

**Self-made myth:**  
**the poetic dialogue between Ted Hughes's**  
***Birthday Letters* and the poetry of Sylvia Plath**  
**in a selection of six poems**

by

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# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that

**Self-made myth: the poetic dialogue between Ted Hughes's**

***Birthday Letters* and the poetry of Sylvia Plath in a selection of six poems**

is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by means of  
complete references.

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G. Nöffke

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Date

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# ABSTRACT

When Ted Hughes published the volume of poetry *Birthday Letters* in 1998, only months before his death, and after decades of silence on the subject of Sylvia Plath, it seemed he was finally offering a confessional account of his marriage to and lifelong association with the American poet. His comments on the book at the time merely promoted such a biographical reading. However, a close examination indicates that in these poems Hughes is not merely autobiographical, but that he is, instead, clearly engaging with Plath's construction of a personal, overarching myth in order to mould his *own* myth. This can be seen when we compare poems from *Birthday Letters* with ones from the Plath *oeuvre*. Though *Birthday Letters* offers an abundance of references to Plath's poetry, many poems address specific ones by Plath, some of them even sharing titles. The aim of this study is to examine critically and in detail three of these Plath-Hughes pairings in order to reveal the poetic dialogue between the two poets as it is manifested in these cases.

Chapter 1 deals with Plath's 'Whiteness I Remember', an early poem about a near-disastrous horse-riding mishap, and Hughes's response to the piece, his poem 'Sam'. 'Whiteness I Remember' displays both Plath's appropriation of distinctly Hughesian concerns and her own developing preoccupations. The poem functions as a practice run in which she rehearses what will soon become some of her most salient motifs. Hughes, in his 'Sam', recognises and lays claim to this concept of the practice run, taking it from Plath's poem and remoulding to fit his own poetic purposes.

In Chapter 2 Plath's 'Daddy' and Hughes's 'The Cast' are analysed. Plath's famous poem offers a speaker who, unlike the many father-worshipping speakers from earlier poems, rejects her father, metaphorically kills him, and berates herself for a lifetime of male worship. Associated with her father is her husband, and he too is killed off. In Hughes's 'The Cast' we find the father recast as a befuddled being recalled from the underworld, shocked and hurt by the accusations his daughter hurls at him. Hughes himself, as fictional character and analogue of the husband in 'Daddy', is notably absent in this account of what Plath does to her father with her poetry.

Finally, Chapter 3 investigates Plath's 'Brasilia' as a foundation for Hughes's 'Brasilia'. Plath's poem envisions the emergence of a future race of 'super-people', inhuman figures who present a threat to the speaker's child, while Hughes's poem presents a resurrected Plath herself, an immortal literary icon who becomes the super-human posing a threat to those left behind in the wake of her death.

# KEY TERMS

Sylvia Plath

Ted Hughes

*Birthday Letters*

Intertextuality

Poetic dialogue

Poetic selfhood

Personal mythology

‘Whiteness I Remember’

‘Sam’

‘Daddy’

‘The Cast’

‘Brasilia’

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# INTRODUCTION

Since Sylvia Plath is one of the principal literary figures of the Twentieth Century, arguably one of the few who still carry some cultural currency in the public consciousness, it seems fair to say that most readers of modern literature have, at the very least, come across either an account of her life, her first and only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), or a few of her poems. She has, in contemporary terms, achieved iconic status, and continues to draw a considerable degree of attention. We might infer from this that Plath has done much to foster a wider interest in poetry. The assumption might be that, in a world abounding with millions of sources of information, distraction, art and entertainment, stimuli that compete for our attention and are delivered everywhere and almost instantaneously, she has become a proverbial bastion of a form of writing that is too often sidelined as being abstruse and minor or simplified in its functions and uses. But it is usually the biographical details, specifically those that are more sensational, that draw readers to Plath in the first place.

