

## 'These Super People': The Superimposition of Ted Hughes' 'Brasilia' on Sylvia Plath's 'Brasilia'

Georg Nöffke 

### ABSTRACT

When Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* was published in 1998, only months before the poet's death, the volume came as such a surprise that it made headlines in both England and America. To readers hungry for biographical revelation, it seemed as though Hughes was finally offering a confessional account of his lifelong association with Sylvia Plath. But a careful examination of these poems indicates that Hughes' intentions are not uncomplicatedly or ingenuously autobiographical. Hughes assesses, appropriates, and recalibrates Plath's mythically charged poetic oeuvre to mould his own myth, and does so in a manner that echoes the way Plath appropriates his work when she writes the *Ariel* poems. In fact, *Birthday Letters* is simultaneously Hughes' last volume of poetry and the last instance of the poetic dialogue between the two poets. Though *Birthday Letters* is saturated with references to Plath's poetry, many poems go beyond incidental allusion to address specific ones by Plath, some of them even sharing titles. This article examines Plath's 'Brasilia' and Hughes' 'Brasilia' as poems that, together, represent an exemplary instance of the Hughes-Plath textual exchange. Neither of these poems has been analyzed closely in existing scholarship. Plath's poem envisions the emergence of a race of 'super-people,' inhuman figures who present a threat to the speaker's child. Hughes' poem superimposes another vision onto Plath's 'Brasilia': a resurrected Plath herself, an immortal literary icon who becomes the super-human threatening those left behind in the wake of her death.

### KEYWORDS

*Birthday Letters*; 'Brasilia'; intertextuality; Sylvia Plath; Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes' 'Brasilia' (*Birthday Letters* 178) is a poem that calls up – and, through acute recalibration, tries to call into question – Sylvia Plath's 'Brasilia' (258). Both these poems, which may appear cryptic or inaccessible at first, which may seem like peripheral exploits in the larger bodies of work to which they belong, have been underexamined and undervalued in the critical output devoted to Hughes and Plath. Each poem is evocative and dense, and suggestive of preoccupations that typify its maker's sensibilities. Considered together, the poems testify to what Diane Middlebrook terms 'the call-and-response manner' of Plath and Hughes' creative partnership (191). They capture key aesthetic attitudes, and some characteristic rejoinders, of a famed artistic collaboration.

**CONTACT** Georg Nöffke  georg.noeffke@up.ac.za

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Inscribed in them are resonant, typical gestures of Plathian or Hughesian vision and revision. This article therefore contests the implicit status of Plath's 'Brasilia' and Hughes' 'Brasilia' as outlier pieces in their respective oeuvres. This is done through juxtaposed, close readings of the two texts. Preceding the close readings is a preamble that discusses the private and public historical context out of which these poems emerged.

When *Birthday Letters* was published only months before Hughes' death in 1998, the volume came as a surprise to those who were interested in him and his work. This was not because the manuscript had been prepared with the utmost secrecy, though it had – a considerable feat in British publishing, Erica Wagner tells us (25). Rather, it was because of what the book contained. For over three decades, Hughes had refused to go into personal detail about his life with Plath, whom he married in 1956, and who, after they had separated in 1962 due to Hughes' infidelity, committed suicide in 1963. During this period, while he oversaw the posthumous publication of a large part of Plath's artistic output, Hughes maintained what Andrew Motion calls 'a bristling, badger silence' with regard to their private life (22). The stance, Motion goes on, 'seemed dignified to some, reprehensible to others, and fascinating to everyone' (22). Commenting only on Plath's work in his capacity as a critic and as her editor, Hughes kept quiet while other critics and biographers examined the poetry and known facts of the relationship,<sup>1</sup> often doing so to criticize him for his perceived role in Plath's demise and his restrictive management of her estate.<sup>2</sup>

What was so surprising about *Birthday Letters*, then, was that it dealt exclusively with Hughes' time and lifelong association with Plath. Here, it appeared, Hughes was finally offering to the public, in the medium he knew best, a personal recollection in 88 poems, a poetic memoir. The proliferation of biographical details, the vivid scenes that track the stages of a life lived together, seemed to confirm this. Plath biographer Anne Stevenson was moved to write that, with his new collection, Hughes was "'confessional" as [he] has never been before' (x). And what Hughes himself said of the book at the time only seemed to further the view. In his acceptance speech for the 1998 Forward Poetry Prize, which had been awarded to *Birthday Letters*, Hughes stated that the volume was 'a gathering of the occasions' on which he had tried 'to open a direct, private, inner contact' with Plath (qtd in Wagner 22). He claimed that his conscious aim during these occasions had not been to write poetry, but rather to evoke Plath's presence to himself, 'to feel her there listening' (qtd in Wagner 22). It is not hard to see how such an explanation could cement a reading public's presuppositions. Indeed, such was the general interest in and excitement about Hughes' new work that the publication of *Birthday Letters* became a literary event – the story made newspaper headlines in both England and America, a reality almost unheard of for a volume of poetry.

