

“**S**hibboleth” denotes a password or test-word, which can only be pronounced by insiders.¹⁸⁰ Poems with Assia Wevill as their subject, including “Shibboleth” (NSP, pp.307-8), explore this “outsider” designation. Hughes first mentioned Assia Wevill in *Crow*, which was dedicated (“In Memory of Assia and Shura”) to his defacto wife and four-year-old child who had died in a suicide-manslaughter tragedy on 23 March 1969. Assia Esther Wevill, who is notified on the death certificate as the former wife of David Wevill, author, died of barbiturate and carbon monoxide poisoning. Her daughter, Alexandra Elise Wevill, died of carbon monoxide poisoning from the domestic supply of coal gas, a victim of “manslaughter by her mother”. Both were residing in rented premises in Clapham Common, South-west London.¹⁸¹

According to available accounts,¹⁸² Assia Wevill was a complex person. She was born in Berlin to a Russian-Jewish doctor and his German wife during the rise to power of the Nazis. The family fled by way of Italy to live in Israel, finally settling in Vancouver, Canada. She married three times, leaving her last husband, the Canadian poet, David Wevill, to live with Ted Hughes. She arrived in England in 1956 with David Wevill and worked in London as a copywriter for an advertising agency. Her affair with Hughes led to the separation of Ted and Sylvia. After Sylvia’s suicide, Assia lived, for long periods, in London and at Court Green with Ted and his children. Many people blamed her for Sylvia’s death, going out of their way, both in private and in public, to make this plain to her. Assia gave birth to Shura in 1965. (Accounts which give her date of birth as 1967 appear to be mistaken, since at her death in 1969 her age was given as four).¹⁸³ Assia wanted Ted to marry her. After differences between them she left Ted and moved into her Clapham Common flat with Shura. She threatened to kill herself if Ted did not marry her. Depression and a profound sense of her Sibboleth status in England

¹⁸⁰ It is “Sibboleth” that the outsider says. See Judges 12:6: “Then said they unto him, ‘Say Shibboleth’: and he said Sibboleth, for he could not frame to pronounce it right”.

¹⁸¹ See [Appendix C](#).

¹⁸² See R.Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, Minerva, London, 1992, various pages listed in the index under “Wevill”; E.Butscher, *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness*, Searburg Press, N.Y., 1976, pp.313-18.

brought about her suicide and Shura's death. Before taking her own life, and that of her daughter, Assia is reported to have so identified with Sylvia that she thought of herself as the poet's reincarnation. It is interesting to reflect that Sylvia, as a German-American, was in British terms an outsider sharing, to a lesser extent, Assia's Sibboleth status. Many of these details are present in Hughes' poems about Assia, as discussion will illustrate.

Hughes' inhibition about publishing poems directly related to recent traumatic events has an impact on Crow, because any personal references to Assia and Shura (to whom the collection is dedicated) would be likely to be indirect and non-specific. "Crow Tries the Media" (C, p.46) is a peculiar poem, its opening line, "He wanted to sing about her", identifying Crow in an unusual fashion. In many of the poems Crow appears as a mythic or archetypal figure, not (or not obviously) a mask for the poet. It is rare, too, to find any "her" associated with Crow, with the exception of the mother *imago* in "Crow and Mama" (C, p.17), "Oedipus Crow" (C, p.43), "Revenge Fable" (C, p.70) and "Song for a Phallus" (C, pp.75-7). Later, however, the "her" of "Crow Tries the Media" is obviously a (non-Oedipal) lover: this seems to be a moment when personal experience does break through and Crow the singer is also Hughes.

Indeed, the significance of the Crow figure shifts. Crow is certainly not, consistently, a malevolent trickster. At times he is selfish and determined on his own survival, while at other times he feels guilty about what he has done to frustrate God's purpose or to make things difficult for humans. He seems to represent some sort of life force which is selfishly programmed to survive, but sometimes has doubts about itself. This shows the human influence coming into play, and elsewhere, as I have begun to demonstrate, Crow seems to resemble an ordinary human lover, though not one who is successful in finding or bringing happiness. The issue is conjectural, but I suspect that various feelings about Sylvia and Assia were coming to the fore at this time and finding expression in Hughes' poetry. In "Crow Tries the Media" there are apparent reference to Sylvia Plath in conjunction with Assia Wevill in these lines:

He wanted to sing to her soul simply

¹⁸³ See, for example, R. Hayman, The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath, op. cit., p. 190. My Appendix C refers to the death certificate, which gives the child's age as 4 years.

But still Manhattan weighed on his eyelid

He looked at the corner of her eye
His tongue moved like a poisoned estuary

He touched the smiling corner of her mouth
His voice reverberated like the slow millstone of London
Raising a filthy haze,

her shape dimmed.

If the “her” of the first line refers to Assia (and to the post-Sylvia relationship), then the word “Manhattan”, the scene of Sylvia’s teenage success as a guest editor of the magazine Mademoiselle, might recall Sylvia. The above lines from the poem certainly seem to suggest a consciousness of a past relationship and its part in curtailing a new relationship.

Autobiographical elements of Hughes’ “Crow Improvises” (C, pp.64-5) form a partial narrative relating the lives of some people close to him, “his lavender-bag ancestors”, to himself in the aftermath of the deaths of Assia and Shura. Yet, in a collection dedicated to their memory, it is puzzlingly difficult to trace unequivocal references to either of them in individual poems. Hughes’ father and himself, for instance, are perhaps glimpsed in this image:

So he took the battle of the Somme in one hand
And a sleeping tablet in the other -
The spark that blasted blew the valves of his laugh.

The reference to Assia and himself possibly occurs in two separate sequences in the poem, the first, perhaps, referring to Shura and the second, an ambivalent reference, linking him with both Assia and Sylvia:

So he took the humane-killed skull of a horse in one hand
And a baby’s fairy-bait molar in the other -
The spark that banged burned out his weeper ...

and,

So in one hand he caught a girl's laugh - all there was of it,
 In the other a seven-year honeymoon - all that he
 remembered -

The spark that crashed through coked up his gonads.

Reference to "a baby's fairy-bait molar" might relate to Shura, who died when four years old, and Assia, while "a seven-year honeymoon" appears linked to Sylvia, as her poem, "Daddy" (CP, pp.222-4), with its reference to "seven years" would suggest:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two -
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.

As was the case with "Crow Tries the Media", although identification with particular persons remains conjectural, poems in Crow in which human sexuality poses a metaphysical or theological dilemma do sometimes hint at a personal dimension.

The possible presence of Sylvia and Edith as subjects of some poems in Crow, a collection dedicated to Assia and Shura, implies a relationship. That they were then all recent deaths in Hughes' life is the obvious link. There are complications, however, that arise from particular poems. In "Revenge Fable", a son blames himself for his mother's death, which becomes his death. The lines "There was a person/ Could not get rid of his mother/ As if he were her topmost twig" are refracted in the three mother *imago* poems mentioned earlier that are based on the Oedipus myth. "Fragment of an Ancient Tablet" (C, p.85) makes an apparent reference to Sylvia, rather than Assia, with the line "... her brow, the notable casket of gems", and by "... gouts of blood and babies". However, the detail of the poem is applicable to woman in general, apart from the idea of "well-known lips". Hughes is of course exploiting the well-known psychological connection between the parts of the face (above) and the genital organs (below), as did René Magritte in his painting The Rape (Le Viol). On the other hand, Birthdays Letters consistently employs imagery of jewels when describing Sylvia. This is so in "St. Botolph's" (BL, pp.14-15), in which Sylvia's eyes are "a crush of diamonds", and in "Trophies" (BL, pp.18-19) where they are "your amber jewels". Striking examples of the jewel strand of imagery associated with Sylvia's eyes are also found in "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress" (BL, pp.34-

5), “Wuthering Heights” (BL, pp.59-61), “The Afterbirth” (BL, pp.130-1), “Robbing Myself” (BL, pp.165-7), “Life after Death” (BL, pp.182-3) and “The Prism” (BL, pp.186-7).

Hughes’ approach to Assia and Shura in his poetry is exemplified by two poems which, though written twenty years apart, are too similar to be unrelated. The first is “Lovesong” (C, pp.88-9), included in a collection explicitly dedicated to the memory of Assia and Shura. This is good preliminary evidence for believing it relates to Assia. A predatory selfishness pervades “Lovesong”, reflecting the fact that the Crow sequence is full of despair at the joke played on humanity by Nature in saddling it with uncontrollable and violent sexual desires. The battle of the sexes gives rise to the predatory, possessive love featured in the poem. This is represented by a strand of eating imagery - “sucked”, “appetite”, “gnawed”, “bites” and “hungry” are its obvious constituents. Images of conflict further emphasise the battle between the sexes for possession: “occupying armies”, “assassin’s attempts”, “hostage”, “whips and jackboots”, with the latter expression, in particular, relating to later poems featuring Assia’s background as a survivor of Nazi Germany.