There is a prevailing fascination with the *story* of Plath, a story that, as it is told, involves an American girl, born in 1932, who loses her father at age eight, becomes an academically successful but also troubled aspiring poet, first attempts suicide at age twenty-one in 1953, is hospitalised, recovers, continues her success, studies in England, meets and marries the soon-to-be successful British poet Ted Hughes in 1956, and then, after the passionate marriage disintegrates due to Hughes's infidelity in mid-1962, experiences a burst of creativity before committing suicide at age thirty, in 1963. Dozens of biographies of Plath have offered versions of this basic narrative since her

death. New versions of her life are still appearing in biographies that either seek to highlight neglected periods or aim to counter the biographies that preceded them. (In some cases, they do both.) 2013 alone has seen the publication of Carl Rollyson's *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* and Andrew Wilson's *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted*. A novel — Kate Moses's *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* (2003) — has been written about Plath and Hughes. And even a Hollywood film — Christine Jeffs's *Sylvia* (2003) — offers an interpretation of the two poets' life together. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, Jo Gill (2008:1) writes that Plath's life 'seems overdetermined'. Indeed, such is the nature of biography on Plath today that to state that she has been overdetermined and that this, by now, constitutes a truism, is to run the risk of making a statement that is a truism in itself.

Naturally, the lopsided focus on the life has meant that the poetry has become coloured in particular ways. Certain stereotypes about Plath came into being almost as soon as news of her suicide became known, and these stereotypes have not dwindled over time. A rough idea of their scope and inclination can be observed in what is offered, to the casual reader, as the givens of Sylvia Plath's work. The *Wikipedia* entry on her tells us that she 'is credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry' ('Sylvia Plath', 2013:¶2); the 2011 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article that 'her works are preoccupied with alienation, death, and self-destruction' ('Plath, Sylvia': 2011). Even more troubling is a passage from the volume *Defining Moment in Books* (2007), which aims to supply a decade-by-decade overview of significant events in the literary world. Plath's suicide is listed as a key event of the 1960s, and in the accompanying text, by Kiki Benzon (2007:477), we learn that

Plath's writing was largely governed by the ebb and flow of her psychiatric condition. Suicide and mental illness are recurring themes in her poetry, particularly in her posthumously published collection *Ariel* (1965). Her subjects include self-loathing, spiritual bankruptcy, destructive relationships, the Nazis and the Jewish Holocaust.

What is distressing about the persistence of such views is that it cannot be ascribed to a lack of insightful critical material on Plath. While Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain (2011:1), the editors of *Representing Sylvia Plath* (2011), note that there is 'an older but still lingering school of Plath criticism that sees her as a "confessional" writer'<sup>1</sup>, there is no dearth of research by dedicated scholars — scholars such as Judith Kroll (2007 [1976]), Lynda K. Bundtzen (1983, 2001), Jacqueline Rose (1991), Susan R. Van Dyne (1993), the above-mentioned Tracy Brain (2001), and Heather Clark (2011), to name just some — who dispel the image of Plath as a psychologically disturbed and death-obsessed artist. So forceful is the tendency toward sensationalism in the public opinion of Plath's work, it seems, that little room is left for nuance or qualification. And it is thus unsurprising that when, early in 1998, only months before his death, Ted Hughes published *Birthday Letters*, a volume of poetry dealing exclusively with Plath, and seeming to offer Hughes's account of Plath, the book was a sensation among sensation-hungry readers.

The actual publication of *Birthday Letters* was, however, a surprise, not because the manuscript had been prepared with the utmost secrecy, though it had (a considerable feat in British publishing, Erica Wagner (2000:25) tells us), but rather because of Hughes's choice of subject matter. For over three decades he had refused to go into personal detail about his life with Plath.

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<sup>1</sup> In Adam Kirsch's 2005 study *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*, to give just one example, Plath is one of the six poets discussed in the book.