Since the extra- and intra-textual narrative of Hughes' last book seemed to be nakedly confessional, the fact that it came in the form of poetry did not detract from its assumed biographical veracity. Rather, the biography appeared to validate the art. This can be seen in comments made by the then-editor of *The Times*, Peter Stothard, when the newspaper serialized poems from the collection in January 1998. Stothard was keen to stress that such poems *deserved* to be published in a newspaper: 'these were real events that happened and this was a narration of them. This was first-rate art that had the qualities of a real news story. You can work in papers for decades and not come across something that has both of these qualities' (qtd in Wagner 25). Stothard is here, perhaps

inadvertently, establishing a hierarchy of art – in the realm of newsworthy narratives, art with an apparent biographical truthfulness (art based on ‘real events’) trumps art without such a truthfulness. In the process, he also spotlights a particular and popular way of reading literature, where the biographical imperative becomes the key factor of critical reception. Much of Sylvia Plath’s poetic output has been interpreted in this way. Already in 1976 Judith Kroll noted with dismay that readers are inclined to view Plath’s poetry ‘as one might view the bloodstains at the site of a murder’ (1). But such an approach, where a hunger for personal revelation subordinates other considerations, tends to reduce the scope of the poetry, and to deny it its autonomy as art. And though a book like *Birthday Letters*, and much of the poetry of Sylvia Plath, is unquestionably informed by biographical elements, meaning that these poets do indeed mine their life experiences in order furnish their art, it still does not follow that the work amounts simply to a synthesis of identifiable biographical elements. As Wagner affirms, referring specifically to *Birthday Letters*, ‘The work is biographical, yes: but the work is not the biography, the biography is not the work’ (13).

Despite what readers may have assumed about *Birthday Letters*, and despite what Hughes may have claimed, it would be a mistake to view the volume as a narration of so-called ‘real events’. If that were the case, critical aspects of creative manipulation would be overlooked. In fact, a close, careful examination reveals that in these poems we can see Hughes engaging not only with Plath’s poetic preoccupations, but also with *her* engagement with *his* work. He appropriates her turns of phrase, assesses her thematic interests, and reshapes her images in a manner not unlike the one in which she appropriates his work when she writes the *Ariel* poems of 1962. Appraising her artistic predilection for mythic amplification, he provides a myth of his own. While such an instance of an explicitly intertextual approach may appear as something novel in Hughes’ career, something as surprising as the publication of *Birthday Letters* itself, reading the volume in that light would be to make yet another interpretive mistake.

*Birthday Letters* is simultaneously Ted Hughes’ last volume of poetry and the last instance of the poetic dialogue that came to exist between him and Sylvia Plath. What is clear from the biographical information available on the work of these two poets is that a profound creative partnership grew between them during the years of their marriage. ‘They made their life together through words,’ states Janine Utell in an examination and theorization of ‘selected exemplars of intimate life writing’ by and about the poets (155). (Utell looks at journal entries and letters, and at biographical and critical archival studies.) ‘[T]he two together and apart engaged in a vigorous textual and discursive practice,’ she continues, ‘telling and retelling the story of their coupling’ (155). This intense closeness, which blurred the borders of the vocational and the personal, is something to which Hughes attested, in interviews and in letters, at several points in his career.<sup>3</sup> What he reveals in these comments is that, if he was evoking Plath (or a Plath) through his poetry, he was also evoking a history of artistic influence.

That such a history existed is borne out by the work of the poets, where the impact they had on each other is striking. Margaret Dickie Uroff, Lynda K. Bundtzen and Heather Clark have shown how the poems Hughes and Plath wrote during their time together – sometimes on the backs of each other’s drafts – echo each other either in subject matter or in imagery. Both ‘at turns embrace[d] and reject[ed] each other’s influence,’ Clark argues, and we can see in retrospect the way in which each broadened

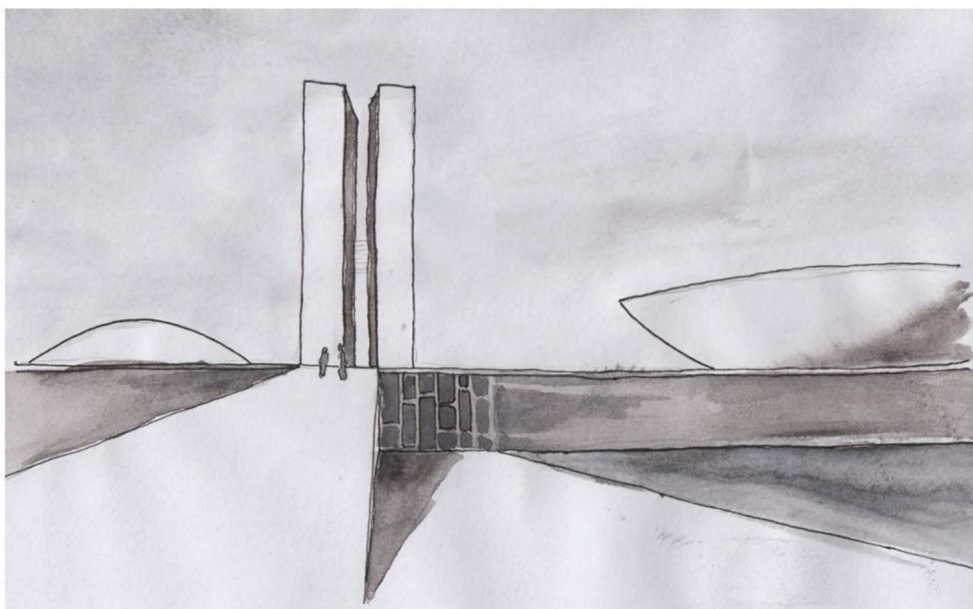
the other's poetic range (101). Uroff, comparing Hughes' early poetry with Plath's late poetry, asserts that there is a similarity between Plath's interest in 'psychological states and extreme human experiences' and Hughes' 'concern with the non-human cosmos' (13). Through Hughes, Uroff maintains, Plath developed an interest in animals and the natural world; because of Plath, Hughes began a shift to a more identifiably personal point of view. The artistic alliance continues even after their separation in 1962, though at this point Plath, by setting up many of her poems in opposition to ones by Hughes, turns the 'productive collusion' into a 'militant rivalry,' as Middlebrook puts it (191, 218). It is therefore with *Birthday Letters*, which Hughes thought of as 'a drama with the dead,' that he responds to and concludes a history of response (qtd in Middlebrook 275).

