I remember scraping away there, on two or three occasions. The stone was embedded in a hole and far too big for us to lever out. We tried to dig round it and under it. But the great slab simply settled deeper. (DB, p.3ff)

Writing of Hardcastle Crag and Crimsworth Dene, Hughes provides an insight into the significance of these places. They form a potent autobiographical anchor, which holds him above the anticipated catch swimming deep in the waters of the past:

Our father and mother had both been born in Hebden Bridge. Their paradise had been the deep, cliffy, dead-end gorge of Hardcastle Crag...

... Here, when they were boys, before the First World War, my mother's brothers used to camp. They called Crimsworth Dene “the happy valley”. (DB, p.6)

The association of these places with poems, such as “Hardcastle Crag”, “Leaf Mould” and “Walt”, is, simultaneously, a significant association of places with family, with Edith Hughes in particular. In the poems written about her, she has undergone a poetic

metamorphosis that has transformed her identity. From the mother on washing day in “Memory” (*Re*, p.15), to the Brontëesque spirit exhibited in “Edith”<sup>144</sup>, to the grieving spirit of a generation in “Leaf Mould” (*Wg*, pp.33-4), to an angel in “Anniversary” (*NSP*, p.291), the mythologising of Edith is ascendant. Her elevation is possible because she is remembered in the poetry as a spiritual, empathetic and strong female. There is no sign of the Terrible Mother or the Devouring Mother in the nature of her portrayal.<sup>145</sup> She is consistently linked to imagery of light and music, which emphasises the creative, rather than the destructive, nature of her mythologised existence in her son’s poetry.

This consistency of portrayal of Edith as a creative, nurturing force distinguishes her from the Goddess figure in poems that appear in *Gaudete*. While the Goddess is sometimes associated with emptiness and destruction, Edith is not. In the Epilogue of *Gaudete*, in particular, the cruelty of the Goddess is evident.<sup>146</sup> The “fullness” of the Goddess is compared to a steel knife scraping inside the skull like “the abortionist’s knife” in “Trying To Be A Leaf” (*G*, p. 180). The bard is “emptied and rejected” in “Music, That Eats People” (*G*, p.182). “Glare out of Just Crumpled Grass” (*G*, p.200) ends with “you have come and gone again/ With my skin”. In “Memory” (*NSP*, p.48), Edith is represented in the image of “hands of light, hands of light” and the power of her influence is unmistakable in the line “mother, mother, mother, what am I?” “Source” (*Wg*, pp.17-8) portrays the spirituality and empathy of the mother. In “a luxury of pure weeping”, the speaker accredits the mother with the power to “dissolve yourself, me, everything/ Into this relief of your strange music”.

As an influence in Hughes’ life, Edith is supreme, as indicated by her evolved status in the personal poetry. Her own life experience provides a great part of the reason for the profundity of her influence, and her son’s poetry is attentive to the personal and psychological power underpinning and transforming her cultural and historical context. Edith Farrar came from a reasonably well-to-do background. Her father, Mitchell, held

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<sup>144</sup> T.Hughes “Edith”, *The Listener*, 5 September 1985, Vol.114, p.26.

<sup>145</sup> See C.G.Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G.Jung, Vol.5, Symbols of Transformation*, p.362ff.

<sup>146</sup> See R. Graves, *The White Goddess, A historical grammar of poetic myth*, London, Faber & Faber, 1961: Graves comments on both the benevolent and malevolent sides of the goddess. Hughes closely follows Graves.

management positions in the cotton mills. He was an overlooker when he first married, which was a position of responsibility and privilege.<sup>147</sup> An overlooker, or tackler as the job was also known, took charge of a section of machinery and the workers operating the looms. His immediate supervisor was the weaving manager in big sheds, or the mill manager himself in smaller concerns. Men in Mitchell's position kept the looms running, both through mechanical maintenance and their interpersonal skills with the workers. They could be responsible for up to twenty-four looms and their operators. Some overlookers were so popular that their workers, particularly the women and children, followed them if they moved to another mill. The overlooker wore a distinctive uniform, mostly trousers made up of bluette and blue drill and sleeved vests that had fronts of bluette and black twilled cotton sleeves. Their uniform was multi-pocketed to accommodate their range of spanners.<sup>148</sup>

The mill manager, who happened to be the appointee's father, passed on the following edict to a newly appointed overlooker:

Now think on your job's to see that the machinery is cleaned, greased, and that the premises you occupy are in perfect condition - no bread left about, no rats, no mice. We want none o' that. If you can't get them as works for you to do it, I shall force you to do it.<sup>149</sup>

Mitchell and Annie Farrar had at least six children for whom I have copies of birth certificates and other records. Coming across the name of Thomas Farrar, who is notified as Miriam's brother on the copy of her death certificate, recently raised that total to seven children - seven I know of, and I have not looked for more, particularly since Hughes expresses some doubt concerning his mother's "seven or eight brothers and sisters" (DB, p.2). Mitchell's employment is listed as overlooker or tackler on all these documents. Edith was probably the couple's third child, born 18 September 1898, after her sister Miriam, who was born in 1896 and her brother Walter, born 1893.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>148</sup> M.Hartley & J.Ingilby, Life and Tradition in West Yorkshire, op.cit., pp. 49-50.

<sup>149</sup> ibid, p.50.

<sup>150</sup> See Appendix A.

Hughes' personal poetry often includes the losses that affected his mother's childhood and later life. Her sister Lily died of pneumonia at the age of four in 1905, when Edith was seven.<sup>151</sup> Miriam also died of pneumonia, when she was eighteen and Edith was sixteen in the dark spring of 1915. Edith lived to be part of the generation caught up in the epiphany of loss occasioned by the First World War. Marriage to William Henry Hughes, after the war, on 19 May 1920 at the Wesleyan Chapel at Foster Lane, Hebden Bridge, brought the happiness of three children to Edith. However, her family life was touched by sadness and tragedy.<sup>152</sup> Gerald, her first child, left home at eighteen for another war and then to lead a separate life in Australia. "Anniversary" reflects upon the effect of this loss on the mother:

She is using me to tune finer  
Her weeping love for my brother, through mine,  
As if I were the shadow cast by his approach.

As when I came a mile over fields and walls  
Towards her, and found her weeping for him -  
Able for all that distance to think me him.

The same poem relates how Edith was the devoted mother excluded from both her sons' weddings:

"And these  
Are the mass marriages of him and his brother  
Where I was not once a guest". Then suddenly  
She is scattering the red coals with her fingers  
To find where I had fallen  
For the third time. She laughs  
Helplessly till she weeps.

This part of "Anniversary" raises the tragedy that struck into her son Ted's life. That the deaths of Sylvia, Assia and Shura may have almost taken him into the grave is a repeated

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<sup>151</sup> See [Appendix C](#).

<sup>152</sup> See [Appendix B](#).

motif in Gaudete, but after the deaths of Assia and Shura on 23 March 1969, Edith's own death occurred less than two months later.<sup>153</sup> "Anniversary" joins other poems in Gaudete and in Cave Birds that mark this dark period in the poet's life.

"I Know Well" (G, pp.190-1), "In These Fading Moments I Wanted To Say" (CB, p.20) and "Something Was Happening" (CB, p.30) are personal poems centring on Edith's death and the poet's anguish. The three poems are linked by shared details of setting and situation. Their personal voice is strong enough to make them stand out from other Goddess-oriented poems in their host mythical collections, and they plainly deal with real life. "I Know Well" and "In These Fading Moments ... " have as a common subject Edith's last days in her hospital bed agony. "Something Was Happening" marks her death: "Her sister got the call from the hospital/ And gasped out the screech". William Hughes was at his wife's side when she died.<sup>154</sup> Hilda, her sister, and Ted were at The Beacon, the Hughes house at Heptonstall Slack.

It is understandable that Hughes' personal poems about his mother, such as "Anniversary", are now in the confessional mode. Their narration is a type of therapy, which is, simultaneously, a reaffirmation of his bonding with his mother through atonement and a pledge of love. Such poems are inescapably autobiographical. Representation of the female in Hughes' works has undergone great change. Elements of violence between the sexes, of misogamy and of battle, are present in The Hawk in the Rain. Competitiveness of the sexes is at the heart of "Incompatibilities" (THR, p.26), indicated by its title, while the misogynic content of "Soliloquy of a Misanthrope" (THR, p.22) is obvious. Hatred of the institution of marriage is apparent in "Two Phases" (THR, p.29), and violence between the sexes takes on frightening proportions in "A Modest Proposal" (THR, p.25). "The Conversion of the Reverend Skinner" (THR, p.32) is, despite its reverse psychology moralising, another misogynic poem. Its vilification of the female form and spirit has echoes in "Secretary" (THR, p.21) and in "The Hag" (THR, p.46).

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<sup>153</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*



Male symbolism and imagery dominates in Hughes' public collections from the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Most poems in The Hawk in the Rain, Lupercal and Wodwo focus on a masculinity of subject. Some poems surprise with the maleness of their comparisons. "Fern" (Wo, p.28) is one of these, in which "the fern/ Dances gravely, like the plume/ Of a warrior". Similarly, in "Snowdrop" (L, p.58), the traditional femininity of the form of the snowdrop is acknowledged, then subverted by images of brutality traditionally associated with the male:

She, too, pursues her ends,  
Brutal as the stars of this month,  
Her pale head heavy as metal.

In the nineteen-seventies, in Crow and Gaudete, females and children are victims. In "Crow and Mama" (C, p.17), "When he laughed she wept". "Crow's Account of St George" (C, pp.31-2) ends when the anti-hero drops the sword and "runs dumb-faced from the house/ Where his wife and children lie in their blood". A "woman of complete pain rolling in flame" and, once again, a male persona, who "ran from the children and through the house/ Holding his bloody hands clear of everything", feature in "Criminal Ballad" (C, pp.38-9). In Gaudete, all females are the victims of a verse drama-film script in which the lump of wood that is the changeling image of Reverend Lumb mismanages their lives and brings them ruin. A female body count mounts as the hacked prophet's mistaken scheme to father a Messiah is enacted within an improbable twenty-hour time frame. Then the real Lumb, returned from a cavern where he proved helpless to restore a woman, writes verse fragments that are often about dead women.

Hughes' public collections through to Wolfwatching contain very few poems that are about female human beings. The Goddess, femininity in aspects of landscape and nature, femaleness in the worlds of the farming cycle and of nature, the mother motif in mythical collections and their derivatives - these aspects of including the female in major collections do not possess the direct and human inclusion of the female that we see in Wolfwatching. However, in uncollected poems and in limited edition collections, Hughes has included the female. This has been done in the most personal way, for these less accessible poems include those based on Edith. Since the publishing of Wolfwatching (1989), some of these personal poems have been collected, and there have been many

new poems, in two recent collections from Hughes - Elmet and New Selected Poems. It is not outside the realms of probability that a collection of the personal poems about females and children discussed in this and subsequent chapters will be forthcoming from Hughes before too much longer.

“Memory” is the first personal poem written about the poet’s mother, Edith Hughes, and comes from circa 1961.<sup>155</sup> It is later collected in Recklings (Re, p.15), and more recently in New Selected Poems (NSP, p.48). The poem encapsulates an early childhood memory of washing day. “Memory” epitomises the difficulty Hughes experienced, at that stage of his writing, when attempting to write about his own mother. The curious properties associated with the onset of a memory tend to swamp the personal aspects that prompt the poem. Instead, it is a sustained metaphor examining the implosion of a past fragment of life and the strangeness of the improbable universe generated by the unconscious mind. An internalised setting discloses an alien terrain where the “morass is bulging and aborting”.