The fact that Assia was a survivor of Nazi Germany might serve to dissociate her in Hughes’ mind from the violence of which she might so easily have been a victim (not a perpetrator). However, a paradoxical treatment of Assia seems to occur in “Lovesong”, which is compatible with the motif present in Crow of uncontrollable, violent sexual desires. Assia becomes infected with the violent history she thought to have escaped. Outside evidence of this may be found in Butscher, who quotes David Compton on the subject of Assia:

He has also emphasised that she was “a very high-powered presence in any room, quite unbearably another Sylvia, in a much nastier way, much cruder in her dominance”.¹⁸⁴

Hayman, not citing his source, makes this comment:

She was rumoured to have attacked her first husband with a knife and slashed up the inside of his car.¹⁸⁵

In “Lovesong”, references to “assassin’s attempts”, looks that were “bullets daggers of revenge” and “her secret drawer” are echoed, but revised, by later poems that have Assia as their subject. The end of “Lovesong” is climactic, for it admits the ironic outcome of possessive love, the separate and disembodied nature of each individual, the loss of contact with the self and with the partner:

Their heads fell apart into sleep like the two halves
Of a lopped melon, but love is hard to stop

In their entwined sleep they exchanged arms and legs
In their dreams their brains took each other hostage

In the morning they wore each other’s face.

“Folktale” (NSP, pp.309-10) mirrors the alternating male and female speaking-in-role parts, two lines at a time, which form a dramatic dialogue that moves inexorably to a climax in “Lovesong”. It features the same driven desperation of the earlier poem, and its form and structure are remarkably similar. However, the possessive and predatory love of “Lovesong”, the selfish aggression of its male and its female, is not present in this new poem. Instead, the ill-starred love of another, born out of one’s own emptiness and insecurity, is a suffering and punishing passage towards an unreachable dimension of compassion and empathy. These following lines sum up the argument of the dialogue between male and female in “Folktale”:

... She wanted

A love-knot Eden-cool as two lob-worms

And a child of acorn

He wanted a mother of halva.

She wanted the hill-stream’s tabula rasa.

He wanted the thread-end of himself.

¹⁸⁴ E. Butscher, *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness*, Searburg Press, N.Y., 1976, p.314.

¹⁸⁵ R. Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, op.cit., p.156.

Some of the images contained in these lines are found in much earlier poems. In “He Sickened” (*O*, #19), the speaker sickened for “that one’s cool salivas”, which in “Folktale” is imaged as a “love-knot Eden-cool as two lob-worms”. “Seven Dungeon Songs” is a seven-part poem collected in *Moortown*, the fifth part of which is called “I Walk” (*M*, p.126). Its image of a former self being “knotted in a great ball” and undertaking a search for “people with clever fingers/ Who might undo me” is related to the final line quoted from “Folktale”, particularly in the suggestion of loss of contact with the self with which “I Walk” concludes:

I hurl myself
To jerk out the knot
Or snap it

And come up short

So dangle and dance
The dance of unbeing.

So, in “Folktale”, the woman described desired the “tabula rasa” of entry into a new life in the world, while he, wanting “the thread-end of himself”, wanted to regain contact with former life, the antithetical desire. It is this conflict of needs and wants that makes love futile and fateful:

So they ransacked each other for everything
That could not be found.

“Folktale” had opened with these lines:

He did not know she had risen out of cinders.
She knew he had nothing.
So they ransacked each other.

Imagery of flames and ransacking is a strong presence in the poem, which concludes with an image of helplessness, of submission to the supernatural world “as midnight struck”.

Poems overtly about Assia and Shura are not evident in *Crow*, though it was dedicated “In Memory of Assia and Shura”. Indeed, a lengthy silence about the deaths of

Assia and Shura is obvious in the poetry. Following the release of Plath's annotated Collected Poems, and since newspapers and biographies have told their story, Hughes has published poems about them. Assia, unlike Sylvia, is not linked to the poet's mother, Edith, in Hughes' personal poetry. Yet, Assia was the mother of Hughes' child, Shura, who is part of the text of "Descent" (NSP, pp.311-12). In the poetry, up to this time, Assia is tied too firmly to the stake as a scapegoat to possess complexity as a subject. There is no sign of the mother archetype or of spirituality, as there is in the case of Edith and Sylvia as they are portrayed in personal poems. However, there are subtleties in the depiction of Assia in recent poems.

The personal confusion and suffering evident in Crow help to explain why no further poems about Assia and Shura appear, apart from passing references to them in Orts, until recent times. The public image of Assia, built up over time and portraying her as The Other Woman responsible for the death of Sylvia Plath, is a factor accounting for Hughes' relative silence on the subject in his personal poetry. His new poems begin to mythologise Assia, by representing her, as do recent Plath biographies from Ronald Hayman and Paul Alexander, in the role of the scapegoat, the person singled out to bear the blame for Sylvia Plath's suicide. However, Hughes goes further than the biographers do by representing Assia as a sacrifice. Before examining the nature of these new poems, the following description of Assia, which comes from the summer of 1966, is an important counterbalance to the nature of Hughes' portrayal of her as a figure of deepest tragedy. An acquaintance of Hughes, who wishes to remain anonymous, recalls seeing Assia with Ted and describes her

gypsy quality, established partly by her bright scarf and smart dressing, reinforced by her thick brown hair, striking eyes, and tanned complexion. She was a friendly, vivacious, stylish and sophisticated woman.

Some of these aspects of Assia - her beauty, sophistication and stylish dressing - are consistent with the woman depicted in "The Locket" (NSP, pp.306-7), "Shibboleth" (NSP, pp.307-8), "Snow" (NSP, pp.308-9), "Folktale" (NSP, pp.309-10), "Opus 131" (NSP, pp.310-1), "Descent" (NSP, pp.311-2) and "The Error" (NSP, pp.312-3). These

poems follow a sequence of poems about Sylvia, which, the two sequences considered as a type of narrative, places Assia in a defined personal context that links her with Sylvia.

“Flame”, an uncollected poem first published in 1990, twenty years after “Lovesong”, refers more or less transparently to the deaths of Assia and Shura.¹⁸⁶ This is apparent in its concluding movement:

You did not know how history had already
 Cast you to repeat itself.
 You had no idea
 What signed paper had found you at last
 After so many years, what detonator
 Waited in your flat ...
 ... Synchrony so precisely attuned
 You barely had time to rip the envelope
 And grab for the telephone
 Before it was all over.

Use of the preterite tense and the second-person pronoun indicate a past self, and this type of pronominal use is consistently linked with feelings of guilt or regret about the past. These feelings are evident in poems such as “Laws of the Game”, “Leaf Mould”, “Grouse butts” and many others that have been discussed. Meanwhile, in “Flame”, imagery of explosion and flame conveys the finality of catastrophe. The speaker is powerless to prevent history from repeating itself in an awful synchrony of fateful destruction. Implications of the Holocaust that end this poem are directly related to Assia in poems that follow.

“Flame” was an isolated precursor of poems that drop the inhibition Hughes had about publishing poems relating directly to Assia, because this inhibition seems absent from *New Selected Poems* (1995). Imagery of flames is particularly strong in “The Error” (NSP, pp.312-3). “When her grave opened its ugly mouth/ Why didn’t you just fly” opens the poem. This line relates Sylvia and Assia in its cemetery setting. Instead, you “selflessly incinerated yourself/ In the shrine of her death”, the speaker deduces. Images

of “offered-up flames”, “feeding the flames”, “brimstone” and “ashes” forge a strong link with the earlier “Flame”. The terrible “synchrony so perfectly attuned” of that earlier poem is repeated in “The Error”. “Six full calendar years”, the speaker recollects, “Every .../ Day torn carefully off,/ One at a time, not one wasted, patient/ As if you were feeding a child”. “The Error”, as a title, maintains that Assia was mistaken in accepting her lot as a scapegoat to be sacrificed. Sylvia’s “grave mouthed its riddle right enough”.

“The Other” (NSP, pp.305-6) addresses Plath’s “The Other” (CP, pp.201-2) and her sequence of poems focusing on “The Other Woman”, Assia Wevill. Plath’s poems are virulent. “The Other” includes an image of “a womb of marble”. The final couplet of her poem raises the smiling motif that characterises Hughes’ “The Other”:

You smile.

No, it is not fatal.

The irony of Plath’s concluding couplet is not lost upon Hughes, for his poem retrospectively interprets its autobiographical elements:

... Even her life was

Trapped in the heap you took. She had nothing.

Too late you saw what had happened.

...

Only you

Saw her smile, as she took some.

At first, just a little.

Assia’s outsider status in the wake of Sylvia’s suicide has been well documented by Plath biographers. Assia’s emptiness, her “vacuum, which nature abhorred”, and the spirit of her search for fulfillment are expressed in terms of the original title of Hughes’ poem, which was “Laws of the Game”. His other poems based on Assia further explore her outsider status.