Just how Hughes responds to Plath can be seen when we compare a poem from *Birthday Letters* with one from the Plath oeuvre. Though the collection is saturated with references to Plath's poetry, a number of poems address specific poems by Plath, many of them even bearing the same titles. One of the most striking examples is Hughes' 'Brasilia,' which replies to and reconfigures Plath's 'Brasilia' (258), a poem she completed on 1 December 1962. The 'Brasilia' pairing has been chosen as the analytical focus of this article for its edifying exemplarity, for the way it, in concentrated form, demonstrates the Hughes-Plath poetic praxis and referential mechanics under discussion, and because neither of these poems has been analyzed closely in existing scholarship.

Plath's abstruse 'Brasilia' imagines a world in thrall to brutal strength. The poem posits – and broods over – the coming of a race of 'super-people' (6). 'Will they occur' is the speaker's worried and worrying first utterance, a question that bears no question mark and thus lands like a blank apprehension of horror (1). Ferocious, affectless, uncanny, these people the speaker imagines are equipped with 'torsos of steel,' 'Winged elbows and eyeholes' (2–3); it takes the shade thrown by 'masses | Of cloud to give them expression' (4–5). Though such an opening may at first seem inscrutable, Plath's point of departure is in the title of her poem. The catalyst of her speaker's nightmarish fantasy is most probably Brasília itself, the planned Brazilian capital that, in 1956, was designed and developed by urban planner Lúcio Costa and architect Oscar Niemeyer, and that, by 1960, was up and running. (It was positioned in the centre of Brazil to draw people away from the overcrowded coastal cities, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in particular.) Anthony Daniels summarizes the city thus:

The first thing to say about Brasilia is that it is an astonishing achievement or feat, and this is so whether you think it good or bad or somewhere in between the two. [Daniels is critical of the city.] Where nothing but a remote, hot, and scrubby plain existed just over half a century ago, there now stands a functioning city of over three million people. This is enough to excite wonderment. What perhaps is even more astonishing is that Brasilia was up and running within less than four years of the first foundation being laid. (34)

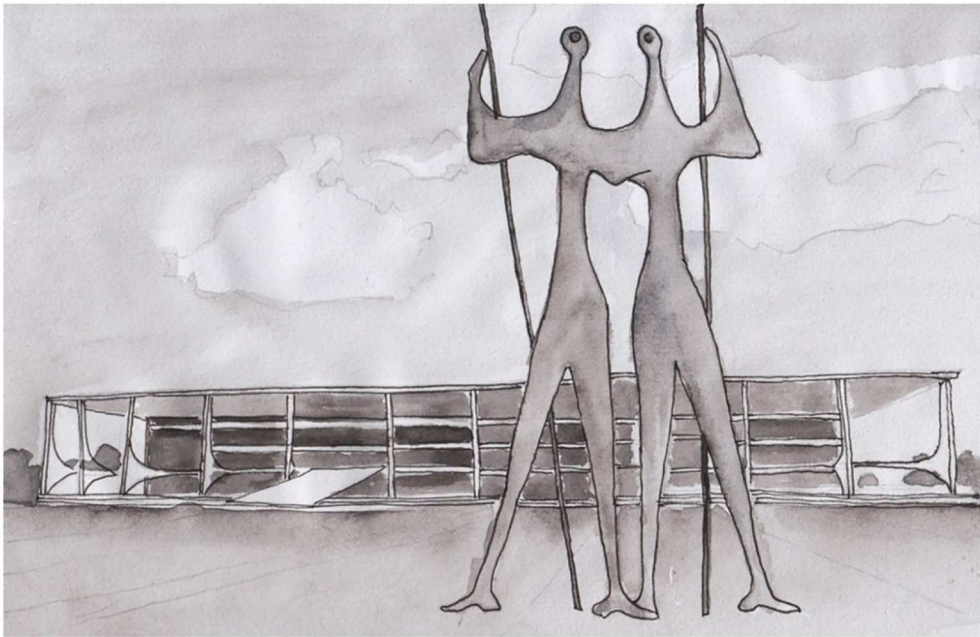
Abounding with monumental architecture – large structures with broad, clean, swooping curves, steep ramps, concrete domes and bowls, imposing monolithic towers, rectangular buildings placed on plinths and accentuated by vaulting, arched pillars – Brasília showcases the Le Corbusier-inspired utopian Modernism, a strain of futurism, favoured by Costa and Niemeyer. The city urges notions of a superhuman future subduing nature; Costa himself saw it as 'a deliberate act of conquest' (qtd in Stäubli 12). To Plath, who by December 1962 must have seen photographs of the new metropolis constructed in



**Figure 1.** Stephen Steyn's National Congress of Brasília (2013) designed by Oscar Niemeyer. Black ink and water on paper, 10 x 15 cm. Commissioned by the author of this article.