However, the significance of the mother remains central in “Memory”. As the speaker is drawn into the medium of water, that element which largely constitutes the morass in which conscious life is submerging, needs and emotions cry out against the flood:

Mother, mother, mother, what am I?

Hands of light, hands of light

Wash the writhing darkness ...

Fears and dislocation move the speaker in “Memory” towards a still-point, the constancy and solace of the mother. Her influence is sensed vividly as “hands of light”, hands which cleanse and order “the writhing darkness”, making things right.

About five years later, “On The Slope” (Re, p.7), which is the first poem in Recklings, again takes up Edith as its subject. The title of the poem incorporates physical setting and an allegorical comment on aging. The woman in the poem, “with the stone agony growing in her joints/ And eyes dimming with losses, widening for losses”, is

linked strongly with the Calder landscape, as are males in poems from Hughes' more public collections from the same time, such as "Dick Straightup" (L, pp.17-9) or "Crag Jack's Apostasy" (L, p.56). The poem is characterised by a simple humanity. Compassion is shown towards the arthritic woman, who likes to climb on the slopes of the valley she has known all her days:

Foxglove and harebell neither protest or hope  
On the steep slope where she climbs.  
Out of nothing she grew here simply

Also suffering to be merely flowerlike ...

A mild stoicism characterises the linked natural and human worlds of "On The Slope", marking the poem with an understated sense of human belonging, which sets it apart from most of Hughes' well known poems of the time. Poems from The Hawk in the Rain, for instance, were reaching and striving to express the vitality and force of nature, such as a storm sky "Flexing like the lens of a mad eye" in "Wind" (THR, p.40), or the stupendous theatre of creation, where the birth of a child, in "Childbirth" (THR, p.45), momentarily "Righted the stagger of the earth". The language and themes of these early poems are often, in consequence, larger than life, with no inclination to focus on the simpler facts that make up our days. Not so with "On The Slope", which looks at a "flowerlike" woman beset by age and illness, getting on with her life as best she can. She has other problems, too, particularly the "losses" she mourns for as she walks upon the hills of her home valley.

Edith is next met in Wodwo, a collection Hughes dedicates "To my Mother and Father". The third section of "Out" (Wo, pp.155-7), "Remembrance Day", raises "the woe-dark under my mother's eyes" and "the cenotaphs on my mother's breasts", both outward signs of the legacy of the First World War. Hughes employs the striking opposition of poppies, symbols of remembrance of great carnage, and breasts that nurtured life. The presence of the human mother in "Out" emphasises the devastating

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<sup>155</sup> T.Hughes, "Memory", Times Literary Supplement, 14 July 1961, p.1.

irony and grief that a mother cannot escape: having given life, she must commemorate its squandering in the cruel and complex theatre of war.

“Ballad from a Fairy Tale” (*W*, pp.166-7) links Edith and Sylvia for the first time in Hughes’ personal poetry. The poem draws upon a visionary dream of an angel in flight, which seems to augur a blessed and charmed life, as suggested by the enormous flight power sensed in the vision of an angel like a “swan the size of a city”. Flight, synonymous with freedom, the journey of the human soul, and closeness to God, is an important motif in *Wodwo*. Imagery of flight embraces spirituality, whereas imagery of rain in *Wodwo* represents confinement and spiritual privation.

However, the angel wears, instead of a halo, “a strange square of satin”:

“Mother,” I cried, “O Mother,  
I have seen an angel  
Will it be a blessing?”  
But my mother’s answer  
Even now I dare not write.

Years later, “Opposite the house/ Where my father was born/ Where my grandmother died”, writes Hughes, the speaker again encounters that “fringed square of satin”, a funereal trapping:

I could have reached and touched it  
But I was standing in a valley  
Deeper than any dream.

Hughes is reported to have said, upon leaving the graveside at the conclusion of Sylvia’s funeral service, “Something of me has died with her”.<sup>156</sup> The speaker of “Ballad from a Fairy Tale” is sunken in despair, understanding that the angel of long ago was a portent of this death, and feeling “its meaning doubled” in the attendant death that the speaker undergoes.

In the two poems from *Wodwo*, “Out” and “Ballad from a Fairy Tale”, Hughes writes, in a public collection for the first time, of his own mother. She is pivotal, touching the spiritual world, yet moving in the real world. She is a point of equilibrium, giver of

life and mourner of many deaths. However, only two personal poems feature Edith, out of a collection of forty poems and six short stories. It is not until after her death in 1969 that poems about her emerge and begin to form a strong presence in Hughes' poetry. The dualism of personal matter and allusive matter that exists in the Epilogue of *Gaudete* (1977) is connected by the quest motif. It is a quest for release, through the travail of purging the self. However, it is possible to discriminate between personal poems and those functioning as poems connecting the Lumb persona with the preceding narrative.

"I Know Well" (*G*, pp.190-1) centres on the death of the poet's mother. The essence of its human subject is delineated in its opening lines:

I know well  
You are not infallible ...

The Goddess is not the subject of this poem. Elsewhere, that Gravesian deity "rides the earth/ On an ass, on a lion" (*G*, p.184), suborning the gulf between alpha and omega: "He almost lives/ Who dare meet you" (*G*, p.197). The subject of "I Know Well" is a woman, who is dying:

I know how your huge unmanageable  
Mass of bronze hair shrank to a twist  
As thin as a silk scarf, on your skull,  
And how your pony's eye darkened larger

Holding too lucidly the deep glimpse  
After the humane killer ...

The mother's beauty, the same deep spirituality that we see in *Wolfwatching*, in poems such as "Source" (*Wg*, pp.17-8) and "Leaf Mould" (*Wg*, pp.33-4), is present in "I Know Well":

And I had to lift your hand for you

While your chin sank to your chest  
With the sheer weariness

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<sup>156</sup> R.Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, Minerva, London, 1992, p.13.

Of taking away from everybody  
Your envied beauty, your much-desired beauty

Your hardly-used beauty

Of lifting away yourself  
From yourself

And weeping with the ache of the effort ...

In contrast to this human dimension of spirituality and suffering, “Churches Topple” (G, p.190) and “The Sun, like a Cold Kiss in the Street” (G, p.191), the poems either side of “I Know Well”, are addressed to the Goddess.

The overlapping of personal and allusive matter in the Epilogue of Gaudete is distinguishable from their separate occurrences. While “The Sun, like a Cold Kiss in the Street” uses sun and moon as concrete metaphors of the Goddess, the very next poem, “Sometimes It Comes, a Gloomy Flap of Lightning” (G, pp.191-2), merges the timeless presence of the Goddess with the lost constancy of the human mother:

The saviour  
From these veils of wrinkles and shawls of ache

Like the sun  
Which is itself cloudless and leafless

Was always here, is always as she was.

The ancient mother identity that forms one aspect of the Goddess is invoked to open a pure and kind door onto death for the human mother, releasing her from her “veils of wrinkles and shawls of ache”. It is the final phrasing of “is always as she was” that implies remembrance of the human mother and joins her in a universal bond of motherhood that is very moving.

Cave Birds (1978) is a poetic sequence focussed on a process of disintegration and reintegration of the self. The Baskin birds illustrating the poems and the bird spirits

addressed by some of the poems stress the existentialism inherent in the quest to set down the coming into being of a new self, a new soul. However, the chronological and autobiographical elements of the quest form a personal layer in what must be regarded as an allegory. References to the mother in “In These Fading Moments I Wanted to Say” (CB, p.20) are prefaced by a lengthy explanation by the speaker of the utterly overwhelming, immobilising effect of the imminent death of the mother. “Even the dead sparrow’s eye/ Lifts the head off me - like a chloroform”, the speaker confides. The autobiographical elements of the poem, that cross-reference with “On the Slope”, are then set down:

But she was murmuring: Right from the start, my life  
Has been a cold business of mountains and their snow  
Of rivers and their mud

Yes there were always smiles and one will do a lot  
To be near one’s friends ...

“In These Fading Moments I Wanted to Say” ends with imagery of the “snow-melt”, of the “slip and trickle” of scree and of the snowflakes “vanished into themselves” as the life that the mother knew continues its cycle, moving on from where she must stay, ignoring her last words, but in the manner of a spouse:

The whole earth  
Had turned in its bed  
To the wall.

The event of the mother’s death immobilises the child, the speaker in “Something Was Happening” (CB, p.30), particularly since the speaker was not present at the death:

As I hung up my coat and went through into the kitchen  
And peeled a flake off the turkey’s hulk,  
and stood vacantly munching  
Her sister got the call from the hospital  
And gasped out the screech.

Seasons continue and pass, until the anniversary of the mother’s death, when the speaker “saw new emerald tufting the quince, in April/ And cried in dismay: “Here it comes

again!” However, nothing momentous occurs, and, reminiscent of the close of “In These Fading Moments I Wanted to Say”, “The earth, right to its far rims, ignored me”, the speaker concludes in dismay.

Unlike these poems from Cave Birds that are sunken in the immediate trauma of Edith’s death, poems from Remains of Elmet, another public collection, reconnect memories of her to life. These poems transcend the blank emptiness of death and move towards giving her a transfigured significance in Hughes’ personal poetry. Hughes dedicates Remains of Elmet with the subtitle “Poems in Memory of Edith Farrar”, which was his mother’s maiden name. The untitled prefatory poem (“The Dark River”) to Remains of Elmet, through Edith’s living brother, emphasises the importance of her resurrection in the personal poetry:

Six years into her posthumous life  
My uncle raises my Mother’s face  
And says Yes he would love a cup of tea.

Her memory still intact, still good  
Under his baldness.  
Her hands a little plumper, trembling more  
Chatter his cup in its saucer.

Keeping their last eighty years alive and attached to me,  
Keeping their strange depths alive and attached to me.

The capitalisation of “Mother” and the repetition of “alive and attached to me” are affirmations of the ongoing significance of the poet’s mother in his personal poetry. In fact, the poem (“The Dark River”) proceeds to link Edith, through Walter’s presence, to the Calder valley and to the long life there of a family the poet attaches himself to when dedicating the collection to his mother as a Farrar. Emphasis on “inheritance”, “treasures” and “the prize of a lifetime” indicate the precious nature of the renewal of the bond of mother and child. Throughout Remains of Elmet, the mother motif comments indirectly on aspects of Edith’s life represented in later personal poems outside the collection. “Where The Mothers” (RE, p.10) emphasises the wild freedom and joy of the moors that



is later directly related to the poet's mother in "Edith" and in "Anniversary". "Long Screams" (RE, p.26) makes a curlew's cry symbolic of mourning the many dead; finally, the "whole scene, like a mother,/ Lifts a cry/ Right to the source of it all". The later poem entitled "Source" places Edith in exactly this role of mourning.

Renewal is an important theme in Remains of Elmet, as is obvious in its prefatory poem. Regenerative and sustaining forces and perspectives battle against degenerative and dissociative forces and perspectives, both in that keynote poem and throughout the collection. This is the case, too, with "Heptonstall Cemetery" (RE, p.122), in which Edith and other deceased family members undergo a metamorphosis in death. In "Heptonstall Cemetery", Edith and Sylvia are again linked, now in the context of the Farrar family:

And Thomas and Walter and Edith  
Are living feathers

Esther and Sylvia  
Living feathers ...