“The Locket” (NSP, pp.306-7) has Nazi Germany as its historical and symbolic background. Assia’s family had fled Germany, for her father was a Russian Jew. The poem juxtaposes the method of Assia’s suicide and her near-death in Germany in “a long-

¹⁸⁶ T.Hughes, “Flame”, *Poetry Book Society Anthology*, 1990, op.cit., pp.42-3.

cold oven/ Locked with a swastika". Fate can never be cheated, and the locket, with the broken clasp like "lips [that] kept coming apart" is, metaphorically, the ironic voice of pre-destination:

Your beauty, a folktale wager,
Was a quarter century posthumous.

While I juggled our futures, it kept up its whisper
To my deafened ear: *fait accompli*.

In "The Locket" (NSP, pp.306-7), more imagery of flames and specific reference to the Holocaust occurs in conjunction with Assia. "Casually as a yawn, you'd open/ Your death and contemplate it", the speaker remembers, using the locket that Assia had brought out of Nazi Germany as the symbol of a precarious survival of those days of flame and horror: its clasp was broken. The "brand of the burnt" had marked the door of Assia's house in Berlin. Her survival was not complete, but haunted by those historical forces of hatred that reclaimed her, "a quarter century posthumous". She, the speaker suspects, imaged her death as "a long-cold oven/ Locked with a swastika".

"Shibboleth" (NSP, pp.307-8) centres on the hounding of Assia by "imperious noses" that had sniffed out her difference, their prejudice: "Lick of the tar-brush?" Her retreat entails, in the nature of the hunt, a "lonely Tartar death". The title of the poem refers to the word "Shibboleth", the pronunciation of which was used to discriminate between the Gileadites, who were permitted to cross over into Jordan, and the Ephraimites, who were not. The parallel meaning is clear: Assia's entry into "the Promised Land" is barred by discrimination that is less direct, but far more brutal. "Shibboleth" emphasises Assia's German-Jew origins and traces her Russian and Palestinian background. Her beauty and sophistication goes unheeded at "the long-weekend Berkshire country table", where "English hounds/ Whose tails had stopped wagging" attack her, in much the same fox and hounds metaphor that Hughes applied to Sylvia in "The Huntsmen, on Top of Their Swaying Horse-Towers" (G, pp.184-5) and

reiterated in a letter to Anne Stevenson.¹⁸⁷ Empathy for the outsider characterises this, and other, poems about Assia.

A memory of walking in Brontë country with Assia revisits “The Locket” and its emphasis on the fate that awaited her. “Snow” (NSP, pp.308-9) remembers Assia in a Calder scene of cold and snow, physical elements charged with the symbolism of ostracism and death:

I watched you. Feeling the snow’s touch.

Already it was burying your footprints,
Drawing its white sheet over everything,
Closing the air behind you.

Descending the cobbled streets of Haworth, place of “closed cafés and Brontë gift-shops”, is also a descent “into the oven/ Of empty fire”, the fate uncoiling in “The Locket”. In “Snow”, a life is “Burning out in the air” during “a short walk/ That could never end [and] was/ Never ending”, a downward journey between symbolic “char-black buildings” that remember the blackness of their past.

“Opus 131” (NSP, pp.310-1) is a moody and powerful prelude to “Descent” (NSP, pp.311-2). The speaker, disconnected from the music of Beethoven, which has opened a door onto “horror”, is filled with foreboding:

Where was the lifeline music? What had happened
To consolation, prayer, transcendence -
To the selective disconnecting
Of the pain centre?

Imagery of the music, “the notes, with their sharp faces” and the “huge constellations of his [Beethoven’s] silence”, then symbolises the powerlessness of the speaker as something terrible readies to unfold. “Opus 131” uses the sustained metaphor of Beethoven’s crashing music to foreshadow the pain that Assia’s death, after the breakdown of the relationship between her and Hughes, would occasion. It is followed by “Descent”, which traces Assia’s life from Germany to annihilation, whereby

¹⁸⁷ See Chapter 1, p.17f.

... your own hands, stronger than your choked outcry,
Took your daughter from you. She was stripped from
 you,
The last raiment
Clinging round your neck, the sole remnant
Between you and the bed
In the underworld ...

“Descent” traces Assia’s downward journey, a strong motif in “Snow”, to the grave. Divesting herself of cultures and heritage, Germany, Israel, Russia, then British Columbia, she arrives at England. “Finally you had to strip off England”, then “go deeper”, the speaker relates. The gem-stones hoarded and hidden in a drawer are no protection. Hughes alludes to the gems as “Urim and Thummim”, which is a reference to the gems that made up the “breastplate of justice” on the high priest’s ephod. These gems were engraved with all the names of the tribes that made up the nation for which the temple at Jerusalem was an outward symbol.¹⁸⁸ Hughes’ allusion is ironic, for there is no justice in the disconnecting act that ensues, and the poem ends with a reference to the deaths of Assia and Shura, which entombs Assia in a “bed/ In the underworld”.

In *Birthday Letters* (1998) the poem “Dreamers” (BL, pp.157-8) is a unique representation of the triangular relationship of Ted, Sylvia and Assia. As a dialogic poem, it consistently uses the pronouns “we” and “us” to identify the Plath-Hughes relationship. Indeed, the beginning of “Dreamers” signals the fact that the poem speaks to the memory of Sylvia:

We didn’t find her – she found us.
She sniffed us out. The Fate she carried
Sniffed us out
And assembled us, inert ingredients
For its experiment.

However, with the metaphor of the “Fate she carried”, which is a metaphor consistently linked to Assia in poems discussed, we realise that the poem also speaks to the memory

of Assia. The poem relates how Sylvia was fascinated by Assia, and so links the two women as they were linked in “The Error” (NSP, pp.312-3). However, in “The Error” both were linked in the cemetery setting, whereas “The Dreamers” links them in life; hence, the Fate linking them is embodied as a personal, indivisible mutuality. The exotic, tragic and erotic nature of Assia touches Plath’s “dream-self”. Assia’s dream of “a throbbing human foetus” in the “globed, golden eye” of a pike, as recounted in Hughes’ poem, is part of Plath’s “The Fearful” (CP, p.256):

She would rather be dead than fat,
Dead and perfect, like Nefertit,

Hearing the fierce mask magnify
The silver limbo of each eye

Where the child can never swim,
Where there is only him and him.

Hughes interprets the dream that Assia told Sylvia and himself, after “a single night under our roof”, very differently in “Dreamers”:

I refused to interpret. I saw
The dreamer in her
Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it.
That moment the dreamer in me
Fell in love with her, and I knew it.

At the conclusion of his poem the memory of Assia takes over from the earlier pronominal emphasis on “we” and “us”, now replaced by “I”, “me”, “her” and “she”. The impulse on the part of Hughes himself to encode her as an outsider struggles against the impulse to be fair. Although Hughes writes of a fate which engulfs the three of them, one senses an animus towards Assia’s memory – this despite the fact that the last lines do take the guilt to himself.

¹⁸⁸ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. by G.A. Williamson, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959, pp.394-5.

“The Pan” (BL, p.121) puns on a pan bought from an ironmonger’s when Ted, Sylvia and Frieda arrive in the Devon village where their new home awaits them. The allusion is to Pan, the Greek god of fertility, known for his amorous affairs. In the poem an exotic young woman, Assia, wears a silk evening gown and “leopard-claw ear-rings”. This is a description of Assia found in “Dreamers”. Fate is revealed, in the guise of the young man with the exotic young woman, watching the new arrivals from outside the ironmonger’s that has been closed for two years:

He did not recognise, nor did his wife
As he squeezed back weary beside her
Behind the wheel of the Morris Traveller,
That this man, barely two yards from them,
Staring at them both so fixedly,
The man so infinitely more alive
Than either of them there in the happy car
Was himself – knowing their whole future
And helpless to warn them.

The repetition of “two” in the poem ushers in the doppelganger, the ghostly apparition that haunts its fleshy counterpart; hence, “The Pan” is only indirectly about Assia. It is more successful than “Dreamers” in showing that an ineluctable destiny was at work, without attaching blame to anybody.

Poetry about Assia tends, because of the links in real life, also to be poetry about Sylvia. However, these recent personal poems give her a place of her own for the first time in Hughes’ poetry. In the poetic narrative to date, Assia is rendered archetypically, in that she is the scapegoat, the sacrifice, and the outsider. However, there is an emergent perspective of her as a mother figure, which may yet see her linked, as Sylvia is at times linked, with the poet’s mother, Edith. There seems to be a symbolic trinity forming, an infinitely human godhead of strong females who understand suffering.