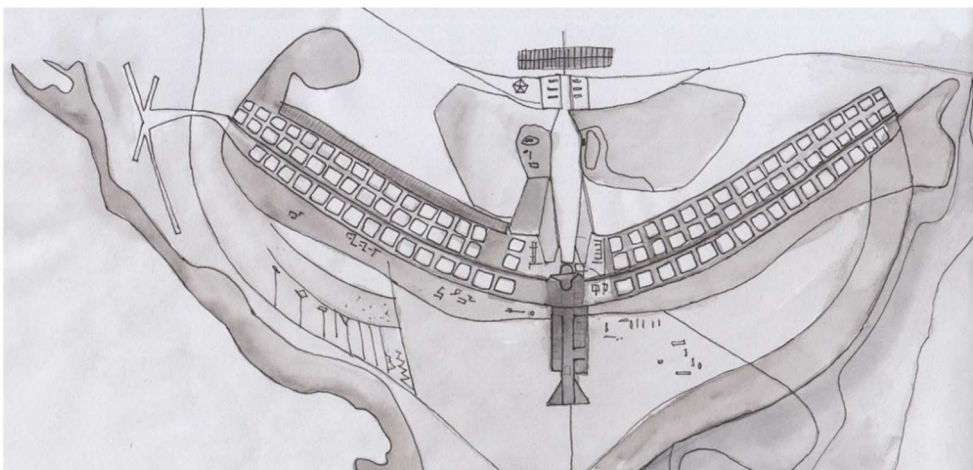
only 41 months,<sup>4</sup> it in all probability spelled a pitiless reality in the offing. Daniels would agree; he finds Brasília's design 'inhuman' (35). (See [Figure 1.](#)) At the centre of the *Three Powers Plaza* stands the *Os Candangos* ('The Warriors') sculpture (see [Figure 2](#)), created by Bruni Giorgi in 1959, and these twin figures, with winged elbows and holes where faces should be, bear more than a passing resemblance to the super-people the speaker of Plath's 'Brasília' describes. It is almost certainly the *Os Candangos* statues that serve as the foundation of the dire, oncoming world the speaker visualizes, and from which she shrinks.

What is also noteworthy about 'Brasília' is that, in it, we can see Plath writing against Hughes and a primary concern established early in his career. Keith Sagar argues that, from the beginning, Hughes is 'searching for a way of reconciling human vision with the energies, powers, presences, of the non-human cosmos' (4). Several poems in Hughes' *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960) show human subjects humbled before the forces of nature. In the title poem 'The Hawk in the Rain' (*Collected Poems* 19), the speaker, involved in a desperate and futile fight to delay being 'swallow [ed] [by] the earth's mouth' (2), 'drown[s] in the drumming ploughland' (1). In 'Wind' (*Collected Poems* 36), the speaker and a companion must suffer the overwhelming force of a wind that 'wield[s] | Blade-light, luminous and emerald' (7). Both 'October Dawn' (*Collected Poems* 37) and 'Crow Hill' (*Collected Poems* 62) contemplate the threat of a landscape that can effortlessly nullify human endeavour. With 'Brasília,' Plath reverses the power gradient, presenting a natural world cowed by human aspirations. This inversion becomes even more piquant when we examine the sketch plan for the city (see [Figure 3](#)), as Plath may well have done.<sup>5</sup> Though Costa described the plan as a cross, it also clearly



**Figure 2.** Stephen Steyn's *Os Candangos* (2013) designed by Bruno Giorgi. Black ink and water on paper, 10 x 15 cm. Commissioned by the author of this article.

resembles a large bird with wings outstretched (qtd in Stäubli 12). At the end of 'The Hawk in the Rain,' the speaker imagines the soaring titular hawk yielding to the necessity of death 'in [its] own time' (16). Hughes' conclusion pictures the bird hurled to the ground by the tumultuous weather; the earth reabsorbs it. If Plath did indeed see Costa's sketch, she may have been reminded of Hughes' poem, and may have drawn



**Figure 3.** Stephen Steyn's *Sketch Plan of Brasília (Plano Piloto)* (2013) designed by Lúcio Costa. Black ink and water on paper, 8 x 15 cm. Commissioned by the author of this article.



another conclusion. That this plan for Brasília – a city founded in the wilderness as an ‘act of conquest’ – should call to mind a bird on the ground might have seemed to her like an ironic perversion of Hughes’ thematic concern, a mocking confirmation of humanity’s superiority.

But if ‘Brasilia’ emphasizes humanity’s superiority, it does not celebrate it. A cardinal factor in the speaker’s trepidation is, we learn, the fact that she is a mother whose child is under threat. Her description of the super-people is trailed by these lines: ‘And my baby a nail | Driven, driven in’ (7–8). The twofold allusion at once lessens and amplifies. The child, dehumanized, is assimilated, is hammered into the futuristic architecture found in the kingdom of the menacing *Übermenschen*. Conversely, the sacrificial child is also assigned a Christ-like momentousness: as Christ was absorbed into heaven after a torturous death, so the child is absorbed into an idealized system by gruesome means.