The flight motif is the vehicle for the transfiguration of death in this personal setting. Family members are universalised in the attaching of memories of their life to the wider world. This occurs in the potent, central setting of the churchyard cemetery at Heptonstall, ending the poem with an epiphany of resurrection:

Where all the horizons lift wings  
A family of dark swans

And go beating low through storm-silver  
Toward the Atlantic.

"Heptonstall Cemetery" is followed by the final poem in the collection, "The Angel" (RE, pp.124-5). Its title, rather than the former "Ballad from a Fairy Tale" (WO, pp.166-7), of which it is a rewording, directly emphasises the flight motif that is regenerative and liberating in nature. There are significant differences between the two poems, particularly since the Wodwo version was linked to a descent into destruction and loss, while "The Angel" climbs out of and beyond that constraining framework. The interim mythical collections, between Wodwo and Remains of Elmet, seem to have

helped bring about such change, for this was their endeavour, to move from destruction and pain towards release and self-knowledge. “The Angel” contains more specific references to the Calder in its more precise rendering of what is now acknowledged as a visionary dream, and not a “fairy tale” as in the earlier version of the poem. Unlike “Ballad from a Fairy Tale”, where “the valley was dark”, as sunken in darkness and death as the speaker of the poem, “The Angel” ends with the decisive burial of the dead by the speaker, whose feet are on the earth:

When next I stood where I stood in my dream  
Those words of my mother,  
Joined with earth and engraved in rock,  
Were under my feet..

“Edith”, an uncollected poem as I write, was published in 1985, between Hughes’ River (1983) and Flowers and Insects (1986) collections, which joyfully entered into the femaleness of the world of nature.<sup>157</sup> Something of the exultant, wild spirit attributed to nature in those collections is carried over into this poem about Edith. Its Brontëesque setting renders the mother as a Catherine delighting in the windswept and liberating moorlands, her wild spirit at one with the landscape she adores. “Sitting under the soot and brick, in Mexborough”, Edith dreams of the moors of her home valley. Her fantasy of riding the moors, “a storm figment”, “in romantic black”, sustains her until she is able to return to the Calder. “Her girlish, hungry passion” for the moors was renewed:

Close to seventy, walking and walking the moors,  
Herself the uncontrollable weather,  
Hurling her delight anywhere -  
All she needed was a twist of heather.

The “twist of heather” of this last line links Hughes’ poem strongly with another Brontë reference made in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë. When her sister Emily is dying Charlotte combs the moorland in a luckless attempt to find just one spray of

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<sup>157</sup> T.Hughes, “Edith”, The Listener, 5 September 1985, Vol.114, p.26.

heather to cheer her sister.<sup>158</sup> At the close of “Edith”, in imagery very similar to that found in “Heptonstall Cemetery”, the mother is, metaphorically, “riding and riding” over the moors:

Away over the last edge - and beyond  
 Into great breakers of light  
 Where earth itself reared up and cried out.

The personal nature of this poem, obvious from the use of the Christian name of the poet’s mother as its title, renews contact with the mother by further freeing her from the terminus of death. She is imagined as a girl, remembered as a mother in Mexborough and back in her home valley nearing death, but, overall, she is freed in the liberating imagery of the poem. She is “herself the uncontrollable weather”, a figment of the Brontë legend.

In *Wolfwatching* (1989), two poems, in particular, raise memories of Edith. These are “Source” (*Wg*, pp.17-8) and “Leaf Mould” (*Wg*, pp.33-4), both of which strongly link mother and son. The spirituality of the mother, her grieving spirit and her giving spirit, are significant emphases in both poems. It is through these poems that the mother becomes an archetypal presence in Hughes’ personal poetry. The title of “Source” recapitulates the questing for the source motif that is important in Hughes’ poetry from the time of *Crow* (1970). The eponymous final poem of *Wodwo* (*Wo*, p.183), which begins with “What am I?” and ends with “I’ll go on looking”, is an earlier clue to the significance of the quest for the source. This motif is ubiquitous from 1970 onwards, so illustration of its occurrence will be necessarily brief and specific. In the second section of “Two Eskimo Songs” (*C*, pp.92-3), “How Water Began To Play”, the source is water, which “lay at the bottom of things”. However, the next and final poem in *Crow*, “Littleblood” (*C*, p.94), identifies the source in anthropomorphic terms, as a mysterious creature, the essence of which appears to be a drop of blood: “Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood”. “Who Are You?” (*G*, p.177), from *Gaudete*, asks the question about the Goddess, as the source, which has no answer, as “Faces Lift Out of the Earth” (*G*, p.195) indicates:

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<sup>158</sup> E.C.Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, J.M.Dent & Sons, London, 1908 (1857), Chapter 16, pp.256-7.

And these are the ones  
 Who are trying to tell  
 Your name.

From age to age  
 Nothing bequeathed  
 But a gagged yell ...

“The Risen” (CB, p.60) continues the quest for the source, rendering it as re-creation of the self, but finally commenting on the hybrid being-soul, “But when will he land/ On a man’s wrist”, and finishing Cave Birds with the epigrammatic “Finale”:

At the end of the ritual  
  
 up comes a goblin

The hybrid reintegration of the self in “The Risen” is cosmic and non-human; hence, the “goblin” of “Finale” is recognition of the elusiveness of the source. “Does It Matter How Long” (O, #48), from Orts, ends with the following lines:

Like an explorer  
 I search the highest peaks for the source  
 At the centre of the earth.

And there, at the highest of the high,  
 I shall have to find it.

“Source” (Wg, pp17-8) satisfies the personal dimension of the quest. The title of the poem names the mother as the giver, the source, of life. The mother’s tears, despite her being “so happy/ Your sisters-in-law lived embittered/ With envy of you”, are mysterious, yet pure, like “the pure/ Water of the source” (O, #38). Imaging of “wrinkles/ Over your face as honours” and the autobiographical details of family that are strong elements of the poem build a reverent, deeply personal tone. A recollection of “thunder, stilled afternoons/ Before my schooldays” emphasises the closeness of mother and child, as the mother wept quietly over her sewing and the child looked on. Her tears are associated with loss and mourning, and with release and repairing. The ending of

“Source” connects the mother’s tears to a deep spirituality that embraces and reshapes life:

... Like a singing.

With no other care, only to weep  
Wholly, deeply, as if at last  
You had arrived, as if now at last  
You could rest, could relax utterly  
Into a luxury of pure weeping -  
Could dissolve yourself, me, everything  
Into this relief of your strange music.

The following lines from “Leaf Mould” (Wg, pp.33-4) represent the bonding of mother and son, which is a central relationship in this poem, “Source” and in the recent “Anniversary” (NSP, pp.291-3):

Giving you the kiss of life  
She hung round your neck her whole valley  
Like David’s harp.  
Now, whenever you touch it, God listens  
Only for her voice.

Religious allusion emphasises the sacred nature of the mother-son relationship, particularly because the initial simile moves forward with the extra force and certainty of a metaphor at the close of the above passage. The gift of life and a rich and personal Calder inheritance are the legacy left by the mother to her son, who writes poems that “touch” her memory and, hence, sing “Like David’s harp”. Tactile imagery is symbolic of the strength and intimacy of the mother-son relationship, which continues beyond the grave. “Leaf Mould”, as a title, emphasises this aspect of vivid remembrance, and repeated tactile images connect the abstraction of remembrance with a special setting in the valley that the mother loved and shared with the child:

... Hardcastle Crag, that echoey museum,  
Where she dug leaf mould for her handfuls of garden  
And taught you to walk ...

Leaf mould, symbol of remembrance of the mother, is “Blood-warm”. In this personal poem, the emphasis is on *feeling* the mother’s presence. The “you” form of identifying the speaker is also more personal than its second person pronominal form indicates, for it is used with the intimacy of “tu”, its French equivalent. This is evident throughout “Leaf Mould”, with its italicised text, mostly the remembered words of the mother, using “you” to address the young son. The “you” form of address is a shared form of intimacy, because at the close of the poem the italicised text refers to both mother and son and joins them in a memory:

*Feel again*

The clogs twanging your footsoles, on the street’s  
steepness,

*As you escaped.*

The speaker remembers the mother with love, as the woman who carried him in her womb as a “spectre-double” of the adult who now sings of her and himself:

And oak, birch,

Holly, sycamore, pine.

The lightest air-stir

Released their love-whispers when she walked

The needles weeping, singing, dedicating

Your spectre-double, still in her womb,

To this temple of her *Missa Solemnis*.

Hardcastle Crag is reshaped in “Leaf Mould” from its rendering in the earlier “Hardcastle Crag” (RE, p.13). That earlier poem included memories of “leaf-loam silence”, “the silence of clogs over cobbles”, “air-stir releases”, all in the “deep gorge under palaeolithic moorland”, in “a grave of echoes”. However, these echoes were presented in “Hardcastle Crag” as historical impulses, not as *personal* impulses being *felt* in “Leaf Mould” as the speaker walks in the same setting. In this more recent poem, the museum is a living thing, not “a grave of echoes”. The “twanging” of clogs and the “Fibres crumbled alive” are vivid sensations connecting the speaker of “Leaf Mould” to a personally realised past.

“Anniversary” (NSP, pp.291-3) again focuses on the central and significant relationship of mother and son. There is no point in ignoring the autobiography that is an obvious part of this poem. The first words of “Anniversary” are “My mother”, and the date of Edith’s death, “May Thirteenth”, is then given. Mention of a “torn-off diary page” where Gerald, Hughes’ brother, “jotted/ `Ma died today”, and mention of Edith’s sister, Miriam, follows - all these details from real life occur in the first four lines of the poem. Pronominal emphasis is on the first person form of address.

Echoes of “Leaf Mould” and “Two” are present in the imagery of the senses, particularly in this Hardcastle Crag-bird metaphor for the speaker’s connection to the mother:

Her voice comes, piping,

Down a deep gorge of woodland echoes.

Echoes of the Brontëesque content of “Edith” are in amongst the mother’s conversation with her sister Miriam, as she recounts examples of a mother’s selfless devotion to a child:

And that is the horse on which I galloped  
Through the brick wall  
And out over the heather simply  
To bring him a new pen. This is the pen  
I laid on the altar.

The sisters are angels in “feathers of flame”. “My mother”, writes Hughes, is “darker with her life, / Her Red Indian hair, her skin/ So strangely olive and other-worldly”. This is not the death-centred poetry of pain that characterises the Epilogue of *Gaudete*, which is illustrated by the memory of Edith in “I Know Well” (G, pp.190-1).

Finally, the same lyrical quality of speaking voice is present in “Black Hair”, another uncollected poem.<sup>159</sup> Reshaping of the past occurs in the first lines of this poem:

I remember her hair as black  
Though I know it was brown.

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<sup>159</sup> T.Hughes, “Black Hair”, *The Guardian*, 10 October 1996, p.13.

There is, as with “Memory” and other poems based on the poet’s mother, a sense of achievement in the creative transfiguration of the intimate subject matter of the past. Memory, remembrance, is a significant focus in “Black Hair”, for it is the enabler of the poetic process:

That’s the memory. I must have been sitting  
On the kitchen table, looking down  
Where she sat on the chest, at the fireside...

So a big thought in my third or fourth year  
Photographed her  
Combing black, North-American hair  
That has outlasted her...