During this period, in the wake of Plath's death, while he oversaw the publication of her *Ariel* — the book that established her reputation — and subsequent collections, and as something approaching a cult devoted to Plath emerged, Hughes maintained what Andrew Motion (in Wagner, 2000:3) calls 'a bristling, badger silence' with regard to their private life, a stance 'which seemed dignified to some, reprehensible to others, and fascinating to everyone'. Commenting only on Plath's work in his capacity as a critic and as her editor, he kept quiet even as other critics and biographers were freely examining the known facts of their relationship and the available poetry, often in order to criticise him for his perceived role in Plath's demise and his management of her estate ('a so-called neutral activity weighed down by the heaviest of psychosexual, aesthetic and ethical investment', Rose (cited in Corcoran, 2010:236) calls it). What made the arrival of *Birthday Letters* so surprising, then, was that here, it appeared, Hughes was finally offering to the public, in the medium he knew best, an intimate account, 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 (1998:x) was even moved to write that, with *Birthday Letters*, Hughes was "“confessional” as [he] has never been before'. And what Hughes himself said of the book at the time merely seemed to further the view.

In his acceptance speech for the 1998 Forward Poetry Prize, which had been awarded to *Birthday Letters*, Hughes (cited in Wagner, 2000:22) stated that the collection was 'a gathering of the occasions' on which he had tried 'to open a direct, private, inner contact' with Plath. 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'. Of course, many reviewers were not

convinced by Hughes's stance. As Bundtzen (2001:164) says, they 'were inclined to question both the emotional and factual veracity and objectivity of Hughes's account'. For instance, Katha Pollitt (cited in Bundtzen, 2001:164), in an unforgiving review, argued that

[t]hat intimate voice... is overwhelmed by others: ranting, self-justifying, rambling, flaccid, bombastic. Incident after incident makes the same point: she was the sick one, I was the 'nurse and protector'. I didn't kill her — poetry, Fate, her obsession with her dead father killed her. The more Hughes insists on his own good intentions and the inevitability of Plath's suicide, the less convincing he becomes.

Similarly, James Wood (cited in Bundtzen, 2001:164) declared that Hughes's poems 'are little epidemics of blame', that reading them is 'like listening to one half of a telephone call'.

Still, it is not hard to see how Hughes's explanation could cement a reading public's presuppositions (and it is worth pointing out that these reviewers denounce Hughes's book of poems not as poetry but as an act of 'autohagiography'). This is why the publication of *Birthday Letters* was something of a literary event, one which made newspaper headlines in both England and America, almost unheard of for a volume of poetry. Readers were eager for Hughes's own version of his and Plath's story. Since the narrative seemed to be nakedly confessional, in other words, it was written in the mode of such American poets as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and, some would mistakenly say, Sylvia Plath, in whose work from the 1950s and '60s unprecedented prominence was given to recognizably autobiographical, often shameful detail, the fact that it came in the form of poetry did not appear to detract from a belief in its biographical veracity. Rather, the biography seemed to validate the art. This can clearly be seen in comments made by the then editor of *The Times*, Peter Stothard (in Wagner, 2000:25), 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): ‘It wasn’t just the extraordinary quality of the poems, but they had this: 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’.

Stothard is here, perhaps inadvertently, establishing a hierarchy of art (art *with* an apparent biographical truthfulness trumps art *without* such a truthfulness, and thus it warrants greater, more widespread attention). In the process he also spotlights a particular way of reading literature, where the biographical imperative becomes the key factor of critical reception, and where, once a biographical framework has been established, biographical transparency becomes a foregone conclusion. The approach has, by now, become a widespread tradition. As has already been suggested, large parts of Sylvia Plath’s poetic output have been interpreted in this way. Already in 1976 Judith Kroll (2007:1) notes with dismay, in her seminal *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, the first full-scale study of Plath’s poetry, that readers are inclined to view Plath’s poetry ‘as one might view the bloodstains at the site of a murder’.