Such sentiments are echoed in other poems of Plath’s late phase. While the *Ariel* voice is often reclamatory and retributive, it has other registers as well. There are, of course, the many iterations of a mythically charged trajectory of revenge, ‘Daddy’ (222) and ‘Lady Lazarus’ (244) being the most famous. In that poetic narrative, once-reverential daughters and wives enact the elimination of those monumental male figures they once worshipped; in doing so, they repeal the socio-cultural authority these men wielded. But there are also poems about children, and these pieces strike an altogether different note. They open a contemplative, generative textual space; they make possible the achievement of an authority not reliant on the valorization or the demonization of paternal gatekeepers. The poems show mothers finding a temporary and invigorating redemption in their children; as such, they offer respite from the battlegrounds mapped out elsewhere. Though the drive towards mythic enlargement persists, its accentuation and effects are different. Where the configuration is that of a mother and son, the relationship is often described with reference to Mary and Christ. So in ‘Nick and the Candlestick’ (240), for example, the speaker calls her child the ‘baby in the barn’ (42). Yet the grand, public destructiveness of the other *Ariel* poems comes to trouble the private mother-and-child meditations, too. Several late poems make plain that the separate peace has been contaminated by a pervasive fear for the future of the boy.<sup>6</sup> In ‘Mary’s Song’ (257), where the speaker also identifies with the mother of Christ, the horror is expressed that ‘the world will kill and eat’ her ‘golden child’ (21); the Mary-like speaker of ‘Brasilia,’ as we have seen, believes that her son’s humanity is the desired condition, that his ascension to superhumanity is a malign transmutation that will, in effect, destroy him as she knows him.

Lines 9 and 10 hint that the negative metamorphosis is already underway. Alarmed, the mother detects in her mechanizing son an imperial expansiveness: ‘He shrieks in his grease | Bones nosing for distances.’ This she juxtaposes with her own increasing irrelevance: ‘And I, nearly extinct’ (11).<sup>7</sup> She then confirms the Christian dimensions to which she has alluded: there is mention of the iconographic ‘star,’ that indispensable constituent of ‘[t]he old story’ (14–15). This is followed by a snapshot of an obsolete, agrarian way of life beholden to a nurturing landscape, a model alterity linked to the nearly extinct mother and included, we can assume, as the beleaguered antithesis of Brasília and its widening horizons: ‘In the lane I meet sheep and wagons, | Red earth, motherly blood’ (16–17).

'Brasilia' draws to a close with a final plea for the son's exemption from integration into the superior race. The mother does not plead with the super-people to spare her, as though her doom – the doom, also, of the rural world she occupies – were a *fait accompli*. Her imploration is a prayer:

O You who eat

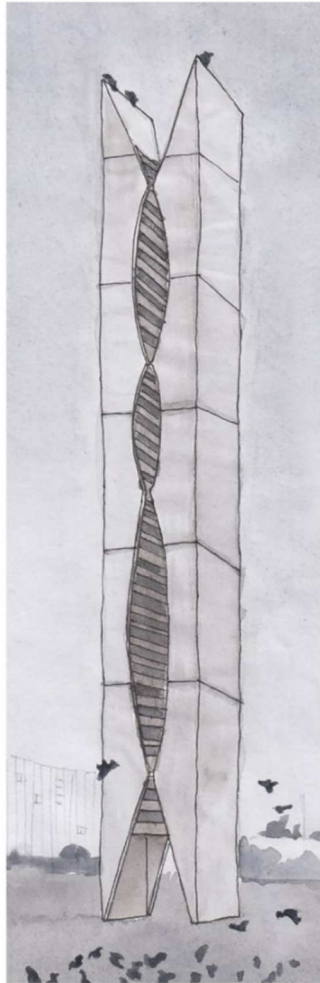
People like light rays, leave  
This one  
Mirror safe, unredeemed

By the dove's annihilation,  
The glory  
The power, the glory. (18–24)

Many of Plath's motherhood poems wield mirror metaphors in their delineations of children.<sup>8</sup> In 'For a Fatherless Son' (205), the mother equates the blank, blameless beauty of her son to a 'blind mirror,' something she looks in to 'find no face but [her] own' (8–9); she feels this salving quality separates her son from the corruptions of the world. Whether 'mirror' in 'Brasilia' is used as an adjective denoting an attribute ('mirror safe'), or as a noun (meaning, then, that the child-mirror must be kept safe), the import remains the same: it is the son's innocence, an open-ended state free from – and, ironically, positioned above – contaminating knowledge and purpose, that the mother wishes to preserve. That the son's mirror purity is jeopardized by a dove is not as odd as it may seem. An instantiation of the Holy Spirit at Christ's baptism, a dove marked the commencement of Christ's ministry. It could also be said that the dove's appearance proclaimed the beginning of the biblical events that saw Christ fulfil his purpose, transcend his humanity, and ascend to heaven. Thus in 'Brasilia' the dove's traditional symbolic qualities of peace and holiness are overturned: the bird turns oppressive and minatory: it annihilates.<sup>9</sup> (It is precisely this kind of abysmal reshaping from which the mother wants to rescue her son.) Given the framework of the poem, the choice of a dove here is especially apt. Aside from the *Os Candangos* sculpture, the *Three Powers Plaza* also has a seven-storey dovecote, designed by Niemeyer in 1961 (see [Figure 4](#)). The structure places real doves (or at least pigeons) at the centre of a city whose population is predominantly Catholic. (The *Three Powers* of the plaza are, officially, judicial, legislative, and executive, but the phrasing undoubtedly recalls another, holier triumvirate.) The final part of the mother's entreaty is a variation on the doxology from the Lord's Prayer. She underlines the awful glory of the super-people as a concluding distillation of her panic that, as Christ was sacrificed in order for him to re-join the Holy Trinity, so her Christ-like son will be offered up to a society of supernatural entities and their cold future. It is a fate that will separate her from her child and, as an act of divine translation, obliterate his humanity.