The confessional elements of overt time-frames, familial intimacy and personal response are clearly present in “Black Hair”, as is the case with “Source”. At the conclusion of “Black Hair”, movement from infant memories of the mother to memories of her deathbed days stresses the long history of personal intimacy. Unlike “I Know Well”, the conclusion of “Black Hair” is characterised by a gentler reminiscence, a tenderness that dwells not on the mother’s agony, but on the fineness of her hair, the fineness of her being:

So fine, I could hardly feel it  
As I stroked it through those days she lay  
Vanishing under my fingers.

Movement from poems linking the mother to the history of the Calder valley, to its mills-and-chapels rigour and to its First World War agony, to confessional poems linking her to the poet himself has a strong momentum in Hughes’ writing. Universalising is the poetic effect that occurs through concentration on the most fundamental of relationships, that of mother and son. The strong influence of the mother empowers and transforms the female in Hughes’ poetry. Spirituality, selflessness and strength establish the sustaining and nurturing presence of the mother in the poems. This has a significant effect on the poetry as a whole, bringing to it a human dimension that Hughes has not always felt able or willing to disclose. Also, establishment of the mother-



son archetypal relationship influences how other females - Sylvia and Assia - are represented in the poetry.

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While Sylvia Plath lived, Ted Hughes dedicated his first two collections of poems, The Hawk in the Rain and Lupercal, “To Sylvia”. There are no overt poems about Sylvia in these collections, but there are poems that laud and celebrate a female different from others, strong enough to match the power of the male who wants her alone as his mate. This is an unwaveringly male perspective, but a compliment is paid in “Billet Doux” (THR, p.24) to the one woman “Who sees straight through bogeyman ... / To the fiery star coming for the eye itself”. “Bawdry Embraced”, first published in 1956,<sup>160</sup> and later collected in Recklings as its final poem (Re, pp.42-4), was the first poem Hughes published beyond Cambridge.<sup>161</sup> It was dedicated to Sylvia, just as her “Ode for Ted” (CP, pp.29-30) was dedicated to her partner in the early months of marriage (LH, p.259). “Bawdry Embraced” might be considered a sexist text, but so might Plath’s “Ode for Ted”. It is worth considering that these poems are youthfully exuberant and effusive, overstated and coloured with the shining unselfconsciousness of love. It was also the contention of both poets that the drive linking man and woman transcended egoism, that drive being linked to forces in the natural universe. Much later, in Birthday Letters, echoes of the imagery and theme of “Bawdry Embraced” are in “St. Botolph’s” (BL, pp.14-15): “That day the solar system married us”.

“Bawdry Embraced” is similar to the poems from The Hawk in the Rain featuring a strong, unique female. “It is enough/ That she is and I am”, the speaker declares. There is nothing of an autobiographical nature in this poem, nor are there any other poems about Sylvia until after her death. In the aftermath of that event, many poems of angst are evident. The poems that link Edith and Sylvia, already discussed, are complemented by many personal poems that focus on Sylvia alone. These begin to appear more than a decade after her death, lending support to the idea that Hughes had to bury the event psychologically before attempting to publish some of his more personal poems about Sylvia. Birthday Letters supports the idea that there was a greater psychological impediment to publishing poems about Sylvia than to writing them.

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<sup>160</sup> T.Hughes, “Bawdry Embraced”, Poetry, August 1956, pp.295-7.

<sup>161</sup> K.Sagar & S.Tabor, Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980, op.cit., entry C10, p.148.

Of course, there are earlier references to Sylvia's death in Hughes' work. One that comes to mind is his short story in Wodwo, "Snow" (Wo, pp.71-81). In this story there is great emphasis on the utter isolation of the sole character, whose "aircraft was forced down by an unusual storm". "Unconscious of everything save the need to get away from the disaster", the narrator believes that he has been walking through a "blizzard for five months" and that he has covered a distance "something equal to the breadth of the Atlantic, between Southampton and New York". These symbolic autobiographical references to the tragedy of Sylvia's suicide are deepened by the choice of physical setting of the story, which is composed of twilight and unremitting snow, to connote a psychological state. Battling insanity is a consistent concern throughout "Snow". Then there is its quite explicit personal reference:

There's a lot I haven't dreamed yet. From my twenty-third and twenty-fourth years I have almost nothing - a few insignificant episodes. Nothing at all after my twenty-sixth birthday. The rest, though, is about complete, which suggests that any time now I ought to be getting my twenty-third and twenty-fourth years in full and, more important, my twenty-seventh year, or as much of it as there is, along with the accurate account of my disaster ...  
(Wo, p.77)

Hughes and Plath were married when he was twenty-five and she was twenty-three, so the reference in "Snow" to there being no memories after a twenty-sixth birthday has an obvious autobiographical connection. So, too, does the narrator's "O jewel of the lotus" prayer, for engraved in rock on Sylvia Plath's grave is "Even amidst fierce flames, the golden lotus can be planted".<sup>162</sup>

There are other signs in Hughes' post-1963 writing, around the time of Crow (1970), of the effect on him of Sylvia's death. However, they do not amount to personal poems about Sylvia. One such poem is "Song of Woe", first published in a periodical with other Crow poems, but never collected in any of the Crow volumes or related

volumes such as Crow Wakes.<sup>163</sup> The speaker is consumed with grief. “His shirt over the chair at night/ Was like a curtain over the finale/ Of all things”. Attempting to rid himself of the “muddy woe”, he concentrates on flinging all attachments into the void:

He flung away the field and its grass,  
The whole grievous funeral,  
His clothes and their house,  
And sat naked on the naked earth ...

As I mentioned, it was more than a decade after the suicide that poems about Sylvia started to appear in Hughes’ output. The Epilogue of Gaudete is the starting point. “I Heard the Screech, Sudden” (G, p.181) signals the personal nature of some poems that follow it:

My legs, though, were already galloping to help  
The woman who wore a split lopsided mask -

That was how the comedy began.

Before I got to her - it was ended  
And the curtain came down.

But now, suddenly,  
Again the curtain goes up.

This is no longer the play.  
The mask is off.

The transition from the drama of the double, from Lumb and the changeling, begins in this passage. Although it is Lumb’s verse diary, the Epilogue exposes the personal losses and grief from the life of the poet. “The mask is off” signals an exposition of pain, and,

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<sup>162</sup> I.Walker, “Secret Life of the Poet Laureate”, The Australian, 10 June 1987, p.12.

<sup>163</sup> T.Hughes, “Song of Woe”, Critical Quarterly, Summer 1970, pp.107-10; collected in Cambridge Book Of English Verse, 1939 - 1975, A.Bold (ed.), U.P., Cambridge, 1976, pp.145-6.

simultaneously, an imaginative and spiritual quest for renewal. The phrase “split lopsided mask” is, similarly, revealing. It certainly suggests the idea of a social or literary mask which a person wears most of the time, but which can split or slip to reveal the real person underneath. While this could be regarded as a rather commonplace view in itself, the image is striking enough to effect a defamiliarisation, and to bolster arguments about the private self that are made in this thesis.

“Once I Said Lightly” (G, pp.181-2) does not address the Goddess, nor does it consist of Lumb speaking in character to Felicity or any other female from the verse narrative. It is plainly about Sylvia:

Once I said lightly  
Even if the worst happens  
We can't fall off the earth.

And again I said  
No matter what fire cooks us  
We shall still be in the pan together.

And words twice as stupid.  
Truly hell heard me.  
She fell into the earth  
And I was devoured.

The conversational idiom of this verse, together with its pronominal constancy of “I” and “we”, suggests a close, shared domestic arrangement. Such a relationship is not accorded to Lumb in the course of Gaudete. Coming as it does after the invocatory fervour of poems that are dedicated to the Goddess, “Once I Said Lightly” is in striking contrast to the formally patterned and phrased poems that precede it. Its last verse identifies the personal trauma that “devoured” the speaker after “She fell into the earth”.

“Waving Goodbye, From Your Banked Hospital Bed” (G, pp.185-6) retrospectively mixes memories of Sylvia’s hospitalisations with the impact of her suicide on the living:

It happened

You knocked the world off, like a flower-vase.

It was the third time. And it smashed.

I turned

I bowed

In the morgue I kissed

Your temple's refrigerated glazed

As rained-on graveyard marble, my

Lips queasy, heart non-existent.

Overtones of the carelessness, dismissiveness and imperiousness of the action taken by the subject of "Waving Goodbye, From Your Banked Hospital Bed" form a loose analogy of a haughty queen holding private court one moment, then summarily curtailing it the next. This conveys the resentment felt by the living, particularly dramatised by "I turned/ I bowed", which targets the grimly compliant role the living must endure in the wake of suicide. Courtliness of expression clashes with the brute reality of the morgue, hinging on the word "bowed", which in the shift to the morgue setting now means "stooped". Association of the temple of the corpse with the headstone marking her grave, coupled with the antithesis of "kiss" and "lips queasy", emphasises the gulf between the living and the dead. The numb suffering of the survivor is apparent in the pithy "heart non-existent".

As is the case with personal poems about Edith, one poem about Sylvia is contained in *Cave Birds*. "She Seemed So Considerate" (CB, p.14) is a veiled reference to the breakdown of marriage followed by Sylvia's death. Its pronominal emphasis on "I" and "my" attaches itself personally to a familiar autobiographical outline. This is the case with "everything had become so hideous", "My solemn friends sat twice as solemn", and "I bit the back of my hand/ And sniffed mortification". The dire pun on "mortification" heralds the suicide:

Then the bird came.

She said: your world has died.

Similarly veiled are two poems in Orts. The first, “He Did All That He Thought He Wanted to Do” (O, #44), proceeds from its titular first line to an autobiographical sketch that includes Sylvia:

... He had what people called luck  
And opportunities  
Which he took.

He had what was called love  
So much such a weight of it  
The axle broke  
On the cart of everything that was not love.

This part of the poem is very similar to the content of a much later poem called, initially, “Laws of the Game”, but re-titled “The Other” (NSP, pp.305-6) in New Selected Poems. The next poem in Orts, “Why Do You Take Such Nervy Shape to Become” (O, #45), uses the metaphor of a violin being played by many “fingers and smiles” to decry the engineering of Sylvia’s posthumous image as a “victim, so violin-like”. “The Inquisitors have caught you”, writes Hughes, for Sylvia is at the mercy of the “pathographers”:

You cannot speak their tongue.  
You can only cry wordlessly

Crying sideways  
From the eyes of men, to the shut doors

Of the dust-grains. Shaking the dust

Of the wrong world.

“You Hated Spain” (SP, pp.135-6) is the first poem based openly on Sylvia. Its setting is Spain and the time of their honeymoon, as indicated by Hughes’ note on 1956 (CP, p.275) and by his positioning of the poem in the chronological context of the honeymoon in Birthday Letters. The opening of “You Hated Spain” is assertive. Sure statements begin the poem, the first being “Spain frightened you”. “Your schooling had

somehow neglected Spain”, and the “welding light/ Made your blood shrivel” continue this authoritative tone. The dramatic shift to a metaphorical Spain enlists Bosch and Goya to open a psychological dimension and interpretation of an internal, underworld dilemma, a “juju land” beneath the skin. A psychologically rendered Spain is “a dust-red cadaver/ You dared not wake with”. “Spain was what you tried to wake up from/ And could not”. Ultimately, in a tableau of “the empty wharf at Alicante” and Sylvia “in moonlight”, the poem is charged with a wistfulness that undercuts its consistent depiction of real and metaphorical violence and death. Reminiscence tempers the assertiveness of the speaker, and an attitudinal shift, from “You did not know the language, your soul was empty/ Of the signs” to a compassionate, spiritual interpretation of suicide now manifests itself. The past tense phrasing of the poem is shaken off at this point:

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.