But this approach, where a hunger for personal revelation subordinates other considerations, tends not only to reduce the scope of the poetry, but also to deny it its significance as art. In his book *Contested Will* (2010) James Shapiro claims that just such an insistence on biographical reading has bedevilled Shakespeare studies. He traces the development back to the Romantic Movement of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries in English literature, which brought with it a new conception of the poet as a supremely individual, uniquely gifted artist relating personal experiences. In particular Shapiro points a finger at the prominent Eighteenth

Century Shakespeare scholar and biographer Edmond Malone, who was the first to suggest that Shakespeare, in the writing of his plays and poetry, drew on his personal life in transparent and traceable ways, and who, by airing this proposition, ‘carelessly left open a fire door’, as Shapiro (2010:40) phrases it. Pre-Romantic readers, Shapiro explains, never felt the need to see the writer’s life reflected in his or her work, but in the wake of Malone’s new emphasis, a shift likened to ‘[prying] open [a] Pandora’s box’ (Shapiro, 201:43), readers and writers alike were beginning to consider the act of writing in a new light. And with the emergence of early Twentieth Century forces such as psychoanalysis the tendency to read biographically gained additional impetus, until it was established as something of a ‘natural’ impulse. As Shapiro (2010:127) elaborates, drawing on the work of Allon White:

At some point it had become a commonplace that writers had always mined their life experiences in furnishing their fictional worlds. Allon White, whose *The Uses of Obscurity* illuminates this development, identifies ‘a new kind of reading, a new kind of critical attention in the period [the early Twentieth Century] whereby the sophisticated read through the text to the psychological state of the author’. ... This newly forged if largely unexamined consensus that fiction was necessarily autobiographical would affect not only what subsequent novelists would write, but also how previous authors, especially Shakespeare, were read.

Yet, as Shapiro stresses, there is nothing inherently natural about this kind of reading; rather, it is the product of historically specific forces. 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, and that a reading of their work centred primarily on its biographical content would therefore be dangerously easy, it still does not follow that the work amounts merely to a synthesis of identifiable biographical elements. We cannot use their work in an attempt to resurrect a ‘real’ or ‘actual’ Plath or Hughes, a somehow solid being with a set world view and attendant opinions, a being who may

express such a world view or opinions and, alarmingly, be held accountable for them. As Wagner (2000:13) confirms, referring specifically to *Birthday Letters*, '[t]he work is biographical, yes: but the work is not the biography, the biography is not the work'. Whatever personal detail exists in the work thus exists in an always-already mediated form (the form of poetry, not life writing), and should be examined only as one of several factors contributing to the nexus of concerns the art-object, the artistic construction, raises. In other words, Plath and Hughes appear, can only appear, as characters in their own work, or in the work of each other — a crucial consideration that any responsible analysis of their poetry must introduce in a field so divisive, so emotionally loaded. Rose (1992:5), for example, ensures she does this at the start of her examination of Plath — and, by extension, Hughes — criticism, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991), when she clarifies that '[w]e do not know Plath (nor indeed Hughes). What we do know is what they gave us in writing, and what they give us in writing is there to be read. In this book,' she goes on to say, 'in the analysis of those writings, I am never talking of real people, but of textual entities... whose more than real reality, I will be arguing, goes beyond them to encircle us all'.

This means, then, that despite what readers may have assumed about *Birthday Letters*, and despite what Hughes may have claimed, or may have seemed to be claiming, about it<sup>2</sup>, it would be a mistake to view the volume simply as a narration of so-called 'real events', since critical aspects of artistic manipulation would be overlooked. In fact, a close examination reveals that in these poems we can see Hughes engaging not only with Plath's construction of a personal and overarching myth (a primary concern in her poetry), but also with *her* engagement with *his* work.

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<sup>2</sup> He goes even further in a letter to his and Plath's son, Nicholas, in February 1998, saying that he felt, initially, that publishing most of the poems from *Birthday Letters* would be out of the question, since 'they expose too much' (2007:712).



If, as Kroll (2007:2) states, Plath's poetry is chiefly not 'literal and confessional', but rather 'the articulation of a mythic system which integrates all aspects of her work, and into which autobiographical and confessional details are shaped and absorbed, greatly qualifying how such elements ought to be viewed', Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, which not only reflects on Plath's myth but presents a myth of Plath, must be considered in a similar light.