If Plath's 'Brasilia' registers trepidation at the thought of horrors to come, Hughes' 'Brasilia' relates them as intractable history. With a title unequivocal about the intertextual relationship that exists between the two poems, this poem, instead of envisioning a race of super-people coming into being, records the re-emergence of one being. Whereas the first poem couched its worries for the future in the present tense, the second glances back at a foreclosed fate using the past tense. 'You returned,' the opening line declares, and from the style of *Birthday Letters*, where Hughes addresses





**Figure 4.** Stephen Steyn's Dovecote (2013) designed by Oscar Niemeyer. Black ink and water on paper, 12 x 5 cm. Commissioned by the author of this article.

his subject directly, we know that the reference is to Plath (1). This Plath returns from the afterlife in a 'steel helm' (2). Indeed, the construction of a Plath that Hughes' poem offers is a character who boasts her own 'Empire,' and the account of her return is one of post-mortem revenge, divine retribution (24). In a setting that appears decidedly Roman, she drags accused individuals – her father, her mother, and the speaker of the poem, presumably her husband – 'into court, [her] arena' (3), where the stadium is later described as a 'Colosseum' (18). After delivering three sentences, one for each person singled out, a 'blade of lightning' descends that at once decapitates all three of the accused (13). While her father does not survive the punishment, her mother and the speaker of the poem somehow do. The 'same flash,' lines 16 and 17 tell us, also '[s]natche[s]' this Plath back 'up into Heaven' in a manner that recalls how the speaker of Plath's 'Brasilia' feared her child would be absorbed into heaven.

In Hughes' poem, which superimposes his thematic preoccupations over those visible in the Plath poem, it is Plath herself who becomes and brings about what her speaker in 'Brasilia' fears. She, a Bellona-like entity, is now a member of the race of super-people, and it is through her insistence on divine justice that those who were nearest to her must be annihilated. In its outsized orchestration, its preoccupation with divine punishment, a scene such as this is in keeping with the world *Birthday Letters* evokes. Just as it is vital to recognize that Plath's poetry demonstrates an abiding propensity for mythic intensification, so too is it vital to understand that, in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes presents a myth of Plath, and of his life with her. The 'mythical method' and 'autobiographical impulse,' Corcoran declares, are fused in the volume (231). From the roughly chronological sequence emerges a portrait of two lovers so doomed, so star-crossed as to be Shakespearian; in fact, as Corcoran also points out, the presence of Shakespeare is '[deeply entwined] in the relationship as Hughes recalls, figures or reinvents it' (231–32). The result is that Hughes' 'drama with the dead' plays out like a tragedy. Beyond Shakespeare there is Ancient Greece: in the latter stages of the book, the older Hughes of the poems 'appropriates an Orpheus-like identity for himself,' as Bundtzen has shown (168). Yet Hughes falters in his attempts to retrieve his Plath-Eurydice through poetry – the narrative was, and is, apparently out of his control. In 'Setebos' (*Birthday Letters* 132), a poem that draws heavily on *The Tempest*, we encounter the arresting line, 'Then the script overtook us' (25). The statement encapsulates the fated universe of the volume. The two aspiring, energetic and naïve poets we find early in the book edge ineluctably closer to an appalling future, one which, when it arrives, destroys them both, though in separate ways.

Hughes' 'Brasilia,' one of the last poems in *Birthday Letters*, shows Plath's resurrection in the wake of her destruction (she needs no Orpheus); it makes that resurrection a source of devastation for those close to her. In emphasizing this movement from death to rebirth, Hughes takes up a motif central to several of Plath's *Ariel* poems, where her speakers disavow false selves and, in violent, complicated performances, reclaim truer, more potent modes of being: 'I | Have a self to recover, a queen,' the speaker of 'Stings' (214) announces (51–52); 'Dying | Is an art,' 'Lady Lazarus' proclaims (43–44). The differences in Hughes' poem are that the epiphany is negative, and the incarnation final, static. Far from being a celebrated state, this new selfhood is viewed much as Plath's speaker in 'Brasilia' views the warrior super-people: as unfeeling, all-powerful and terrifying.