The pregnant “I see you” discloses an intimate immediacy. Alliteration now emulates the acute nature of reminiscence. “You Hated Spain” leaves its plosives behind, epitomised by the “b” and “p” plosives of “blowfly belly/ Of the toppled picador punctured”, and attains a lyricism which is a softened personal voice. Hughes now makes a classical tribute to Plath’s memory, as the simile “like a soul waiting for the ferry” indicates. The dismissive nature of earlier comment, evident in “a bobby-sox American” and “your panic/ Clutched back towards college America”, is replaced by an empathetic voice. The poem is retrospective, but its conclusion stirs a strange mixture of prophecy, fate, compassion and reminiscence. The vulnerability of Sylvia, living in “the happy world” of honeymoon, youth and potential is now the focus of “You Hated Spain”. This vulnerability, and the essential mystery of fate, banishes the discursive character of the first part of the poem, which was a form of *altercatio* between the speaker and his subject.



Plath “pathographies” are available, all making extravagant claims that suggest the omniscience of their authors.<sup>164</sup> Recently, and obviously, some new poems about Sylvia seem bent on taking to task the *paparazzi* and pathographers alike. This is true of “Black Coat” (NSP, pp.298-9), “Being Christlike” (NSP, p.300), “The God” (NSP, pp.300-3) and “The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother” (NSP, pp.304-5), which form a powerful and purposeful sequence in Hughes’ latest selection of his poems. They are, to an extent, a backlash against those writers who have profited from the weight of authentic personal tragedy that Hughes has carried. Clearly, they separate the engineered posthumous image of Sylvia Plath from the poet, woman, wife, and mother of his two children, who Hughes has lived with, one way or another, since nineteen fifty-six. However, in the light of the last poems in New Selected Poems, it is clear that he is now willing to write and publish openly the poems he has written over the years about his relationship with Sylvia Plath. The eighty-eight poems of Birthday Letters, which includes “You Hated Spain” and the Sylvia poems of New Selected Poems, constitute Hughes’ answer to the “pathographers” and give his account of the relationship.

In one sense, poems such as these represent an outward projection of the poems already discussed about Sylvia that antedate them. Hughes has conducted a poetic dialogue with Plath’s writings, tangible reminders of the woman he loved, for many years now. He has also been the editor of her letters, journals, short stories, manuscripts and poems. I repudiate the cynical view that Hughes has somehow mismanaged Plath’s literary estate. But for Hughes, the writings of Plath would be quite inaccessible. His close association with the body of her work is, as this chapter will show, an influence on his own writing. Most obviously, some of his poems address Plath’s own poems, and, on occasion, their titles are identical. Ekbert Faas writes of a shared mythology between the two writers,<sup>165</sup> which is an interesting aspect of the work of two married poets. The dialogic intercourse of some of their poems is more interesting. The table beginning on this page outlines this poetic dialogue. It shows, through titles alone, the correspondence

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<sup>164</sup> Some of these appear in the Bibliography; for example, entries under Butscher, Hayman, Stevenson.

<sup>165</sup> E.Faas, “Chapters of a shared mythology: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes”, The Achievement of Ted Hughes, K.Sagar (ed.), Manchester U.P., Manchester, 1983, p.107ff.

of settings and events derived from the shared life of the poets. The dates in parentheses after entries for Hughes in the table indicate the year in which poems were first published. Dates in parentheses after entries for Plath indicate the dates that Hughes assigned, based on the “full record of the dates she sent her poems off to magazines, and she usually did this as soon as possible after writing them” (CP, p.17). *Birthday Letters* (1998) confirms the significance of Hughes’ dialogue poems, to the extent that I cannot possibly treat all of the new instances of this type of personal poem: my original table is extended by a selection of these newly published poems.

<b>PLATH</b>	<b>HUGHES</b>
“The Goring” etc. (1956)	“You Hated Spain” (1979)
“Hardcastle Craggs” (1957)	“Hardcastle Craggs” (1979)
“The Lady and the Earthenware Head” (1957)	“The Earthenware Head” (1980)
“Two Views of Withens” (1957)	“Two Photographs of Top Withens” (1994)
“Man in Black” (1959)	“Black Coat” (1994)
“Wuthering Heights” (1961)	“Wuthering Heights” (1998)
“The Rabbit Catcher” (1962)	“The Rabbit Catcher” (1998)
“Apprehensions” (1962)	“Apprehensions” (1998)
“Words heard, by accident, over the phone” (1962)	“Do not Pick up the Telephone” (1980)

“Burning the Letters” (1962)

“The God” (1994)

“The Bee Meeting” etc. (1962)

“The Bee God” (1998)

“Daddy” (1962)

“A Picture of Otto” (1998)

These dialogue poems turn away from covert poems about Sylvia Plath in Hughes’ mythopoeic collections, for he published her Collected Poems in 1981, and the date “August 1980” is affixed to the end of the work’s Introduction by Hughes. Assembling and editing Plath’s Collected Poems was, quite conceivably, concurrent with Hughes’ publication of Gaudete and Cave Birds, and with the rush of collections he released at the end of the nineteen-seventies. He was, as well, engaged in co-editorship of Plath’s journals. The process of readying Collected Works for publication seems to have played a role in encouraging the spate of Hughes’ dialogue poems. Assembling Plath’s poems and providing personal notes on some of them produced poems that focused on their life together. But the pattern of dates given above suggests that, while he felt able to release a small number of poems at the time, he may still have felt restrained from publishing any which engaged with those that Plath wrote in the last, tragic months when she and Hughes were living apart: thus it is possible that some of the poems dated 1994 and 1998 in the list given above do, in fact, belong to the nineteen-seventies, though I can find no instance of their publication at that time. The flyleaf comment of Birthday Letters does not offer any precise information, but states that Hughes’ poems about Sylvia “were written over a period of more than twenty-five years, the first a few days after her suicide in 1963”. This endorses my view that there has been a psychological impediment to Hughes’ publishing of overtly personal poems he has written about Sylvia.

The dialogue poems provide an open channel of communication, which poems about Sylvia in Crow, Gaudete and Cave Birds could not. “You Hated Spain” (SP, pp.135-6) responds to poems written by Plath in 1956, including “The Goring”, “Fiesta Melons”, “Alicante Lullaby”, “The Beggars” and “Spider”. In contrast to the opacity that clouds the subject of Sylvia in mythopoeic collections, “You Hated Spain” is an attempt to understand what prompted Sylvia Plath to die by her own hand. “Do not Pick up the

Telephone” (SP, pp.154-5) and “The Earthenware Head” revisit a shared past, the latter poem actually specifying the autobiography behind Plath’s “The Lady and the Earthenware Head”. Hughes’ “Hardcastle Craggs” (RE, p.13) is a subtly different dialogue poem. Landscape as a metaphor for the self is an interesting vantage point from which to compare the differing versions of “Hardcastle Craggs” written by Plath and Hughes.

Plath’s “Hardcastle Craggs” (CP, pp.62-3) opposes the “small heat” of the self of the persona to “the humped indifferent iron” of the physical world, which seems intent on “paring her person down/ To a pinch of flame”. The tone of this poem differs considerably from “The Snowman on the Moor” (CP, pp.58-9), but her theme pertaining to “human limits versus grand marmoreal vast power of cold, snow, stars and blackness” (JSP, p.149) is common to these poems based on the same Calder landscape. In Plath’s “Hardcastle Craggs”, the self is small, vulnerable and threatened by the greater world outside ‘the beat of her heart’. On the other hand, Hughes’ “Hardcastle Craggs” (RE, p.13) connects the self of the persona with the complexity of the greater world, but only as an observer-narrator, not as a participant in the scene. The landscape is both “a grave of echoes” of the Calder’s human past and “a hide-out of elation”. The “broken water at the bottom of a precipice” symbolises the past and its passing, but the legacy of the work ethic and the First World War suffuses the natural setting, where “the air-stir releases/ The love-murmurs of a generation of slaves/ Whose bones melted in Asia Minor” – a gesture towards the mill-workers killed at the Dardanelles. In Hughes’ “Hardcastle Craggs”, a disengaged self ranges the greater world to link historical and natural impulses.

The differences between the two poems are interesting. In Plath’s poem there is a marked personal dimension. This is missing in Hughes’ poem, partly because of its wider contextual reference to destructive and restorative forces, but mainly because it lacks a human character walking about in the setting, feeling and communicating as the speaker of Plath’s “Hardcastle Craggs” does. The downward movement of Plath’s speaker, a descent into “the fissured valley” of Hardcastle Craggs, mirrors the apprehension that overtakes the speaker regarding the “antique world” “paring down” “the paltry gift of her bulk”. This is why “She turned back” is a logical last line. However, in Hughes’ “Hardcastle Craggs” liberation from a painful past, present in the upward image “Far above, mown fields escape like wings”, is rejected, and a descent into a realm where

“happiness is now broken water at the bottom of a precipice” is elected. The confrontation of universal forces is responsible for this descent to “a grave of echoes”.

Hughes’ poem “The Earthenware Head” (NSP, pp.295-7) addresses Plath’s “The Lady and the Earthenware Head” (CP, pp.69-70) by direct reference:

You ransacked Thesaurus in your poem about it,  
Veiling its mirror, rhyming yourself into safety  
From its orphaned fate.

“The Earthenware Head” was first published in 1980.<sup>166</sup> “You did not like it, / I did not like it”, Hughes writes in his poem. The head seems to be “magnetised” by “unease” for “a perverse rite”. Recollection of carrying it “in your [Sylvia’s] red bucket bag” and placing it in a willow on the riverside near Grantchester revisits a shared past. Wondering what became of the terracotta head then feeds into the symbolic and psychological meaning of this personal episode, which is the nature of the concluding section of the poem:

Surely the river got it. Surely  
The river is its chapel. And keeps it. 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, saluted  
Only in summer briefly by the slender  
Punt-loads of shadows flitting towards their honey  
And the stopped clock.

Plath’s imagery, of mirrors, father-sea god-muse and bees, underscores the summer river scene and “the head’s death”. The poem’s elegiac tone is represented by the tributary nature of “the stained mournful flow” of both the river and time passing. Of course, in paralleling Plath’s use of the double in her writing, which is a feature of Hughes’ own

writing, the symbolic, psychologically interpreted death of Sylvia is what truly ends the poem.

Plath's attitude to her poem, "The Lady and the Earthenware Head", is set down in her journals:

"The Earthenware Head" is out: once, in England, "my best poem": too fancy, glassy, patchy and rigid – it embarrasses me now – with its ten elaborate epithets for head in 5 verses. (JSP, p.243)

Her earliest title, "The Earthenware Head", not "The Lady and the Earthenware Head", is echoed faithfully by the title of Hughes' poem. In her poem, concern about disposal of "the model head" of "sanguine clay" focuses on the concept of the double: if the head should be mistreated, then this might "waken the sly nerve up/ That knits to each original its coarse copy". The "crotched willow" selected as the place to lodge the terracotta head was preferred over the river Cam. Plath's poem voices chill and unease, as

... out of the watery aspic, laureled by fins,  
The simulacrum leered,  
Lewdly beckoning, and her courage wavered:  
She blenched, as one who drowns...