It is necessary, at this point, to supply a brief explanation of Kroll's work on Plath, how it has been contested, and how the mythic reading she presents may be defended. This is because Kroll's analysis of Plath's poetry is used, in this dissertation, as the point of departure in the investigations of Plath's poems.

Marcel Danesi (2002:47) explains that the word 'myth' 'derives from the Greek *mythos*: "word", "speech", "tale of the gods"'. 'It can be defined', he says, 'as a narrative in which the characters are gods, heroes, and mystical beings, in which the plot is about the origin of things or about metaphysical events in human life, and in which the setting is a metaphysical world juxtaposed against the real world'. Kroll's view of Plath's poetry, the particulars of which will be discussed more fully in Chapter 1, is broadly that it presents a mythicized biography, in other words, that the body of work shows an assimilation of personal details into an impersonal narrative conceived of along mythic lines. Biographical details are thus used and revised to develop a personal mythology that represents, to use Danesi's words, 'a metaphysical world juxtaposed against the real world'. This personal mythology hinges, Kroll says, on the problem of a divided selfhood, a problem that can only be overcome through 'rebirth and transcendence' (Kroll, 2007:3), and its mythic terms are, she argues, drawn from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) and Robert

Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948), both of which are comparative studies of world mythologies. The evidence she presents by way of close analysis is compelling and persuasive. Moreover, there is clear biographical evidence to suggest that Frazer and Graves were indeed influences.

We know that, for her undergraduate thesis at Smith College, titled 'The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoyevsky's Novels', which she completed in 1955, Plath read Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. And, after she met Hughes in 1956, he introduced her to Graves's *The White Goddess*. In 1995 Hughes (2007:679) wrote to Nick Gammage, an admirer of his work with whom he had built up a correspondence, that *The White Goddess* not only made a great impact on him when he first read it in September 1951, but that it also had 'a big effect' on Sylvia Plath when he 'got her into it, later on'. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1957 Plath (2000:289), planning to write a novel, tells herself in her journal that she must make her heroine 'a bitch' who is 'the white goddess'. This heroine must be a 'statement of the generation', '[w]hich is you', she adds, identifying herself.

It is therefore not unreasonable to argue that Plath's poetry is informed by the mythic models Frazer and Graves discuss. And, as for the notion of a divided selfhood, this too is something that Plath very probably would have been aware of and affected by. Her undergraduate thesis was, after all, concerned with 'A Study of the Double'. In his *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (1987), Karl Miller (1987:318) offers the biographical assessment that Plath 'was a student and a further living embodiment of duality'. Furthermore, in *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes* (2011), Clark posits that R.D. Laing's groundbreaking psychological study *The Divided Self* (1960) made an impact on Plath (2011:134). 'It is likely', she writes, 'that Plath read *The*

*Divided Self* when it appeared in London in 1960 and that she identified strongly with Laing's... focus on the conflict between "true" and "false" selves' (2011:134). Steven Gould Axelrod (1990:229), in his *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (1990), comes to the same conclusion: 'Although it is not clear that Plath actually had a copy of Laing's *The Divided Self* in her hands, she would unquestionably have known about the book... its ideas were in the air'.

Resistance to Kroll's ideas — from the likes of Bundtzen, Rose and Christina Britzolakis (1999) — does therefore not take the form of refutation, that is to say, a denial of the influence of Frazer and Graves or the notion of a divided selfhood. Rather, it comes as a problematization of these influences and what Kroll makes of them, and a wish to downplay them. 'There can be little doubt after reading Kroll that Plath was influenced by Graves and that the source for many of her eeriest images may well be his White Goddess mythology', Bundtzen (1983:11) admits in her *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (1983). 'Not so convincing, though', she continues, 'are Kroll's efforts to systematize everything into a preconceived myth' (Bundtzen, 1983:11). And by arguing for a mythic dimension and heroine, says Bundtzen (1983:11-12), Kroll gives us 'an image of [Plath's] vision as depersonalized, obscure, and more than a little eccentric'; the heroine 'has little to say about experience except on a mythic and religiously exalted plane'. When Kroll 'transforms a strong female figure in Plath's poetry into a manifestation of Graves's White Goddess', Bundtzen (1983:11) thinks 'of Plath's final description of Lady Lazarus as "just a good, plain, resourceful woman"'.