With 'Brasilia,' Hughes therefore portrays a vengeful Plath immortalized in art who, as a literary icon, made art and is made by art. She is capable of accusing and assigning blame *ad infinitum*. After this super-Plath has delivered her three sentences, the 'sentences' referring both to her judgement and her poetry, the speaker explains that her 'great love [has] spoken' (10). (The 'great love,' a phrase at once earnest and sarcastic, probably also refers to Plath's work.) That the speaker feels the punishment unjust is made plain in the next few lines:

Only the most horrible crime  
 Could have brought down  
 The blade of lightning  
 That descended then. (11–14)

The lines are a reworking of words from Plath's poem 'The Colossus' (*Collected Poems* 129), where the speaker's father is a gigantic, wrecked statue she is tasked with reconstructing.

Surveying the landscape of debris, the speaker concludes: 'It would take more than a lightning-stroke | To create such a ruin' (22–23). As with Hughes' commentary on the fears of the mother in 'Brasilia,' the implication is severe: the Plath of Hughes' poem is the true cause of the ruin, the one responsible for what the daughter of 'The Colossus' laments.

'Even the dogs [are] stunned' by the violence of the punishment on display, Hughes' speaker goes on to say (15). These 'dogs' are most likely intended to represent admirers of Plath's work, or, more specifically, a certain kind of anti-Hughes, pro-Plath devotee, a person who, as a defensive, dismissive Hughes saw it in a letter to the *Guardian* in April 1989, 'live[s] in some kind of Fantasia' about the poet (*Letters of Ted Hughes* 553). Hughes dedicates an entire poem in *Birthday Letters* to attacking such admirers, the distressingly titled and grisly 'The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother' (*Birthday Letters* 195), which is addressed to his and Plath's daughter. That even the dogs are stunned by the spectacle before them validates the speaker's belief in an unjust punishment. The presence of the dogs at the scene also serves as a reminder of how very public this family affair has become. We are, after all, in something like the Colosseum, where private suffering and personal blame have become entertainment. And Hughes' relocation to Rome takes the notion of conquest and empire – a notion key to Plath's 'Brasilia' – back to its archetypal source, just as he takes the fears and anxiety of that poem back to their source by asseverating that it is Plath herself who must be dreaded.

Hughes' 'Brasilia' ends with an unnerving image of the ceaselessness of art. 'Every day since' (24) the super-Plath's judgement and destruction, the speaker says, and throughout the empire she has created for herself, her 'effigies cry out on their plinths, | Dry-eyed. [Her] portraits, tearlessly, | Weep in the books' (28–30). The 'effigies' and 'portraits' could refer to Plath's followers, those so-called dogs who now fashion themselves after her, but it is likelier that Hughes' diction once again signals a conflation of artist and art: Plath's textual creations become proxies of their originator; as a result, they are capable of voicing eternally the judgement of injustice. If they do so dry-eyed, tearlessly, this is because of their iterative nature.

What is also revealing is that the effigies and portraits are said to cry out and weep 'Like the motherly wraith who nightly | Wailed through the streets of Tenochtitlán | Just before Cortés ended it' (25–27). The 'motherly wraith' is an allusion to the widespread Meso- and South American legend of *La Llorona*, 'The Wailing Woman'. As various cataloguers and interpreters of the story – see Leddy, de Aragón, Castro, Winick, and Fuller – have shown, the legend survives in a vast array of regional versions, and has many possible sources. One line of origin goes back to Aztec folklore, to narratives about the goddess Cihuacoatl (or Ciuaacoatl); her appearance in Tenochtitlán shortly before the arrival of the Spanish was said to herald doom. 'This goddess,' writes Fuller, could be 'linked to the ... omens that are recorded in the codex<sup>10</sup> as having foretold the Conquest: the voice of a woman heard wailing at night, crying about the fate of her children'. Leddy mentions another folkloric root – the belief that the wailing ghostly woman is La Malinche, the Nahuatl interpreter who aided Cortés in his conquest and became his consort, but who, in this twist of the historical tale, 'repented of her Quisling cooperation with Cortés and who, as La Llorona, now wept for her sin' (273). In many still-circulating versions of the legend, though, La Llorona is a woman named Maria. To paraphrase Castro's delineation of the salient narrative points: Maria's relationship with her abusive or unfaithful husband founders; she, either despairing

or vengeful, drowns her children, and then, recognizing what she has done, drowns herself; unable to enter the afterlife, Maria is forced to remain on earth, where she wanders and wails as she searches for her offspring.

With his *La Llorona* simile, Hughes suggests that the vengeful Plath he depicts – a Plath whose powers are extended to weeping effigies and portraits – constitutes a threat to her children in the same way that she and her ‘great love’ constituted a threat to her father, mother and husband. (This is a significant addition since the children have been wholly absent in the poem up until this point.) The suggestion is strengthened by the fact that the Mary-like speaker of Plath’s ‘*Brasilia*,’ a mother who cries for her child because she fears for the future, finds a shadow self in the Maria of the legend, a mother who cries for her children because of guilt over the past. The inclusion of the reference to Hernando Cortés, who conquered Tenochtitlán in 1519 and overthrew the Aztec empire, something which the poem claims silenced the motherly wraith, echoes the way in which Hughes’ ‘*Brasilia*’ silences her grieving, nearly-extinct mother.

