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»»Owning The Facts Of His Life«: Ted Hughes's *The Birthday Letters*«

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The publication earlier this year of *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes's powerful, intimate sequence of poems about his relationship with his late wife Sylvia Plath, caught the literary world off-guard. After thirty-five years of aggressive silence regarding their relationship, Hughes essentially tossed a grenade into received Hughes/Plath mythology, refused all interviews, and let the chips fall where they may. As executor of Plath's estate, Hughes has fought periodic rearguard skirmishes against accusations of arbitrary selection, editing, and timing of the publication of Plath's work. He has also battled – some would claim pressured – biographers and critics, »who extend over the living that license to say whatever they please, to ransack their psyches and reinvent them however they please.« And he has defended his silence, claiming in a letter to Plath biographer, Anne Stevenson, a »... simple wish to recapture for myself, if I can, the privacy of my own feelings and conclusions about Sylvia, and to remove the contamination of everyone else's.«

Hughes's reasons for reversing position at this time are unclear. The poems are dedicated to the couple's children, Frieda and Nicholas, both in their thirties, and early reports suggest that they were in favor of the publication – in fact, may even view the volume as a sort of reclamation of their early lives which were »usurped« to some extent by the Plath myth. On the simplest level, perhaps the sheer act of publication by Hughes may ensure some sort of personal resolution. Or as he has commented elsewhere, »Maybe all poetry, insofar as it moves us and connects with us is a revealing of something that the writer doesn't actually want to say, but desperately needs to communicate, to be delivered of.... The real mystery is this strange need [to share].«

What does seem clear is that Hughes published *Birthday Letters* with full knowledge that he would keep the critical mills in operation for years to come. The risk is that the volume will be read solely for biographical content, or reinforcement of previously held views of Hughes. While there is little question that much of the impact of poems turns on the immediacy of biography – and perhaps objectivity can only come in the fullness of time – this should not override the realization that *Birthday Letters* is a major work of poetry by Hughes, containing some of the most visceral, accessible writing that he has produced to date. In fact, while Hughes opens the gate, he still guards the entrance, and readers looking for true confessions will be disappointed. Moreover, the collection does not represent a seismic shift in Hughes's poetic enterprise. Rather, the interlacing threads – the Lares and Penates of his singular poetic vision – are all here: Hughes's concern with myth and spirituality; his complex response to both the beauty and essentially atavistic elements in nature; his overall sense of determinism, as well as the efforts toward integration or wholeness that are at the root of his poetry, early and late.

Several of the poems in *Birthday Letters* were published previously in either the 1982 or 1994 editions of *New Selected Poems*, although few critics capitalized on the connections to Plath. Earlier volumes, such as *Remains of Elmet* (1979), rooted in the historic Calder Valley of Hughes's childhood, or the moving, elegiac *Moortown* poems also prefigure some of the more effective poems of the sequence. In previous volumes, Hughes

generally maintained a determined distance from overt disclosures of the self, and with few exceptions – notably some of the poems of *Moortown* – rarely wrote in the first person. In *Birthday Letters*, Hughes moves center stage, and in relatively atypical open, tender, conversational language addresses Plath, the »you« of the poems. The concluding lines from »A Visit,« written ten years after Plath's death, set the stage for what are essentially poems of remembrance, a poet reflecting, perhaps attempting to come to terms with his life, with a difficult, complex relationship that continues to exert an influence:

All around me that midnight's
Giant clock of frost. And somewhere
Inside it, wanting to feel nothing,
A pulse of fever. Somewhere
Inside that numbness of earth
Our future trying to happen.
I look up – as if to meet your voice
With all its urgent future
That has burst in on me. Then look back
At the book of printed words.
You are ten years dead. It is only a story.
Your story. My story.

Hughes graphs the chronology of the relationship in his eighty-eight poem sequence, written over a twenty-five to thirty-year period – first sighting, relatively brief dating period, marriage, teaching and travels in the US, return to England, birth of their two children, separation, Plath's suicide, and the years thereafter. »Daffodils« poignantly captures the early years when the couple was poor, hopeful, and unsuspecting, with few premonitions of the future: »Remember how we picked the daffodils? Nobody else remembers, but I remember.... / Our lives were still a raid on our good luck / We knew we'd live forever / We had not learned / What a fleeting glance of the everlasting / Daffodils are. Never identified / The nuptial flight of the rarest ephemera – / Our own days!« Other poems such as »Robbing Myself,« »Life After Death,« the continued references to Plath's eyes, »a crush of diamonds,« reproduced in her son, »the long, balletic monkey-elegant fingers,« remembered by »your daughter's fingers / in everything they do,« or a later poem, »The Prism,« with refrains from Plath's poetry, »the waters off beautiful Nauset,« convey immediate grief, quiet remembrance, and perhaps later, reluctant acceptance of a not fully understood past. Poems such as »The Beach« or, more specifically, »Rabbit Catcher« (Hughes's response to Plath's poem) outline marital discord, here raised to a fever pitch by Plath's relentless fury:

It was May. How had it started? What
Had bared our edges? What quirky twist
Of the moon's blade had set us, so early in the day,
Bleeding each other? What had I done? I had
Somehow misunderstood. Inaccessible
In your dybbuk fury, babies
Hurled into the car, you drove.