Hughes published Elmet in 1994; then came his New Selected Poems (1995). Both these recent collections follow on quite naturally from Wolfwatching (1989), which is a “seminal collection” because of its public display of Hughes’ personal poetry. As demonstrated, there were many personal poems before 1989, but their personal nature was often shrouded in the collections in which they appeared. In these collections, the poems were surrounded by others of a universal nature, so that their personal elements did not leap to the eye. Sometimes, too, personal poems have been less accessible because they have been collected in rare books or dispersed throughout the literary journals and periodicals. This situation is changing, as Hughes’ most recent collections demonstrate. Collected in Elmet are many of the poems discussed in earlier chapters, but not all the personal poems are there, which is interesting and significant on the basis of the poet’s selection. As well as this, there are some new personal poems and one poem that is markedly revised since it originally appeared in Remains of Elmet (1979) as two distinct poems. The publication of Elmet provides a launching point for this final chapter.

Elmet is not simply the revised edition of Remains of Elmet that Hughes has always wanted to publish, despite his promulgation of this concept. Keith Sagar stated Hughes’ professed position on the matter in a letter written three years before Elmet was published:

The personal poems in Wolfwatching are, of course, new or rewritten Elmet poems. Ted was unhappy with Remains of Elmet partly because he felt the photographs had pushed him to be more topographical than he would have liked, and partly because the book was widely displayed and reviewed as a coffee-table book. Some book-shops even put it in the photography section! He has been trying for years to persuade Faber to bring out a new edition, with many new and revised poems, and without the photographs. I gather there is to be a new edition, but with new photographs also.¹⁸⁹

The idea that Fay Godwin’s photographs were instrumental in forming the poetic sequence of Remains of Elmet is not supported by Hughes’ own comments on the inviolability of his creative process. These comments are raised and discussed in considerable detail in Chapter 1 of this thesis. Godwin’s photographs may have played a role in encouraging the mythical

¹⁸⁹ A letter to me from Keith Sagar dated 5 June 1991.

dimension of Remains of Elmet, through their powerful, Wuthering Heights detailing of moorlands, heather, windblown and tortured trees, brooding storm clouds and glarings and flarings of light. However, Hughes reined back the personal significance of the collection's subject matter and formed it into a generalised archetypal sequence with a character of its own. Elmet, on the other hand, is a collection, which includes – covertly, as so often – a good deal of personal material that Hughes was not inclined to publish in 1979 when he released Remains of Elmet. It represents a later, restructured treatment by Hughes – a fragmented narrative, almost – of his personal background, and to this end, it includes some poems from 1957 and 1960 collections. The collection is a new artefact which, as well as offering new poems, presents old ones in a new context, and represents an attempt on Hughes' part to come to terms with events, many of them painful, in his own life.

Elmet is an affirmative collection: Remains of ... is dropped, as is the poem "Remains of Elmet". The dedication now includes the poet's father - "In memory of Edith Farrar and William Hughes". It is not subtitled "A Pennine Sequence" because it is, to an even greater extent than Remains of Elmet, something more than a sequence of poems about picturesque places: it is a collection of personal works, many of them "photographs" of vividly remembered Calder scenes, but also featuring Calder intimates. The blackness of design of the Remains of Elmet product - black and white photography, black bound hardcover version, and black face and end pages - does not carry over into the "revised edition". Elmet has a non-funerary light grey hardcover and its photographs are set in monotype Apollo, a photoset type that harmonises with the glowing beauty of the photographs in the collection. The photography is visually symbolic of the newness of the form and nature of Elmet. Fay Godwin, whose photographs were integral to Remains of Elmet, brings old and new photographs to the pages of Elmet. A simple comparing of her Remains of Elmet photograph listed as "Cain and Abel" with her newly rendered Elmet same shot, listed as "Abel Cross, Crimsworth Dean (or Mourning and Vanity)", highlights the fundamental difference between the two collections. In the latter photograph, one can see the blades of grass in the foreground, which were blurred into gritty blackness in the earlier shot. There is clarity and openness in the Elmet photography, which seeks to recreate the characteristic sepia of period snapshots, particularly those from the nineteen-thirties when Hughes was a child.

A new emphasis on people is evident in the poems and photographs of Elmet. The photograph accompanying "For Billy Holt" (RE, p.91) is retained in Elmet. Billy Holt is the

man wearing the cap in the left of the photograph, as another photograph of him in Glyn Hughes' Millstone Grit confirms.¹⁹⁰ Photographs in Elmet draw attention to the human character of the Calder environs of Hughes' youth, while in Remains of Elmet landscape photographs held sway over the sole photograph of Billy Holt and companions. In Remains of Elmet, it was the only photograph of people, but in Elmet it is joined by others. There is a photograph of an intimate of the poet, Geoffrey Sunderland (E, p.26), another of a child on a swing in her Mytholmroyd yard (E, p.36), another of a child fishing near a canal bridge near Hebden Bridge (E, p.69), another of a young boy walking past graves in Mytholmroyd (E, p.129), and several more. The featuring of children in the Elmet photographs recalls that place and time of Hughes' own childhood, which he has asserted to be the crucial influence on his writing. The older people represented by photographs likewise symbolise a long personal link with the Calder. Hughes' mother, his father, their parents, his uncles, all were born and buried there, in the area around Mytholmroyd, Hebden Bridge and Heptonstall.

A pair of parallel lists designed to point up correspondences and divergences between Remains of Elmet and in Elmet is set out in table form on the following two pages. The numbers in bold print in front of each poem represent the position of the poem in the collection being analysed. Numbers after each poem indicate the position it occupies in the other collection, if any. A zero entry indicates that a particular poem is not present in the other collection. Changed titles and sources other than Remains of Elmet are listed.

¹⁹⁰ G.Hughes, Millstone Grit, op.cit., p.49.

Remains of Elmet

(1979)

- 1: untitled poem: 1
- 2: "Where The Mothers": 2
- 3: "Hardcastle Crags": 0
- 4: "Lumb Chimneys": 0
- 5: "Open To Huge Light": 6
- 6: "These Grasses Of Light": 5
- 7: "Moors": 13
- 8: "The Trance Of Light": 0
- 9: "It Is All": 45
- 10: "Long Screams": 0
- 11: "Curlews In April": 20
- 12: "Curlews Lift": 21
- 13: "Hill Walls": 33
- 14: "Walls": 0
- 15: "First, Mills": 7
- 16: "Hill-Stone Was Content": 8
- 17: "Mill Ruins": 0
- 18: "Wild Rock": 12
- 19: "The Sheep Went On Being Dead": 30
- 20: "The Big Animal Of Rock": 0
- 21: "Tree": 38
- 22: "Heather": 27
- 23: "Rock Has Not Learned": 28
- 24: "Remains of Elmet": 0
- 25: "There Come Days To The Hills": 15
- 26: "Dead Farms, Dead Leaves": 16
- 27: "When Men Got To The Summit": 25
- 28: "Churn-Milk Joan": 26
- 29: "Grouse-Butts": 0
- 30: "The Weasels We Smoked Out Of The Bank": 9
- 31: "High Sea-Light": 0
- 32: "A Tree": 38
- 33: "Bridestones": 31
- 34: "When The Millstone Of Sky": 41

Remains of Elmet

(1979)

- 35: "Spring-Dusk": 0
- 36: "Football At Slack": 3
- 37: "Sunstruck": 24
- 38: "Willow-Herb": 0
- 39: "The Canal's Drowning Black": 29
- 40: "The Long Tunnel Ceiling": 34
- 41: "Under The World's Wild Rims": 0
- 42: "Two": 35
- 43: "Mount Zion": 36
- 44: "The Ancient Briton Lay Under His Rock": 0
- 45: "Rhododendrons": 18
- 46: "Crown Point Pensioners": 44
- 47: "For Billy Holt": 23
- 48: "Heptonstall": 11
- 49: "You Claw The Door": 50
- 50: "Emily Bronte": 47
- 51: "Haworth Parsonage": 0
- 52: "Top Withens": 0
- 53: "The Sluttiest Sheep In England": 40
- 54: "Auction": 19
- 55: "Widdop": 46
- 56: "Light Falls Through Itself": 0
- 57: "In April": 0
- 58: "The Word That Space Breathes": 0
- 59: "Heptonstall Old Church": 43
- 60: "Tick Tock Tick Tock": 14
- 61: "Cock-Crows": 32
- 62: "Heptonstall Cemetery": 57
- 63: "The Angel": 0