This unease, the father-and-death symbolism, is directly expressed in Hughes' poem, which ends with the memory of Plath's distress:

Evil.

That was what you called the head. Evil.

If Plath had, in the words of Hughes' poem, tried "rhyming [herself]... into safety", then his poetic dialogue does the same, with its movement into tributary elegy contrasting with past fears concerning the head.

A previously unpublished poem about Sylvia appears in Elmet (1994). "Two Photographs of Top Withens" (E, p.19) is another "dialogue poem". It makes direct reference to Plath's "Two Views of Withens" (CP, pp.71-2). One of the photographs mentioned in the title of Hughes' poem is "my snapshot", as he writes in the first line. "It

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<sup>166</sup> T.Hughes, "The Earthenware Head", London Review of Books, 21 February 1980, p.4.

was a blue day, with larks, when I aimed my camera”, he remembers towards the end of his poem. However, the other “photograph” is not physical. It is expressed as a personally apprehended memory, which extends the first static snapshot into a cinematic revisitation of a youthful and happy older world. Hughes is inside this memory with Sylvia and Walt. It is a memory that comes from 1956. “We had all the time in the world” and “you smile in the branches - still in your twenties” emphasise the intimacy of the recollection. Death is an attendant in this Brontë setting, too. The “empty horror of the moor” and “Walt would live as long as you had lived” make us conscious of the finite limits of the happiness expressed in “Two Photographs of Top Withens”. The poem ends with a more recent memory of the same setting:

But the tree -

That’s still there, unchanged beside its partner,

Where my camera held (for that moment) a ghost.

The “timeless eye” of the camera, photographing the scene, had captured the ghost of Sylvia. She seemed young and happy, with the entire world before her, but afflicted by “the empty horror of the moor”. This mirrors Hughes’ metaphorically and symbolically charged psychological setting in “You Hated Spain”. In “Two Views of Withens”, Plath contrasts responses to the conjectured house of Heathcliff:

I found bare moor,

A colorless weather,

And the house of Eros

Low-lintelled, no palace;

You, luckier,

Report white pillars, a blue sky,

The ghosts, kindly.

Hughes’ poem, by referring to the emptiness of the moors and to the supernatural aura of the same setting, conducts a dialogue with Plath’s poem. However, his poem reshapes the past by extending the frame of reference of Plath’s poem, in his inclusion of familial details and in his re-ordering of the experience raised by her poem.

“Black Coat” (NSP, pp.298-300) depicts Hughes as a victim, a situation that derives from Plath’s poem titled “Man in Black” (CP, pp.119-20), for it is a mild representation of her personally aggressive late poetry. As expressed in his poem, Hughes was merely watching the sea, finding it a type of “therapy” in the alien American setting, trying to be “Simply myself, with sharp edges”, and he had on a favourite black coat. He conjectures that Plath’s poem may have been a product of her “eye’s inbuilt double exposure”; hence, there was a “paparazzo sniper/ Nested in your brown iris”. With a future ahead of him in which an altered Hughes would be paraded in print in paraphrases of “Man in Black”, the original Hughes, unaware of his destiny, conducted his “minimal but satisfying discussion/ With the sea”. “Perhaps you had no idea either”, Hughes “says” to Plath in this “dialogue poem”, of what the future would bring. Nonetheless, he became a trophy:

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.

The image of the father sliding into Hughes is implied by the following passage from Plath’s “Daddy” (CP, pp.222-4), particularly when it makes overt reference to “Man in Black” by using that title as significant words in “Daddy”:

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.

Hughes’ “Wuthering Heights” (BL, pp.59-61) is of particular interest. It is an extended dialogue encapsulating the identical memory that is central to his “Two Photographs of top Withens”, which is linked to Plath’s “Two Views of Withens”, while his new poem identifies with her “Wuthering Heights” (CP, pp.167-8). Imagery of



moorland desolation, the failure of aspirations and death is common to the work of both poets, emphasising the hardship rather than the romance found in life as represented in Brontë's Wuthering Heights. Plath's "Wuthering Heights" is an atmospheric and symbolic landscape poem, whereas Hughes' "Wuthering Heights" uses this same framework to write personally about Sylvia, in a manner seen before in a poem such as "You Hated Spain". Hughes' figurative language reflects the personal nature of his writing about Sylvia:

And a poem unfurled from you  
Like a loose frond of hair from your nape  
To be clipped and kept in a book.

As a matter of interest, the imagery of a fern, in the "unfurled" and "frond" metaphors, recalls the opening of "Fern" (Wo, p. 28), in which a sense of remembrance operates on the natural world:

Here is the fern's frond, unfurling a gesture,  
Like a conductor whose music will now be pause  
And the one note of silence  
To which the whole earth dances gravely.

The sense of remembrance operating on the landscape in Hughes' "Wuthering Heights" is, in contrast to the faint trace of it in "Fern", pervasive. Memory of Sylvia, "brilliantly faceted" as a jewel and ebullient with "transatlantic elation", is the personal and focal point from which the poem charts and foreshadows the great loss that was to follow only scant years into the future.

"The Rabbit Catcher" (BL, pp.144-6) presents Hughes' perspective of the ramifications of an event poeticised in Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher" (CP, pp.193-4). The intensity of his dialogic re-visitation mirrors the intensity of mood present in her poem, to the extent that he refers directly and consistently to her text throughout. His poem is a fine (if despairing) recognition of the total incompatibility of two points of view towards nature. Both revere nature, but Hughes' always recognises it as a battlefield and sees it as normal and inevitable that humans should catch and eat animals. If he would like to see a fox or otter escape from the hunters, it is partly because the hunting set do not seem sympathetic to him and partly because he feels a certain identification with the hunted

animal, which in these cases is also a hunter on its own account. The concluding section of his poem also mirrors the self-inclusive apprehension of an insidious threat that concludes Plath's poem, which she expressed as a "constriction killing me also". Hughes elaborates, from his perspective, on the dread forming Plath's final line:

In those snares  
You'd caught something.  
Had you caught something in me,  
Nocturnal and unknown to me? Or was it  
Your doomed self, your tortured, crying,  
Suffocating self? Whichever,  
Those terrible, hypersensitive  
Fingers of your verse closed round it and  
Felt it alive. The poems, like smoking entrails,  
Came soft into your hands.

His openness of approach in this dialogue poem is indicated by the two questions asked, and by the reserving of judgement that follows them. "Apprehensions" (BL, p.140) is closely related to Plath's poem of the same title. Plath's "Rabbit Catcher" is followed by "Event" in Collected Poems, both dated 21 May 1962. Her "Apprehensions" (CP, pp.195-6) comes immediately after "Event" and is dated 28 May 1962. Hughes' poem conducts a dialogue with Plath's poem, and his "Apprehensions" is placed two poems before "The Rabbit Catcher" in his collection. Plath's writing (and not her sequencing, which is Hughes' work), at the personal level, charts the beginnings of her unease about the future of the marriage. Hughes' sequencing (for we are not privy to when his poems were actually written) does not emphasise this aspect, although his choice of title in "Apprehensions" is a deliberate link. His poem relates how Sylvia's "swelling terror" threatened to "burst out" and strip everything from her, including her life. In her writing, "terror's goblins" and "jujus" demanded their painful, destructive birth, which is a consistent theme in Hughes' poems about Sylvia and a consistently expressed view in his critical writings on her work.

The dialogic "telephone poems" by Plath and Hughes have been discussed in Chapter 1. "The God" (NSP, pp.300-3) is a lengthier dialogic poem. From "a religious

fanatic/ Without a god” to a disciple like “those desert ascetics/ Who fascinated you”, Sylvia and her writing moved from the atheism of writer’s block to the outpouring joy of “a trance-dancer”. Hers was the god of a demonic aureate poetry that demanded her all, and that included her life. “You bowed at your desk and you wept/ Over the story that refused to exist”, the speaker laments. Imagery of ritualistic sacrifice moves to a symbolic realm that interprets an actual event, which is set down by Plath in her poem “Burning the Letters” (*CP*, pp.204-5). The speaker, watching the flames he “had lit unwittingly”, for he is in the “spirit-house” of the poetry of fire, is helpless and devastated:

As I sat there with blistering eyes  
Watching everything go up  
In 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.

In Plath’s “Burning the Letters”, the totemic image of the fox, discussed in Chapter 1 as a symbol often linking Hughes and Plath, expresses the personal angst and literary direction of her final poetry:

My veins glow like trees.  
The dogs are tearing a fox. This is what it is like –  
A red burst and a cry  
That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop  
With the dead eye  
And the stuffed expression, but goes on  
Dyeing the air,  
Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water

What immortality is. That it is immortal.

The immortality of the fox-spirit of Plath's poem can be equated with the immortality of the Plath-Hughes relationship; indeed, in "The God", Hughes emphasises their absolute interconnectedness, which was transmitted to the public through her final poems: "Everybody knew everything". *Birthday Letters* further explores this relationship and demonstrates the significance of certain strands of imagery associated with Sylvia in Hughes' poetry. The imagery of flames and burning, for example, which is common to Hughes' mythopoeic collections and which is significant in "The God", is strongly present in *Birthday Letters*. "Suttee" (BL, pp.147-9), for instance, is composed of such imagery.

"The Bee God" (BL, pp.150-2) addresses "the bee poems" written by Plath by using her imagery and conceits. Hughes identifies what Plath in "Wintering" (CP, pp.217-19) refers to as the unlit "room I could never breathe in" as "the fixed stars/ At the bottom of the well", which is the conclusion of "The Bee God". His opening couplet clarifies this identification:

When you wanted bees I never dreamed  
It meant your Daddy had come up out of the well.

In "The Bee-keeper's Daughter" (CP, p.118) and in "The Bee Meeting" (CP, pp.211-12) the contrasting strands of imagery of blackness and whiteness are linked to the conceit of a funerary and incestuous wedding. "Father, bridegroom", "that man in black", "that long white box in the grove" and "a black veil that molds to my face" are indicative of these features of her writing. In "The Bee God" Hughes represents the meaning of these forms:

But when you put on your white regalia,  
Your veil, your gloves, I never guessed a wedding.

The "scapegoat" referred to in Plath's "Stings" (CP, pp.214-15) occasions a self-identification from Hughes. In "The Bee God" he writes, "Your Daddy's plans were Prussian" and his bee minions, "Fanatics for their God, the God of the Bees", swarmed at "the target".

"A Picture of Otto" (BL, p.193) conducts a dialogue with "Daddy" (CP, pp.222-24) and is another allusive and poignant poem. Its closing movement acknowledges

Plath's painful and elaborate modeling of a psychodrama, composed antithetically of rejection and the striving for perfect belonging:

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.

The effect of Plath's mental illness, of her suicide, of her joy for life, and of his love for her is cumulative in the powerful and moving poetic setting we find in Hughes' "A Picture of Otto".

The dialogue poems written by Hughes raise the question of their motivation. The obvious has been mentioned - they represent his perspective, rather than the one generated by the media and by biographers, of the life shared with Plath. There can be no doubting the pressure exerted on Hughes to make some response to those writers tightening a noose around his neck. A Hollywood venture has been proposed, based on a film script to be written by Paul Alexander, the author of *Rough Magic*. The particular newspaper article containing this information originated from a British tabloid and opened with the soulless sensationalism that sells papers:

Hollywood is planning to reopen the controversy surrounding Ted Hughes and the suicide of his wife, Sylvia Plath, throwing extra spice into the cauldron with new tales of rough sex and the occult.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> T.Rayment & M.Chittenden, (*Sunday Times*), *The Australian*, 17 February 1992, p.7.