Contemplating the poetic interaction between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath in *Birthday Letters*, Jo Gill wonders whether Hughes’ letters ‘are the first in an exchange of letters to which Plath, as implied addressee, is invited to respond,’ or whether they are rather ‘responses to messages which he has already received through the medium of Plath’s extant writing’ (Gill 59). ‘The collection,’ Gill decides, ‘leaves this question open as a sign of the fluidity, or indecipherability, of meaning’. Gill’s answer is in keeping with Hughes’ statements concerning his book. It implies that Plath, through her work, was an active presence in Hughes’ work, and this is undeniable. But the nature of the exchange between the poets is frequently anything but innocuous, and the volume is not open-ended. *Birthday Letters*, in its treatment of Plath, runs a gamut of emotions and intentions, from explanation to puzzlement to diagnosis to rebuke, and in many poems, Hughes honours the battlelines Plath drew in 1962. Such is the case with his response to Plath’s ‘*Brasilia*,’ where he imposes his poetic vision on hers. In this instance of the dialogue, Hughes is speaking over Plath.

## Notes

1. Hughes broke his silence in 1989 – by writing a letter to the *Guardian* and an article for *The Independent* – when admirers of Sylvia Plath complained to the *Guardian* that her tombstone was missing. Plath’s grave, located in Heptonstall and with a headstone that reads ‘SYLVIA PLATH HUGHES,’ had been vandalized so many times in two-and-a-half decades, the ‘HUGHES’ on the headstone scratched off, that eventually the stone was removed. (In due course it was returned.) It should be noted that, if Hughes kept quiet about his life with Plath, he also tried to enforce silence, denying scholars and biographers who were critical of him the right to quote from Plath’s work. Over the decades there were several accounts of battles with the Plath estate, which was managed first by Ted Hughes, and then by Olwyn Hughes (Ted Hughes’ sister).
2. Jacqueline Rose calls his oversight of the Plath corpus ‘a so-called neutral activity weighed down by the heaviest of psychosexual, aesthetic and ethical investment’ (74).
3. There are three examples worth mentioning. Speaking in an interview for the BBC radio programme *Two of a Kind* in 1961 (Plath was being interviewed as well), Hughes claimed that he often felt he and Plath drew on a ‘single shared mind’ for poetic inspiration (qtd in Middlebrook xvi). Four years later, Hughes told the *Guardian* that the two of them had been ‘like two feet, each one using everything the other did’; it had been ‘a working partnership’ that was

- 'all-absorbing' (Horder 9). Then, in a 1975 letter to Plath's mother Aurelia, Hughes states that he and Plath 'sacrificed everything to writing,' that, had they not met, they probably would have pursued different careers (qtd in Middlebrook 241).
4. See Daniel Mangabeira's 'Brasília through British Media,' which tracks 'articles published in the British media about the Brazilian capital' from 1956 to 2012. The rapid construction of Brasília was a matter of some interest in England. As Mangabeira indicates, when the city was dedicated by President Juscelino Kubitschek on 21 April 1960, three British newspapers – *The Times*, *Financial Times*, and *Sunday Times* – covered the story in the days that followed. Just over a year before the founding, the London-based *Architectural Review* had published a feature, 'Building Brasilia,' which detailed the construction of the new capital (Richards). In April 1962, the *Architectural Review* published a follow-up piece, 'Progress in Brasilia' (Crease). Both articles included several photographs.
  5. The February 1959 *Architectural Review* feature contains the sketch plan for Brasília, as well as an aerial photograph onto which the sketch plan has been superimposed.
  6. Paul Giles contextualizes the *Ariel* poems as 'an indirect response to political events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis' (221); the poems 'are not "about" the Cuban Missile Crisis in any positivistic or verifiable sense,' he explains, 'but they do approach this subject in, as Plath aptly phrased it, a "'sidelong" fashion' (222).
  7. In an earlier draft of the poem, the mother describes herself as a 'dumb coelacanth' swimming underneath her son. The line is marvellously emblematic of an anachronism that turns out not to be anachronistic at all. Thought extinct for millions of years, coelacanths were rediscovered in 1938 off the coast of South Africa. (The initial discovery was made by a British trawler near East London, which had caught a specimen of the prehistoric fish in its net.) The story was reported worldwide.
  8. For a fascinating discussion of the connections between Plath's 'Mirror,' Hughes' 'Pike,' and Amy Lowell's 'The Pike,' see Hannah Roche's 'Plath, Hughes, and Amy Lowell: Relations and Reflections'. Though Plath's 'Mirror' (173), a dramatic monologue written from the perspective of a mirror, completed on 13 October 1961, is not concerned with motherhood per se, it does feature a woman who, through years of standing and fretting before the mirror-speaker, 'has drowned a young girl' in the mirror itself (17). '[I]n me,' says the mirror, 'an old woman | Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish' (17–18). 'Taking a second look at "Mirror", a reader might,' Roche suggests, 'see its speaker as neither a mirror nor a woman but instead as the "not cruel, only truthful" (4) Hughes' (459).
  9. A different exegesis is possible here: 'the dove's annihilation' could be read as 'the annihilation of the dove' and not as 'annihilation by the dove'. This would mean Christ is likened to a sacrificial dove, which would be an unorthodox application of religious symbolism. The dove is, conventionally, associated with the Holy Spirit, whereas Christ is associated with the lamb.
  10. This refers to Bernardino de Sahagún's sixteenth-century *Florentine Codex*.

## Notes on Contributor

**Georg Nöffke** is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Pretoria. He is interested in twentieth-century and contemporary literature, modernism, postmodernism and film theory.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ORCID

Georg Nöffke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4030-1268>

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