<u>Elmet</u> (1994)	<u>Elmet</u> (1994)
1: "The Dark River: 1: previously untitled	31: "Bridestones": 33
2: "Abel Cross, Crimsworth Dean": 2: title change	32: "Cock-Crows": 61
3: "Football At Slack": 36	33: "Walls at Alcomden": 13: title change
4: "Two Photographs of Top Withens": 0: previously unpublished	34: "The Long Tunnel Ceiling": 40
5: "Stanbury Moor": 6: title change	35: "Two": 42
6: "Two Trees at Top Withens": 5: title change	36: "Mount Zion": 43
7: "First, Mills": 15	37: "What's the First Thing You Think of?": 0: previously unpublished
8: "Hill-Stone Was Content": 16	38: "'Tree": 21 & 32: markedly revised
9: "The Weasels We Smoked Out Of The Bank": 30	39: "Dick Straightup": 0: L, 1960
10: "Leaf Mould": 0: Wg, 1989	40: "The Sluttiest Sheep In England": 53
11: "Heptonstall": 48	41: "Wadsworth Moor": 34: title change
12: "Wild Rock": 18	42: "Familiar": 0: uncollected, 1984
13: "Moors": 7	43: "Heptonstall Old Church": 59
14: "Tick Tock Tick Tock": 60	44: "Crown Point Pensioners": 46
15: "There Come Days To The Hills": 25	45: "West Laithe Cobbles": 9: title change
16: "Shackleton Hill": 26: title change	46: "Widdop": 55
17: "Chinese History of Colden Water": 0: previously unpublished	47: "Emily Bronte": 50
18: "Rhododendrons": 45	48: "Walt": 0: Wg, 1989
19: "Auction at Stanbury": 54: title change	49: "The Horses": 0: THR, 1957
20: "Curlews In April": 11	50: "The Beacon": 49: title change
21: "Curlews Lift": 12	51: "Wind": 0: THR, 1957
22: "On The Slope": 0: Re, 1966	52: "Roarers in a Ring": 0: THR, 1957
23: "For Billy Holt": 47	53: "Pennines in April": 0: L, 1960
24: "Sunstruck": 37	54: "Six Young Men": 0: THR, 1957
25: "When Men Got To The Summit": 27	55: "Slump Sundays": 0: Wg, 1989
26: "Churn-Milk Joan": 28	56: "Climbing into Heptonstall": 0: Wg, 1989
27: "Heather": 22	57: "Heptonstall Cemetery": 62
28: "Alcomden": 23: title change	58: "Heptonstall": 0: Wo, 1967
29: "The Canal's Drowning Black": 39	59: "Sacrifice": 0: Wg, 1989
30: "The Sheep Went On Being Dead": 19	60: "Telegraph Wires": 0: Wg, 1989
	61: "For the Duration": 0: Wg, 1989
	62: "Anthem for Doomed Youth": 0: Wg, 1989

As the tables show, twenty poems from Remains of Elmet are not repeated in Elmet. Their omission raises some interesting issues pertaining to how and why Hughes reshapes the past. Notably, “Remains of Elmet” and “The Ancient Briton Lay Under His Rock” do not carry over into Elmet, though they were signpost poems in Remains of Elmet, indicating the historical framework that was a conscious force in that collection. They were in contact with the antiquity of Elmet, and they helped to define its legendary status, hefting it up above the commonplace. However, this is not the thrust of Elmet. It actually celebrates the commonplace by consciously focussing on a personal history, a history of experience shared with the Calder valley folk known to the poet and his family. Other poems that help to establish the visionary timbre of Remains of Elmet have also been omitted from Elmet. They include “The Trance Of Light”, “Under The World’s Wild Rim”, “Light Falls Through Itself”, “The Word That Space Breathes” and “The Angel”. On the other hand, there are three previously unpublished poems, one markedly revised poem and sixteen poems selected from the period 1957 – 1989, all of which attach themselves firmly to the lived life of the Calder valley. For these reasons, Elmet is not merely a revision of Remains of Elmet.

“Two Photographs of Top Withens” (E, p.19) provides clues to the strangeness of Hughes’ earlier “Top Withens” (RE, p.103). Those peculiar references to America were oblique references to Sylvia, and to a visit to Top Withens made by Hughes with her and Walt in 1956 (LH, p.269). “Two Trees At Top Withens” (E, p.21), formerly “Open To Huge Light” (RE, p.17), is also associated with the same memory. Its new title makes this clear, and its close is, with the retrospective knowledge imparted by “Two Photographs of Top Withens”, less esoteric:

Startled people look up
With sheep’s heads
Then go on grazing.

Hughes has, effectively, personalised “Two Trees At Top Withens”, for the above lines, along with an image of “reeds of desolation”, also in the text of the poem, closely correspond to Plath’s journal entry from the visit:

The house - small, lasting - pebbles on roof, name scrawls on
rock - inhospitable two trees on the lee side of the hill where
the long winds come, pierce the light in a stillness. The furious
ghosts nowhere but in the heads of the visitors and the yellow-
eyed shag sheep. (JSP, pp. 148-9)

Another previously unpublished poem, “What’s the First Thing You Think of?” (E, p.75), is, as the title suggests, a type of writing exercise that Hughes set for himself; hence, it is a poem of vivid impressions in the manner of an early poem, “View of a Pig” (L, pp.40-1). There are three memories fused in the poem. The first two revolve around Hughes and his brother Gerald, which makes me think that the third also concerns the pair. The first two memories are clearly set in the Mytholmroyd of Hughes’ childhood days, before his family moved to Mexborough and before Gerald left home and then went to war. The first is inside the house, the second on the “Heights Road” above the town. The third memory is more private and closed, differing from the physicality of the preceding two memories. Its image of a Viking ship-burning ceremony to mark the death of someone important seems to apply to a dying fledgling, but this is clearly not the case. “Two” and “Waterlicked”, with their imagery of the Hughes brothers as birds and the freedom and spirituality of the flight motif, together with the emphasis on the maleness of the bird in “What’s the First Thing You Think of?” and the affinity between the dying bird and the speaker, are factors suggesting that an ailing family member is the poem’s personal subject. One suspects, in the absence of hard factual evidence, the bird imagery in this poem relates to Gerald:

... and for all his baby-bird distress at the food
I’d tried to spoon into him, and for all the gaping
wound of his look, his stricken, unrecognizable look,
that could no longer recognize me ...

The closed nature of the memory is reflected in the punctuation of this part of the poem that appears above, for it is enclosed, in the original text, by elans. “(So I still cannot get it afloat or light it)”, Hughes concludes, evoking an image of a Viking ship that, like the poem itself, does not commemorate a most significant event as it should.

“Chinese History of Colden Water” (E, p.42) uses an oriental storytelling form to trace the rise and fall of the chapel-and-mill ethos in the Calder valley. It borrows some good lines from “The Trance Of Light” (RE, p.20) to create a new poem. Interestingly, the “fallen immortal”, who dreamed the cleansing and renewal of the valley, is left with “the laughter of foxes” in his hearing. One wonders whether the poet sees these aspects of the poem as analogous to his efforts in Remains of Elmet - the rub of vintage Hughes humour. His totemic foxes may well be chuckling because Elmet is the showcase for many personal poems that he was not ready to assemble for the public fifteen years ago, when he instead published Remains of Elmet

Alongside these three new poems in Elmet, a markedly revised poem takes its place. “Tree” (E, p.77) joins poems from Remains of Elmet, “Tree” (RE, p.47) and “A Tree” (RE, p.63), in that order, together in the one new poem. Hughes has not made a revision of this type before. Previously, separate poems always retain their integrity, even if Hughes makes considerable revisions to them. His action with “Tree” implies that there was only ever the one poem, which raises the issue of why Hughes divided it in Remains of Elmet, particularly when the titles of both poems indicate a single tree was his focus. (Fay Godwin’s photography was not responsible for his decision). The answer lies with the poem as it appears in Elmet. “Tree” is a Lumb poem; that is, it bears a striking resemblance to the character and concerns evident in Gaudete. The poem begins with the line “A priest from a different land”. The biblical references in “Tree”, to Samson and to Christ, give the poem a more universal than personal slant, by empowering the tree as a priest of the forces in nature. However, “A priest from another land” was the situational context of the doubles, the changeling and Lumb, in Gaudete. The Epilogue of Gaudete mixes Lumb’s metaphysical experiences with Hughes’ personal memories. Lumb and Hughes are often interchangeable in the Epilogue, and “Tree”, in its Elmet form, adds weight to this notion by further relating Lumb to Hughes and then to the Elmet setting. The traumatic existence of the tree in the poem is, equally, Lumb’s in Gaudete and Hughes’ in a dark period of his life. Lines from “Tree” such as “Tried to confess all but could not”, “Tried to tell all” and “Lets what happens to him simply happen” support my analogy. The subject is more than a tree; this is made more apparent by the joining of two separate Remains of Elmet poems so that the maleness of subject is emphasised in the new poem. This is further confirmation that the mythical predecessors of Remains of Elmet - Crow, Gaudete and Cave Birds - were, in part, attempts to write personally.