The press continues to report the extreme actions of feminist fringe groups. The cross-examination of Hughes in a Boston courtroom in 1987<sup>168</sup> was the culmination of what Olwyn Hughes was already calling a “feminist beanfeast” in 1971.<sup>169</sup> Matters have worsened since 1987. Unforgiving litigants have by no means given up on punishing Hughes for the suicide of his first wife (and that of his defacto wife, compounded by her manslaughter of their child). When not suing in courts proper, they are holding their own mock-trials. One has only to pick up the occasional Sunday paper to be chilled by their sense of purpose:

An American groupette known as the Sisters of Eve has placed fiendish curses on three distinguished men of letters: Britain’s poet laureate Ted Hughes and playwrights John Osborne and Harold Pinter ... “Trials” will be conducted during this year and in 1995, says a communiqué from the sisters ... “These males will be tried for fatal damage to women who laboured with dignity in the non-electronic media. They clambered over the women and a girl child in ruthless pursuit of self-interest. They censored their life. They came to rest with a strong woman who in each case regarded them as a trophy, for whatever reason”.<sup>170</sup>

Yet above all else, Hughes’ poems about Sylvia are poems of love. There are poems, from the aftershock of her suicide, that are marked by anger, blame, guilt, and so on. These are subsidiary feelings to love, which is the motivator of Hughes’ poems about Plath and about the children from their marriage. Moving on from the dialogue poems, there are many other poems about Sylvia.

In *Earth-numb*, collected under the *Moortown* banner, “Actaeon” (*M*, p.122) personalises the fate of the mythical hunter who, for daring to look upon a goddess while she bathed, was torn apart by his own hounds. In this poem, the treatment of Sylvia is

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<sup>168</sup> *The New York Times*, 21 January 1987 through until February on a daily basis; *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 February 1987, p.136; *The Australian*, 10 June 1987, p.12.

<sup>169</sup> *The Times*, 19 November 1971, p.14.

<sup>170</sup> *The Sun-Herald*, 24 July 1994, p.20.

more indirect, moving towards myth or even allegory. However, the fate of the speaker in this poem is latent, waiting amongst the domesticity of “carpet” and “hooverdust”, because he “did not understand the great danger”. The woman, whose hair “he had paid for”, whose hands “produced food naturally”, broke out:

The jigsaw parts of her face, still loose in their box,  
 Began to spin.  
 Began to break out.  
 Openly they became zig-zagging hounds.  
 Their hunger rang on the hills.  
 Soon they were out of control.

The speaker is not aware that a crisis has come. The “blank of his face” does not register the critical level of his spouse’s problem. He “went on staring at her/ As he was torn to pieces”. “His voice went on, decorating the floor/ Even though life had ceased” – his in life-in-death, hers in death. In daring to look upon the face of the goddess muse, Sylvia incurs the fate of Actaeon. Her own suffering and striving for the sake of writing poetry become the hounds that tear her to pieces. The speaker is emotionally, not bodily, torn from the earth.

“The Honey Bee” (FI, p.39), from Flowers and Insects (1986),<sup>171</sup> is clearly an allegory. Its surface level rests on the world of nature, while its personal level is elegiac in memory of Sylvia. Before writing this poem, Hughes had commented, as editor, on Plath’s work. The substance of these comments feeds into his “The Honey Bee”, for it consists of images of mathematics and patterns. In Winter Pollen, Hughes writes about Plath’s “feminine bee-line instinct for the real priority, for what truly matters” (WP, p.179). Another article, collected in Faas, explores the deep mathematical inevitability of her finished poems:

One of her most instinctive compulsions was to make patterns - vivid, bold, symmetrical patterns ... the flight of her ideas and music.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> T. Hughes, Flowers and Insects, Some Birds and a Pair of Spiders, Faber, London, 1986.

<sup>172</sup> T. Hughes, “Sylvia Plath (1965)” in Faas, p.179.

There are links between “The Honey Bee” and Plath’s ‘bee poems’ sequence, which consists of “The Bee Meeting” (CP, pp.211-2), “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (CP, pp.212-3), “Stings” (CP, pp.214-5), “The Swarm” (CP, pp.215-7) and “Wintering” (CP, pp.217-9). One is also reminded of the emblem of family inheritance present in “a bee’s wing” in “The Manor Garden” (CP, p.125), which is itself a reference to Otto Plath’s reputation as an authority on bees. “The Honey Bee” focuses on “the rainbow waves of her flowers”, a “flying carpet of flowers”, which is “a pattern”, “Out of which she works her solutions”. She is “Brilliant as Einstein’s idea” and is “on course forever”. There are “gloves of shadow” impinging on her works, which represent the “beekeeper’s thoughts”, but she “in her brilliance” “Cannot imagine him”, though he “drinks her sums”. At the personal level of the allegory, Sylvia is the creative and joyous force innocent of the final dark payment that will be exacted. “The Honey Bee” differs markedly from “Actaeon”, which covers similar ground in alleging that her poetry entailed a dreadful final reckoning.

Hughes’ editorial comments on Plath and her work have a dialogic quality, as indicated by their correlation with the text of poems he writes about her. Another instance of this is found in his poem “Lovesick”.<sup>173</sup> Comment from Hughes on Plath’s poetry later becomes the stuff of his poem:

What she was most afraid of was that she might come to live outside her genius for love, which she also equated with courage, or “guts”, to use her word. The genius for love she certainly had, and not in the abstract. She didn’t quite know how to manage it: it possessed her. It fastened her to cups, plants, creatures, vistas, people, in a steady ecstasy. (WP, p.162)

“Lovesick” returns to a much more direct presentation of Sylvia. It opens with the words, “You barely touched the earth, You lived for love”. Association of love with the impossibility of “Dante’s God”, and with the biological, reproductive love that is “almost

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<sup>173</sup> T.Hughes, “Lovesick”, *Poetry Book Society Anthology, 1986/87*, Hutchinson, London, J.Barber (ed.), p.55.



the fire in the sun” (as it was in Hughes’ “Bawdry Embraced”, dedicated to Sylvia), and with love as “its own Aztec victim” are suggestions in the poem, which asks, “How many loves did you have?” “Lovesick” ends with the tragedy of love feeding itself to death, with all its attachments sounding “the lulling flutes/ As you fed your heart to its god”:

No matter what happened or did not happen

You burned out. You reserved nothing.

You gave and you gave

And that included yourself and that

Was how you burned out

A lonely kind of death.

The personal observations made in “Lovesick” are present in Plath’s “Kindness” (CP, pp.269-70), in its lines “The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it”, and in “Mystic” (CP, pp.268-9), which asks, “Is there no great love, only tenderness?” Hughes’ poem, “The God”, is closely related to these literary antecedents.

“Chaucer” (NSP, pp.293-4) is a very different poem from most written with Sylvia as their subject, but again direct and unambiguous in its presentation. Only its last three lines touch on the passage to her suicide:

... What followed

Found my attention too full

And had to go back into oblivion.

However, the rest of the poem celebrates “one of those bumpers of champagne/ You [Sylvia] snatched unpredictably from pure spirit”. “Chaucer” is a lively, comic and fond memory of Sylvia declaiming Chaucer to a field of cows, which form a ring about her fence-post rostrum. The “you” and “I” form of pronominal address links Plath and Hughes in an affectionate fashion in this setting. Imagery of spring and exuberance is juxtaposed with the tragedy of suicide.

“The Tender Place” (NSP, pp.297-8) relates the electro-shock therapy treatment experienced by Plath when she was a teenager to the images of pain that “Came up, years later, / Over-exposed, like an X-ray”. Her writing is described in these terms:

... And your words,

Faces reversed from the light,  
Holding in their entrails.

“Your temples, where the hair crowded in, / Were the tender place”, Hughes writes. Images of “lightnings”, “a burning child” and “dark-patched” clouds contrast with the calibration and calm of those, in “their bleached coats”, who “crashed/ The thunderbolt into your skull”. Tenderness and horror are antithetical in “The Tender Place”, creating a tension between personal and impersonal worlds, and the depiction of Plath as a victim is highlighted in this framework. This poem, too, contains the personally bonding use of the “you” and “I” pronouns, and is, perhaps, Hughes’ answer to Plath’s “The Hanging Man” (CP, pp.141-2).

“Being Christlike” (NSP, p.300) fulminates against the engineering of Plath as an icon with cultist followers:

You did not want to be Christlike. Though your Father  
Was your God and there was no other, you did not  
Want to be Christlike.

A “false god”, the ecstasy of the late poetry, took Sylvia to the grave. Imaging of Christ and use of his scriptural saying mirrors the religious nature of “Sylvia’s death” as it is represented by some interpretations of her late poetry. A distinction reiterated throughout the poem, between this one-dimensional Sylvia Plath and the multi-faceted female that she was, breaks the trick mirror that the Plath industry uses to achieve her distorted image: “But you did not/ Want to be Christlike”. This is a sentiment that is, of course, decisively expressed in Plath’s “Years” (CP, pp.255-6).

Birthday Letters (1998) includes many new poems about Sylvia, some of which have been discussed as dialogue poems. I propose to select only three additional poems from the collection to discuss at this point, for quite a number will be referred to in my final chapter. “The Owl” (BL, p.33) expresses the intensity of a recollected shared past, the times when Plath’s trans-Atlantic capacity to be astounded by the English countryside re-awakened the Wordsworthian joys of Hughes’ own boyhood:

You took it all in with an incredulous joy  
Like a mother handed her new baby  
By the midwife. Your frenzy made me giddy.

It woke up my dumb, ecstatic boyhood  
Of fifteen years before.

The domestic metaphor of motherhood is linked to the male's eagerness to make nature come alive, to make "my world perform". An incident, referred to as "my masterpiece" in the poem, whereby Hughes' summons an owl is mirrored by Plath's "Ode for Ted" (CP, pp.29-30) and "Faun" (CP, p.35).

"Daffodils" (BL, pp.127-9) begins with an intimacy that is reinforced by the exclusivity of the poet's memory:

Remember how we picked the daffodils?  
Nobody else remembers, but I remember.  
Your daughter came with her armfuls, eager and happy,  
Helping the harvest. She has forgotten  
She cannot even remember you. And we sold them.

The beautiful transience of the daffodils becomes a metaphor of shared intimacy. They return each year "to forget you stooping there" writes Hughes, who drinks deeply of "that same groundswell of memory", as the bulbs become a "nuptial flight of the rarest ephemera".

"Epiphany" (BL, pp.113-15) recounts an incident in London, when the poet had the opportunity to buy a fox cub from a passing stranger, but did not because of the practicalities of married life in cramped lodgings with a new baby. The text of the poem is charged with the totemic significance that the fox symbol has for Hughes, which climaxes at its concluding section:

If I had paid that pound and turned back  
To you, with that armful of fox –  
  
If I had grasped that whatever comes with a fox  
Is what tests a marriage and proves it a marriage –  
I would not have failed the test. Would you have failed it?  
But I failed. Our marriage had failed.