Probably one of the more controversial aspects of the book is Hughes's apparent belief that regardless of his effort to either assuage or understand Plath's turmoil, he was ultimately a helpless witness. Moreover, Hughes suggests throughout the sequence that his relationship with Plath was fated, preordained – whether by the stars, an inevitable disjunction between two highly creative people, Plath's uncontained demons, or her obsession with her father's death. Thus, Plath's assignment (or at least as he interprets the situation) of the ambiguous role of father/protector/lover to Hughes was one in which he was miscast, caught between Plath and her father, »the god with the smoking gun,«

and destined to fail. Perhaps he's correct – and Plath's poems, letters and journals lend some support to this view; yet this also has the effect of destroying objectivity, of absolving Hughes unnecessarily for any responsibility for the relationship.

The theme surfaces early in »St. Botolph's,« Hughes's version of their first meeting recounted in Plath's letters, a generally memorable response to Plath's earlier descriptions of their meeting, »he kissed me bang smash on the mouth,« swamped initially in an astrological jumble: »I left it for serious astrologers to worry / That conjunction, conjunct / With your natal ruling Mars.« Other poems such as »Ouija,« again a response to Plath's poem of the same name, resolve in particularly uncomfortable, almost trite language that undercuts the full nature of Plath's tragedy: »Fame cannot be avoided. And when it comes / You will have paid for it with your happiness / Your husband and your life.« This sense of inevitability is questionable, even objectionable, in »Dreamers« – the one poem in which Hughes mentions his mistress – which is structured, in part, on an interplay of Plath's German blood, the Jewish woman, »slightly filthy with erotic mystery,« where Fate, dreams, lead to the irrevocable conclusion:

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.

More surprising, in light of his impressive career, perhaps, is Hughes's initial sense of himself as a provincial – at least in comparison to Plath, or more specifically to Plath, an American. In »Fulbright Scholars,« the first poem in the volume, Hughes spots the picture in the Strand of the current crop of Fulbright scholars, wonders in later years whether Plath was among them, and remembers buying a peach: »It was the first peach I had ever tasted. / I could hardly believe how delicious / At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh / By my ignorance of the simplest things.« In »18 Rugby Street,« Hughes ignores the warning sign, the vestigial scar of Plath's early suicide attempt, and loses himself in their early lovemaking: »You were slim and smooth as a fish / You were a new world. My new world / So this is America, I marvelled / Beautiful, beautiful America.« And in the wonderful »A Pink Wool Knitted Dress,« Hughes describes himself on Bloomsday, his wedding day, as a »post-war utility son-in-law / Not quite the Frog Prince. Maybe the Swineherd / Stealing this daughter's pedigree dreams / From under her watchtowered searchlit future.« What is memorable about this poem, though, is Hughes's remembrance of Plath – trusting, giving, with her future stretching before her:

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

Overarching the sequence are Plath's painful struggles to create, or forge what would become the distinctive voice of *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* from the bedrock of her »inclusive inner crisis,« and Hughes's efforts in this development – no small matter of controversy among Plath scholars. Over the years, critics have attempted to evaluate the range and nature of the Plath/Hughes creative liaison, and there is some evidence that they may have learned as well as opened new poetic territory for each other. Hughes has commented that »our minds soon became two parts of one operation. We dreamed a lot of

shared or complementary dreams. Our telepathy was intrusive.... throughout our time together we looked at each other's verse at every stage – up to the *Ariel* poems of October 1962, when we separated.« Yet their methods were clearly different: »Hers were to collect a heap of vivid objects and good words and make a pattern; the pattern would be projected from somewhere deep inside, from her very distinctly evolved myth.... My method was to find a thread and draw the rest out of a hidden tangle. Her method was more painterly; mine more narrative, perhaps.«

In the early stages, Hughes's voice was the more commanding as he attacked his themes in words that seemed to erupt spontaneously from some natural, untapped source, while Plath, a more precise, willed poet explored her chosen ground in direct, economical language. Plath herself quickly realized that her early poems were »exercises,« that her reputation would be built on the late poems of *Ariel* and *Winter Trees*. Plath's poetic development in the last period of her life, her efforts to come to terms with her materials borne out of the death of her father when she was eight, her suicide attempt at twenty-one, her compulsion to tell her story, to write with »the full power and weight of her extraordinary nature« continue to be the cornerstone of dissertations, critical studies, and biographies. Hughes has no doubt provided additional fuel with poems such as »The Table,« or the unsettling »Suttee,« his powerful recreation of Plath's symbolic or ritualistic death and rebirth as a poet:

And I was your husband
Performing the part of your father
In our new myth –
Both of us drenched in a petroleum
Of ancient American sunlight.
Both of us consumed
By the old child in the new birth –
Not the babe of light but the old
Babe of dark flames and screams
That sucked the oxygen out of both of us.

Finally, not all of the poems of *Birthday Letters* are successful. Those structured on astrology, magic numbers, voices from the ouija board – however genuine Hughes's convictions – appear arcane and stilted. This is small criticism of a volume where Hughes writes at the full range of his linguistic powers, shifts convincingly from moods of tenderness, humor, and grief to tell his story of a relationship that is loving, complex, perhaps obsessive, but always immediate:

I still have it. I hold it –
'The waters off beautiful Nauset'
Your intact childhood, your Paradise
With its pre-Adamite horse-shoe crab in the shallows
As a guarantee, God's own trademark.
I turn it, a prism, this way and that.
That way I see the filmy surf-wind flicker
Of your ecstasies, your visions in the crystal.
This way the irreparably-crushed lamp
In my crypt of dream, totally dark.
Under your gravestone.

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