New and revised poems in Elmet have elaborated on the personal nature of past poems. The inclusion of sixteen earlier poems ranging from 1957 to 1989 confirms the extent to which the Calder experience is important to the poetry that Hughes writes. Previous chapters have discussed all these poems, but in the case of “On The Slope” (E, p.49), or “Roarers in a Ring” (E, p.107), it is reassuring to have their Calder origins and significance endorsed by Hughes. The extended introductory notes to Elmet, compared to the brevity of these in Remains of Elmet, focus on two of my three major subject areas: poems about the Calder experience, and poems about the First World War. Immediately apparent are the title

changes of Remains of Elmet poems. In Elmet, their titles specify their Calder settings, just as Hughes does in his introductory notes:

The tributary known as Colden Water (the “moor-water” in the poem titled “Crown Point Pensioners”) comes down a small side-valley as a tiny stream. (E, p.10)

The Calder childhood milieu of Hughes’ poems is now referred to openly:

When I came to consciousness there in the 1930s, the process was already far gone, though the communities seemed to be still intact, still entirely absorbed by the life of the factories - or by the slump. (E, p.11)

“Slump Sundays” (E, p.116) mixes this comment with another that Hughes makes about the effect of the First World War on the Calder valley and surrounding area:

But you could not fail to recognize that the cataclysm had happened - to the population (in the First World War, where a single bad ten minutes in no man’s land would wipe out a street or even a village) ... (E, p.11)

What Hughes does not write about in his introduction to Elmet forms a significant absence, and this is compounded by his non-inclusion of some Elmet poems, including some extremely likely contenders, in the compilation. The closest Hughes comes to broaching this missing subject occurs in his opening comment, where it remains undeveloped:

These poems confine themselves to the Upper Calder and the territory ... (that forms) ... an “island” straddling the Yorks-Lancs border, though mainly in Yorkshire, and centred, in my mind, on Heptonstall. (E, p.9)

Of course, “centred ... [in Hughes’ mind] ... on Heptonstall”. This is where Edith, Sylvia and other family members are buried. Hughes’ grandparents lived there, as did his parents. Hughes’ Lumb Bank ex-residence looks upon Heptonstall and upon its graveyard that adjoins the two churches sharing the same grounds in the ancient hilltop village. This setting has featured in many of Hughes’ personal poems, and it is what brings us to what is missing from Elmet.

Poems about females who played significant roles in the drama of Hughes’ life as it has been confessionally poeticised are missing. “Source” (Wg, pp.17-8), a striking example, is an Elmet poem centred on memories of the poet’s mother:

Your tears didn't care.
 They'd come looking for you
 Wherever you sat alone. They would find you
 (Just as I did
 On those thundery, stilled afternoons
 Before my schooldays). You would be bowed
 In your workroom, over your sewing machine.

Other Elmet poems about the poet's mother include "Memory" and "Edith". They are most relevant and obvious contenders for a place in Elmet. While a new Sylvia poem, "Two Photographs of Top Withens", is a striking addition to Elmet, it extends the time-frame from a nineteen-thirties focus to the nineteen-fifties. Other poems, such as "Walt", extend it further still, into the nineteen-seventies and beyond. This being the case, Elmet exists throughout Hughes' lifetime, and not merely the time of childhood, though that may be the most attractive of times to revisit.

Sequencing in Hughes' collections would make a fascinating study in itself, as I found when touching upon this aspect in earlier chapters, particularly when discussing personal poems embedded in mythopoeic sequences. Meanwhile, it is noticeable that Remains of Elmet and Elmet share the same point of equilibrium, the poem "Bridestones". There are few other similarities when sequencing is examined, so Hughes' placement of "Bridestones", as a fixed point, accords to it a considerable significance. "Bridestones" (E, p.64) occupies the same page number in both collections. Its first line of text is altered, from "Holy of holies - a hill-top chapel" in Remains of Elmet to "Scorched-looking, unhewn - a hill-top chapel" in Elmet. This revision is joined by others, their sum making a composite personal reflection upon the lasting significance that Hughes' first marriage, to Sylvia Plath, holds for the poet. However, it is the new "Bridestones" that reshapes the past from the present perspective. The ancient landmarks, in both versions of the poem, are revered by the statement "You do nothing casual here". The bridestones are "wedding stones/ Electrified with whispers" and "marriage is nailed down". In Remains of Elmet they were represented as burdensome and accusatory sentinels, a weight "Upon your shoulders" and an ominous reminder that "From now on/ The moon stares into your skull/ From this perch". In Elmet the bridestones are a mantle "Over your shoulders" and a purging influence that "can always lift your skull/ On this perch, to clean it".

Sequencing is interesting in Hughes' rarer collections, particularly in Recklings (1966). A considerable number of personal poems collected in this limited edition have found their way into major collections over the years. This, of course, removes them from the sequential context they held in their original collections. The title Recklings derives from a Middle English word of uncertain origins and it refers to the weakest and smallest of a litter. In January 1967, its publication price of £5.6.0. was reasonably expensive, and lucrative given its 150-copy release, which belies the title of the collection in a pragmatic sense.¹⁹¹ Also, some of the "recklings" have since been brought into Hughes' more public major collections. "On the Slope", for instance, is collected in Elmet. "Stealing Trout on a May Morning" was chosen for Selected Poems 1957 - 1981. "Logos", in a revised form, finds its way into Wodwo, while "A Match", "On the Slope" and "To be a Girl's Diary" appear under the title "Root, Stem, Leaf" in the American Wodwo and in place of "Logos". Furthermore, "Root, Stem, Leaf" is also collected in Selected Poems 1957 - 1967.

Recklings is a rather drably presented collection. Its mucky-grey hardcover and lack of adornment make it physically unremarkable. However, its poems are still contemporary currency, and, for its time, the collection is remarkable for the personal statement made by its sequence of poems. The following table looks at the sequencing of Recklings. Numbers in bold print in front of poems indicate their position in the sequence of poems that forms Recklings, which consists of thirty-two poems, while first publication details follow each entry. Poems newly published in Recklings are listed under the year 1967, though this may be somewhat misleading.

1956	6: "Flanders": <u>ibid</u>
32: "Bawdry Embraced": <u>Poetry</u> (88: 295-7) August	27: "Poltergeist": <u>Spectator</u> (205: 859) 25 November
1960	1961
31: "Unknown Soldier": <u>Critical Quarterly</u> (2: 322-3), Winter	3: "Fishing at Dawn": <u>New Statesman</u> (61: 838): 26 May
28: "Last Lines": <u>Observer</u> , 16 April, p.31	10: "Memory": <u>Times Literary Supplement</u>
9: "Toll": <u>ibid</u>	14 July, p.i

¹⁹¹ K. Sagar & S. Tabor, Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980, op.cit., p.21.

- 30: "The Lake": New Yorker 21 October,
p. 192
1962
- 4: "Dully Gumption's Addendum": Poetry
(100: 92-4) May
- 26: "Tutorial": New Statesman: (64: 626)
2 November
1963
- 2: "Water": Observer 6 January, p. 19
- 11: "Heatwave": Poetry (103: 152-6)
December
1964
- 24: "Stealing Trout on a May Morning": New Yorker 21 March, p. 44
- 5: "Guinness": Critical Quarterly (6: 153)
Summer
1965
- 12: "Fallen Eve": Agenda (4: 128-9) April-May
- 18: "Trees": New Yorker 17 July, p. 30
- 1966**
- 19: "A Colonial": New Statesman (71: 504)
8 April
- 17: "As Woman's Weeping": Critical Quarterly
(8: 108-9) Summer
- 29: "Logos": ibid
- 1: "On the Slope": New Yorker 27 August,
p. 90
- 23: "To be a Girl's Diary": New Statesman
(72: 523) 7 October
- 8: "Beech Tree": Poetry Review (57: 148)
Autumn
- 15: "Plum-Blossom": Transatlantic Review
(22: 71-2) Autumn
1967
- 7: "Keats" 20: "Don Giovanni"
- 13: "The Toughest" 21: "A Match"
- 14: "Thaw" 22: "Small Events"
- 16: "Public Bar T.V." 25: "Humanities"

Recklings contains no dedication, yet its first poem, "On the Slope" (Re, p. 7), is a poem about Edith Hughes. Its final poem, "Bawdry Embraced" (Re, pp. 42-4), is the first of Hughes' poems to be published beyond Cambridge and a poem he dedicated to Sylvia Plath. In between these two poems, markers of birth and marriage in the poet's life, a personal narrative, darkened by the suicide of his wife, exists as a flux of memories. Strands of imagery of decomposition, death, disassociation and dissipation dominate in Recklings. They are answered, or opposed, in part, by strands of imagery of strength and endurance, characteristics found mainly in the world of nature, but also in one's roots or origins. For these reasons, and because some of the poems are also collected in Wodwo, there is an obvious relationship between Recklings and Wodwo, the latter of which Hughes described to Faas as "a descent into destruction of some sort".¹⁹² Both collections were for sale in the same year.

¹⁹² E. Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, op.cit., p. 205.