These three selected poems are examples of self-examination. In them there is an understandable attempt to displace responsibility for Sylvia's death onto electrotherapy,

her feelings about her father, the intensity of her poetic gift, anything except his affair with another woman. Needless to say, many other people in the world, both men and women, have given similar pain to their partners by similar behaviour, and many of these situations have failed to cause suicide or murder. It is true that Hughes has suffered disproportionately. For a less well-known person it would have been much easier to surmount the trauma (insofar as such an event is ever really surmounted). Poems linking the memory of Sylvia with her living children operate on a different level from those poems focussed upon Sylvia alone. "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother" (NSP, pp.304-5) makes direct reference to Hughes' children, Nicholas and Frieda, who now live in Alaska and Australia, respectively:

So leave her.

Let her be their spoils. Go wrap  
Your head in the snowy rivers  
Of the Brooks Range. Cover  
Your eyes with the writhing airs  
Off the Nullarbor Plains.

Nicholas "is a zoologist, working at a university in Alaska", according to an interview given by his sister Frieda in 1987.<sup>174</sup> She was still an art student at St.Martin's College, London, at the time.<sup>175</sup> "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother" is, hence, post-1987 and contemporary. The sense of persecution and destruction of the privacy of family life conveyed by "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother" manifests itself in media comments made by Hughes. In a letter of reply to Jacqueline Rose,<sup>176</sup> he makes the following comment on Rose's interpretation of Sylvia Plath's "sexual identity" through analysis of her poetry:

I tried to jolt Ms. Rose into imagining their ... [his children's] ... feelings, seeing her book (as I have seen it) in a friend's house ...

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<sup>174</sup> M.Field, "The Game of the Name", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June 1987, p.49.

<sup>175</sup> *ibid*, p.47.

<sup>176</sup> J.Rose, "Ted Hughes and the Plath Estate", *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 1992, p.15.

... I did not see how Ms. Rose could fail to have full and instant knowledge of the peculiar kind of suffering such a moment induces - the little dull blow of something like despair, the helpless rage and shame for their mother, the little poisoning of life, the bitter but quite useless fury against the person who shot this barbed arrow into them just to amuse herself.<sup>177</sup>

Frieda Hughes makes several remarks in the course of an interview, which also suggest the disruption of life by family tragedy:

We moved around a lot, I went to nine different schools ...

My father was by no means wealthy and that made it quite difficult. He wanted the best for my brother and me - that was his main concern.

I don't want to change my parents - even if I could, I wouldn't. When I was very young, I was afraid of having the association made. It finally dawned on me that it wouldn't last forever, people being nice to me because ...

<sup>178</sup>

"The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother" (NSP, pp.304-5) addresses the effect that the Plath industry has had on Hughes' children and himself:

They will find you every bit  
As succulent as she is. Too late  
To salvage what she was.  
I buried her where she fell.  
You played around the grave. We arranged

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<sup>177</sup> T.Hughes, "Ted Hughes and the Plath Estate", Times Literary Supplement, 24 April 1992.

<sup>178</sup> M.Field, "The Game of the Name", *op.cit.*, p.49.

Sea-shells and big veined pebbles  
Carried from Appledore  
As if we were herself.

The poem proceeds to tell of the vandalism visited on both the grave and the life of the family. Those hyenas who “bristle and vomit/ Over their symposia” are too many. The siege mentality of the poem is only partially defused by its concluding Aztec image of the mother, high on a burial platform, being taken by vultures “back into the sun”.

Hughes’ resentment and exasperation represent the human dimension of the effect of having one’s private life discussed in print that the media and other writers sometimes choose to ignore. The protection of loved ones and the maintenance of the integrity of the original family unit are strong instincts. Poems about the children are both links with their mother and symbolic of the continuance of life in the wake of disaster. Such poems are relatively few, but they are important. An early example of the sustaining, regenerative nature of poems with the children as their subject is “Full Moon and Little Frieda” (Wo, p.182), which has its subject candidly indicated in its title. Its placement in the collection is telling. Coming immediately before “Wodwo”, the final poem of the collection of the same name, “Full Moon and Little Frieda” is a poem of joy derived from communion with the natural world in a personal and harmonious setting. This sets it apart from the majority of Wodwo poems, for theirs is “a descent into destruction of some sort”, in Hughes’ words to Faas. However, at the end of the collection there is a concerted movement from the pit towards the surface. “Gnat-Psalm” (Wo, pp.179-81) begins the climb with its focus on the instinctive dance of life seen in nature, then “Full Moon and Little Frieda” with its symbolism of personal continuance and belonging follows. The “I’ll go on looking” conclusion of “Wodwo” is a half-hopefulness prompted by the preceding two poems.

“Full Moon and Little Frieda” possesses a lyricism and ambience that is unique in Wodwo. Its opening line heralds the sensory appeal of its language by an aesthetic recreation of the timelessness of a harmonious meeting of human and natural worlds:

A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and the clank of  
a bucket ...

Little Frieda is listening; she is a “spider’s web, tense for the dew’s touch”, as real and poetic elements mesh. The actuality of the “pail lifted, still and brimming” coexists with the artifice of symbolism, for the child is also the pail; her rapturous enjoyment and force of being are the contents, the “mirror/ To tempt a first star to a tremor”. Involved in this ambient, harmonious scene is the tenderness of an intimate personal core, the father-child relationship, existing as a wellspring to produce the unity of the poem. Its affirmation of a joy in being is continued throughout, with subsequent detailing of cows “looping the hedges with their warm wreaths of breath”, moving in the gathering dusk like a “dark river of blood, many boulders, / Balancing unspilled milk”. Imagery of festival and celebration of abundance, in the “warm wreaths of breath” and “unspilled milk”, is connected to a universalising “dark river of blood”.

“Moon!” you cry suddenly, “Moon! Moon!”

This released delight produces a playful and triumphant ending to “Full Moon and Little Frieda”, which might be considered a manifesto poem capturing the autobiographical artist at work:

The moon has stepped back like an artist gazing amazed at  
a work

That points at him amazed.

“In the Little Girl’s Angel Gaze”,<sup>179</sup> a broadsheet released in 1972 and featuring the artwork of Ralph Steadman, bears photographs of Frieda and Nicholas and a prone, deceased Crow. The poem is a statement endorsing the continuance of life, away from the cynicism and pessimism that is Crow’s calling card. “In the Little Girl’s Angel Gaze” is an uncollected and most significant poem, which is worth reproducing in full, particularly since it is such a rare work:

In the little girl’s angel gaze  
Crow lost every feather  
In the little boy’s wondering eyes  
Crow’s bones splintered

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<sup>179</sup> T.Hughes, “In the Little Girl’s Angel Gaze”, No.44 of a limited and signed (by Hughes and the artist Ralph Steadman) release of 50 copies, Steam Press, London, 1972: single broadsheet.

In the little girl's passion  
Crow's bowels fell in the dust  
In the little boy's rosy cheeks  
Crow became an unrecognisable rag

Crow got under the brambles, capitulated  
To nothingness eyes closed  
Let those infant feet pound through the Universe.

Any argument in favour of seeing in the Crow collection a personal and autobiographical layer is strengthened by this poem, as is an argument relating the life of Ted Hughes to its protagonist, Crow. In images of youth, passion of being and health, the function of the children as vanquishers of Crow is emphasised. The last line of the poem, particularly its emphasis on the symbolically forceful “pound”, marks the influence of Hughes’ children, when young, on this poetry to come.

In Orts, “Children, New to the Blood” (O, #35), whose “hot push” forward in life “has surpassed/ The sabretooth”, are represented as “power”, “conquest”, and as a “joy beyond good and evil”. The concluding lines suggest that this poem may well have been cut from Wodwo or Crow, for its perspective of the passion for life rests with the children, not with the father:

Soon they'll sleep where they struck.  
They'll leave behind  
A man like a licked skull  
A gravestone woman, their playthings.

In Hughes’ personal poetry, Nicholas and Frieda are vitally associated with the continuance of life, as well as with memories of Sylvia Plath, their mother. The Alaskan river settings in River (1983) illustrate this celebratory aspect of Hughes’ poetry, particularly “That Morning” (Ri, p.72). He and Nicholas, for the dedication of River names Nicholas, are on a fishing trip, and, because of his son’s presence and the miracle of the salmon and the bears, the poem is exultant:

So, we found the end of our journey.



So we stood, alive in the river of light  
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light.

A memory of Hughes' own youth, in response to the massed salmon moving steadily into the waters of the lake to spawn, parallels the effect of their numbers and movement:

England could add

Only the sooty twilight of South Yorkshire  
Hung with the drumming drift of Lancasters  
Till the world had seemed capsizing slowly.

The transfiguring of this image, upon its transference to masses of salmon drifting into the lake from the river, not only emphasises the enormity of the imminent spawning, but disperses a memory of war. It is noticeable that, while Plath recalls "the cicatrix of Poland" and the murders of Jews in "Mary's Song" (CP, p.257), Hughes does not directly recall the bombing of Dresden: perhaps "That Morning" is the closest he comes to it. Father and son, in "That Morning", are privileged to witness the spawning of "wild salmon swaying massed/ As from the hand of God". They are drawn into the scene, recognising that the shared life of all things is to be enacted. The lake, "in the cupped hands of mountains", becomes a lit place of celebratory worship. The humans are "solemn" in "the pollen light", which symbolises birth and the powerful continuance of life. There is a Wordsworthian intensity in the imagery of light and of praise of a sacred and mighty design. The "two gold bears", "who swam like men", eating only what they needed of the spent salmon, the father and son bearing witness, and the new life "made of tingling atoms" make a harmonious scene of interrelated life participating in the holiness and wonder of continuance. It is interesting that the representation of landscape and wild life in North America is so positive and pastoral, whereas in *Birthday Letters* poems such as "The 59<sup>th</sup> Bear" (BL, pp.89-95) give a very different picture.

"The Indian village where we bought our pass", Hughes writes in "Gulkana" (Ri, pp.78-84), was "comatose - on the stagnation toxins/ Of a cultural vasectomy". The trip down river, in contrast, was a journey of rediscovery for father and son. The powerful torrent of the Gulkana River was "Biblical, a deranging cry/ From the wilderness". The forces of life and death, in the vastness of a wilderness that lay unchanged from the time

of the ancient world, emphasise the comparative frailty of human relationships. This knowledge heightens the significance of the bond between a father and his son.

Poems about Sylvia and the children move away from the closed nature of “Ballad from a Fairy Tale” in *Wodwo*, in which her presence anonymously pervades the entire poem, to candid poems. The new openness of personal poems about Sylvia, which we see in *Birthday Letters* (1998), and which we also saw in *Elmet* (1994) and *New Selected Poems* (1995), parallels that of poems about Edith. However, while the mother figure is archetypal, the poet-wife figure is still travelling in that direction. Hughes’ contemporary consistency in portraying her as a sacrifice driven by a muse that was “a false god” sees the beginnings of Sylvia’s archotyping, but a poem such as “Chaucer”, or one such as “Two Photographs of Top Withens”, pulls her back to the firm shared earth. Evolution of a complex personal poetry about Sylvia is indicated by the diverse treatment of her as a significant subject in Hughes’ work. Plath realised the significance of the past to her creative process:

My house of days and masks is rich enough so that I might  
and must spend years fishing, hauling up the pearl-eyed,  
horny, scaled and sea-bearded monsters sunk long, long in  
the Sargasso of my imagination. I feel myself grip on my  
past as if it were my life: I shall make it my future business  
... Because these are the sunk relics of my lost selves that I  
must weave, wordwise, into future fabrics. (*JSP*, p.196)

Plath’s fishing analogy is later, in *Poetry in the Making* (1967), paralleled by Hughes, who, in his reshaping of the past, also undertakes the quest for “lost selves”.

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