“Dully Gumption’s Addendum” (Re, pp.10-1) is autobiographical. The Calder and its West Yorkshire dialect are an important part of this early poem.¹⁹³ Roots or origins such as dialect and its life experience are opposed by the speaker to “the morphine of his Anglicising”. “At grammar school, this remorseless strain of maggot ... ate into his brain”, and at Cambridge he “Dreamed his tongue uprooted”. “Now this chrysalis twitches into his thirties”, Hughes writes when in his early thirties, “The fly hardening in him”. The battle to remain in contact with origins, hence, in contact with one’s true self, is a conscious force in the poem, and more widely in Hughes’ poetry. Another poet out of the Faber stable noticed the strength of this poetic voice. Seamus Heaney, Nobel Prize winner, commented respectfully on the significance of Hughes’ dialect to his poetry:

Hughes’ voice, I think, is in rebellion against a certain kind of demeaned, mannerly voice. It’s a voice that has no truck with irony because his dialect is not like that ... I mean, the voice of a generation - the Larkin voice, the Movement voice, even the Eliot voice, the Auden voice - the manners of that speech, the original voices behind that poetic voice, are those of literate English middle-class culture, and I think Hughes’ great cry and bawl is that English language and English poetry is longer and deeper and rougher than that. That’s of a piece with his interest in Middle English, the dialect ...¹⁹⁴

Hughes’ “Memory” (Re, p.15) travels back into an early childhood Calder setting in an attempt to make contact with that childhood self that he spoke about with Faas. However, the “remorseless strain of maggot” in “Dully Gumption’s Addendum” works against and subverts this being true to oneself. Awareness of challenge to the true self is echoed by the “bellowing of the maggot” in “Fishing at Dawn” (Re, p.9). A strong process of dislocation from roots working against the self is responsible for the “bleak eyeholes” of the speaker in “Tutorial” (Re, pp.36-7 and “the touch of my own ghostliness” that grips the speaker in “Trees” (Re, p.24). There is a great deal working against the individual in Recklings, with the life of the self being symbolically threatened or extinguished in many of its poems. This is the case in “Last Lines” (Re, p.38):

¹⁹³ See Chapter 3, p.92f.

¹⁹⁴ S.Heaney, Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden, Faber, London. 1981, pp.73-4.

The loaded vampire I have been
 All this time and fed on this heart and reared
 From birth is moulting me ...

In “Logos” (Re, p.39), human existence is imaged as a descent into destruction:

The sea pulling everything to pieces
 Except for its killers, alert and shapely,
 And within seconds the new born baby is lamenting
 That it ever lived ...

“Don Giovanni” (Re, p.26) and “A Match” (Re, p.27) are companion poems that express the human dilemma described in the above passage from “Logos”. Human sexuality, which, in The Hawk in the Rain and Lupercal, connected some of the characters with the vital forces of the universe, now, in Recklings, is self-destructive. “Don Giovanni” presents a persona who is preyed on by his own “ravening”. Immersion in the life of the body and the flesh, through sexuality, leads to an ironic entrapment of the self, a denuding of relationship with the greater world and a barren existence:

Who’s at the door? Blind and dumb,
 Who’s in the room? You are your own
 Guest of annihilating stone,
 Invited a lifetime, now come.

The persona of “A Match” is in much the same position as Don Giovanni, but is more resourceful. His ravening becomes a quest to “savour and own the dimensions of woman”, and his search is a “foraging/ Through everything unhuman or human”. Recklings, coming from the same period as Wodwo, is an interesting collection in its own right. As brief discussion has indicated, Recklings, as a title, is somewhat of a misnomer, for the sequence is substantial. Some of its poems are appearing in new collections and, like poems in Wodwo, poems in Recklings also chart the concerns that appear in the mythical collections of the nineteen-seventies.

Hughes’ selections of poems demonstrate the changes in his poetry since 1957. Three editions of selected poems have been published, covering the periods 1957 -1967, 1957 - 1981 and 1957 - 1994. There are no changes between the first and second selected editions, apart from the obvious additions from later collections in Selected Poems 1957 - 1981. However, it is interesting to look at the first selection for what is there, and for what that implies about Hughes’ poetry, and for what is not there, and for what that in turn implies.

Selected Poems 1957 - 1967¹⁹⁵ contains poems selected from The Hawk in the Rain, Lupercal and Wodwo. Uncollected work is not represented, as it is in each of the following editions of selected poems. There is no indication of the direction of future poetry, as there is in the next selected poems, Selected Poems 1957 - 1981, with its inclusion of two poems from River (1983). Crow poems do not appear, though they were being published in journals and periodicals before Selected Poems 1957 - 1967 was published.

The poems selected are all strong poems, period poems really, from Hughes' "elemental power-circuit of the universe" days. The few poems expressing tenderness in the first selected poems are "Song", "A Woman Unconscious" and "Full Moon and Little Frieda". There is a selective reshaping of the nature of Hughes' first collection, The Hawk in the Rain: misogynic poems from the first collection are dropped, with the exception of "Soliloquy", which is the more politic title appearing in the selected edition for the original "Soliloquy of a Misanthrope" (THR, p.22). "Secretary" (THR, p.21), "A Modest Proposal" (THR, p.25), "Incompatibilities" (THR, p.26), "Two Phases" (THR, p.29), "The Conversion of the Reverend Skinner" (THR, p.32), "The Hag" (THR, p.46) and several other poems forming a deliberate sequence in The Hawk in the Rain are excluded from Hughes' first selection of his poems. They linked human sexuality and love to the instinctive life found in nature, and, because of this link, these poems represented sex and love in a violent, primal context, particularly evident in "A Modest Proposal".

On the other hand, while Hughes' selection is not representative of his earliest published poetry, it is very generous with its inclusion of poems from Wodwo. There are thirty-one of them, including two poems, "Root, Stem, Leaf" and "Scapegoats and Rabies", from the American edition. The effect of the weighting given to Wodwo, for Hughes' selection contains only thirty-seven poems taken from both The Hawk in the Rain and Lupercal, is to emphasise the existential debate centred on the battling forces of life and death, and on the mystical nature and role of death in universal life. Also emphasised is the nature poetry, which in any case is closely connected to the existential debate. This is reasonable, given that these interrelated subjects are of obvious importance in Hughes' poetry, both at the time and now. However, the personal poetry of the period, epitomised by "Six Young Men", from The Hawk in the Rain, and by "Dick Straightup" and "Pennines in April", both from Lupercal, is not represented in Hughes' selection. This makes for an

¹⁹⁵ T.Hughes, Selected Poems 1957 - 1967, Faber, London, 1972.

exclusion of poems that do not carry on an existential debate, whereas in the larger corpus there are quite a number of poems that empathise with simple, domestic pleasures.

Hughes' next selection of poems, Selected Poems 1957 - 1981 begins with the same sequence of poems as the previous selection. There is a greater variety of poems in the updated selection, reflecting the diversity of subject and form in Hughes' writing. This is immediately apparent from the inclusion of poems from Under the North Star and Season Songs, both of which are often categorised as collections of poetry for children. Significantly, there are uncollected poems of a candid, personal nature in the new selection. "You Hated Spain" and "Do not Pick up the Telephone" both enter into a dialogue with Sylvia Plath's poems, by addressing her poems, which themselves make reference to a shared personal history. Interestingly, the sequence of poems selected from Crow also includes "The Lovepet", which is from Moortown. A relationship between "Lovesong", "Notes for a Little Play" and "Lovepet" is suggested by that sequencing, which is how they appear in Selected Poems 1957 - 1981. The tragedy of suicide, of the deaths of Sylvia, Assia and Shura, is a dimension of the poems of this selection. This characteristic is reinforced by selections from Gaudete, by inclusion of "Once I Said Lightly" and "Waving Goodbye, From Your Banked Hospital Bed". "I Know Well", also from Gaudete, is included. Its personal subject is Edith Hughes, the poet's mother. Another Moortown poem, "At the Bottom of the Arctic Sea, They Say", is related to the Gaudete sequence of the collection by its placement there. The personal dimension of Hughes' poetry is further represented by poems such as "For Billy Holt" and "Heptonstall Cemetery" from Remains of Elmet. The upbeat poem that ends the selection, "That Morning" from River, is also a personal poem which joyfully and reverently affirms the cycle of ongoing life.

Finally, Hughes' most recent selection, New Selected Poems 1957 - 1994, still more clearly demonstrates the significance of the personal poetry in his wider work. This selection contains many previously uncollected and unpublished poems about Edith, Sylvia, Assia, Frieda and Nicholas, and Shura. It includes personal poems from Recklings, "The Honeybee" from Flowers and Insects, and many other poems discussed in previous chapters. The selection, like Hughes himself today, is much more candid and comfortable about the personal poetry that used to be covert, its significance denied in interview. The sequence of personal poems ending the collection is especially powerful in its endorsement of the importance of Hughes' personal poetry. The cover of the paperback edition carries a coloured drawing of foxgloves, acknowledged as "courtesy of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew". A

recent photograph of Hughes, taken by Jane Bown, appears on the back cover. In this photograph, he does not look like “something belonging to then not now - a bit like a Henry Moore carving”, as he allegedly did in a previous photograph.¹⁹⁶ His face is benevolent, almost radiant from the lighting that suffuses the photograph. Again, as with Elmet and its dramatic reshaping of Remains of Elmet, there is the same visually symbolic trend towards light and openness and away from gritty blackness and impersonality.

The same applies to the poems collected in New Selected Poems. The way that the selection ends reflects the light and openness of the photograph and the white cover with its flowering and fertilised foxgloves. A generous selection of poems from Flowers and Insects, What Is The Truth?, River, Wolfwatching and then the previously uncollected and new poems forms a sequence which confirms this contemporary feature of Hughes’ poetry. A passage from Jung helps to identify the process responsible for the change evident in Hughes’ poetry:

It is generally believed that anyone who descends into the unconscious gets into a suffocating atmosphere of egocentric subjectivity, and in this blind alley is exposed to the attack of all the ferocious beasts which the caverns of the psychic underworld are supposed to harbour.

True, whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face.¹⁹⁷

This comment applies to the history of Hughes’ writing of personal poetry. The allegorical and mythopoeic collections emphasise “the psychic underworld”, which is also an assembly of selves and fragments of personal experience. However, in the Epilogue of Gaudete the poet declares that “the mask is off”, which it is for a time, but not convincingly, for the Lumb persona and the Goddess persona are both masks that are also present. Universalism of the

¹⁹⁶ A letter to me from Michael Bradford dated 29 April 1991.

personal does not occur successfully, consistently and publicly in Hughes' poetry until the mirror is faced, which is the situation that we are seeing in poems from the time of Wolfwatching to the personal poetry of today. The mirror reflects "whatever looks into it", and the universalising of intense personal subjects and memories occurs.

Birthday Letters (1998) confirms the fact that Hughes is now able to universalise the most personal of subjects, for this new collection is almost entirely composed of poems written to and about Sylvia. The collection is "for Frieda and Nicholas", and its jacket painting is by Frieda Hughes. The jacket seems to respond to many poems in the new collection, in which imagery of combustion and eruption is set against imagery of waters and calm. "Red" (BL, pp.197-8), the final poem, contrasts these strands of imagery by using the eruptive colour red to symbolise a desperate creativity in the face of "bone-clinic whiteness", and by using the calm colour blue to symbolise a "kindly spirit", "electrified, a guardian, thoughtful". The jacket painting visually represents the symbolism of these strands of imagery that Hughes employs to describe his subject, Sylvia, for its eruption of magma is set against a background of blues found in long-cooled lava.

What one notices about Birthday Letters is that it forms a *sequence* of poems, adding up to a carefully fashioned work of art,¹⁹⁸ rather than trying to offer an exhaustive factual account. The story is there in the background, but the poet feels no obligation to tell the whole story. Some things are left out in the interests of creating a unified work. Of course this does also act as a pretext for Hughes omitting some of the parts of the story which are most painful to himself and which would show him in a bad light. I addressed this question earlier,¹⁹⁹ and need say little more about it, except that this tendency, already apparent in New Selected Poems, is even more so in Birthday Letters. However, to return to the work of art (collection rather than individual poems), there is also the aspect suggested by the title. "Birthday Letters" suggests a kind of celebration of Sylvia's life – compare Gaudete, the title of which paradoxically means "Rejoice" – a return to being able to talk or write to her as if she were still alive. It is *that sort* of collection, and arguably it is fair to leave out the hatreds

¹⁹⁷ C.G.Jung, The Archetypes and the Collected Unconscious, trans. by R.F.C.Hull, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1959, p.20.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Lewis' comment on the sonnet sequence: "Facts may, of course, lie behind (and any distance behind) a work of art. But the sonnet sequence does not exist to tell a real or even a feigned story". Lewis rather overdoes the distancing between the real life of the poet and the sonnet-sequence, but his comment is helpful in interpreting other poem-sequences besides sonnets. See C.S. Lewis, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1954, p.328.

¹⁹⁹ See ch.5, ch.6.

and suspicions. Perhaps “rhyming [oneself] into safety”,²⁰⁰ is an apt description of the sequence: this need not necessarily be a bad thing to do.

A work of art is a shaping of experience (including fantasies), and certain themes or slants impose themselves. One that came over strongly to me in Birthday Letters was the notion that poor Sylvia was doomed from the start and that both of them were confronted by this doom from time to time, as in the poem about the fortune-teller, “The Gypsy” (BL, pp.116-7). Of course, while this apprehension of doom is the major theme in Birthday Letters it is not new to Hughes’ writing about Sylvia, as demonstrated in earlier poems such as “You Hated Spain”. However, the way in which the doom is represented as gathering around Sylvia at an earlier stage of their relationship is a new feature. It is present in “Fullbright Scholars” (BL, p.3), the first poem of the collection, which deals with a memory of a newspaper photograph from the time before Hughes knew Plath. Amongst the days of innocence motif of the poem is the foregrounding of this significant theme. Sylvia’s “Veronica Lake bang” had been uppermost in the picture of her and other Fullbrights: “Not what it hid”, which is a reference to the scar left by her suicide attempt. This does help to shift the blame for her death, as does the emphasis on the never-exorcised figure of her father (with whom, Hughes implies, she sometimes identified him), and the fact that she had been subjected to electrode therapy before she met him. The omission of “The Other” from the collection makes suppression of his desertion of Sylvia for another woman almost complete. Perhaps, then, “confessional poetry” is not quite the right word for this collection, as there are important wrongs that remain unconfessed. As noted before, however, a poet is not obliged to tell the whole story. He is entitled to construct a myth which obviously has its share of truth. The phrase “they censored their life”, which was quoted earlier from Hughes’ feminist tormentors, is not completely without foundation, but it is judgmentally harsh.

Some poems are left out of Birthday Letters. I have mentioned “The Other”, which, as well as “Do not Pick up the Telephone”, is understandably not included in this new and celebratory collection. Another poem, “Lovesick”,²⁰¹ is a striking omission. The “you” addressed in “Lovesick” has obvious affinities with the “you” addressed in previously published poems that *are* included in Birthday Letters, such as “The God” (BL pp.188-91).

²⁰⁰ See p.149. Hughes, in his “The Earthenware Head”, writes of Plath’s concern in her “The Lady and the Earthenware Head”.

²⁰¹ “Lovesick”, Poetry Book Society Anthology 1986/7, J.Barber (ed.), Hutchinson, London, 1987, p.55.

The reason for its non-inclusion must remain speculative. One notes that the emphasis on Sylvia's lavishing of love on everything, for this is the contention of "Lovesick", would be somewhat at odds with the more impersonal operation of Fate or doom unifying Hughes' sequence. However, the new sequence of poems is also intent on examining the psyche of Sylvia, for the extremes of frenzied joy in life and the darkest brooding on death are the two obvious aspects raised in Birthday Letters. "Two Photographs of Top Withens" is another omission, but "Wuthering Heights" reshapes that poem to heighten the sense of foreboding that builds throughout Birthday Letters.

The newly published poems about Sylvia, which comprise eighty of the eighty-eight poems in Birthday Letters, are a windfall. Overall, these poems are not self-justifying, as discussion of "The Rabbit Catcher" (BL, pp.144-6), "Dreamers" (BL, pp.157-8) and "The Pan" (BL, p.127), for instance, has demonstrated. If anything, the poems pronounce a sense of marriage as eternal: they pay a tribute to Sylvia. "Fingers" (BL, p.194) is the strongest example of this:

I remember your fingers. And your daughter's
Fingers remember your fingers
In everything they do.
Her fingers obey and honour your fingers.
The Lares and Penates of our house.

In Roman mythology the Lares and Penates were household gods. The Lares were considered the guardian spirits of one's ancestry, while the Penates were keepers of the storeroom. Hughes' allusion accords a familial sanctity to the memory of Sylvia.

Other newly published poems about Sylvia seem to descend from the times when Hughes was writing poems to put into his various collections. Two such poems are "Daffodils" (BL, pp.127-9) and "Perfect Light", which are very similar to poems in Flowers and Insects (1986). "The Honey Bee" (FI, p.39), as discussed, is an allegorical poem about Sylvia, and thereby gained entry to the earlier collection. Flowers and Insects contained poems about daffodils and perfect light, but Sylvia's presence in the scenes they depicted was omitted, until now. Birthday Letters is, in terms of his reshaping of personal experience, Hughes' magnum opus. Its poems have many antecedents, but the new collection proclaims to the world that Ted Hughes writes intensely personal poetry.