But nowhere in *Chapters in a Mythology* does Kroll claim that Plath constructed her work as a 'preconceived myth'. Instead her interpretations seek to uncover the evolution of Plath's ordering

principles and thematic preoccupations, and to trace some of the major sources that influenced this evolution. The unwavering focus on the mythic models may have the effect of overstating her case and downplaying Plath's engagement with other literary and historical sources, but this does not mean that Plath does not use mythic narratives in her poetry. If Kroll's analyses make Plath's work appear 'depersonalized, obscure, and more than a little eccentric', this is because, in the late phase, it *is*. (Art is allowed, we hope, to be depersonalized, obscure, and eccentric.) Plath's mode is primarily not confessional (as Bundzten (1983:33) herself concedes). Hughes (cited in Kroll, 2007:2), assessing the nature of Plath's work and comparing it to other, more obviously confessional writers, explains it as follows:

Her poetry has been called 'confessional and personal', and connected with the school of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. She admired both these poets, and knew them personally, and they both had an effect on her. And she shares with them the central experience of a shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again or finding a new one. She also shared with them the East Massachusetts homeland. But the connection goes no further. Her poetic strategies, the poetic events she draws out of her experiences of disintegration and renewal, the radiant, visionary light in which she encounters her family and the realities of her daily life, are quite different in kind from anything one finds in Robert Lowell's poetry, or Anne Sexton's. Their work is truly autobiographical and personal, and their final world is a torture cell walled with family portraits, with the daily newspaper coming under the door. The autobiographical details in Sylvia Plath's poetry work differently. She sets them out like masks, which are then lifted up by *dramatis personae* of nearly supernatural qualities.

That Plath uses '*dramatis personae* of nearly supernatural qualities' in her poetry does not mean that her speakers have 'little to say about experience except on a mythic and religiously exalted plane'. We do not think of a myth-indebted poem like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) as being the weaker or less culturally relevant for its mythological allusions. Is one of the functions of myth not that it universalizes experience, that it lodges experience in a culture's collective unconscious? One of the most thrilling features of Plath's poetry is precisely the way she takes

specific biographical material and opens it up, relating her own experience to a larger framework of mythic experiences that are not only ancient, but also folkloric, modern and even futuristic<sup>3</sup>. In the poems discussed in this dissertation we will see Plath doing just this. In Chapter 1 we will see how the speaker, describing a transcendent near-death experience that leads to a rebirth of sorts, mythologizes an encounter with a horse. In Chapter 2 we will see how the speaker, in order to kill off her male-worshipping false self and emerge reborn as a triumphant, independent true self, transforms a father who was once depicted as an aloof but all-important sun-god into a Nazi oppressor and a devil, and a husband, the father's double, who was once represented as a pagan god of the natural world, into a vampire. And in Chapter 3 we will see how the speaker's fears concerning her son's future are played out against a backdrop in which super-humans from the future threaten her child's selfhood and her own existence. Bundtzen is right to point out that Plath describes her Lady Lazarus, in a reading prepared for the BBC, 'as just a good, plain, resourceful woman', but let us not ignore the fact that she chooses to omit the first part of that description, which forms the bulk of the text. 'The speaker', Plath (1981:294) tells us, 'is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will'.

From Rose and Britzolakis we get reservations of another kind. Regarding Plath's debt to Frazer and Graves, Rose (1991:153) wonders whether 'there might be a problem with such an

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<sup>3</sup> It nevertheless goes without saying that the presence of mythic models and mythic entities in Plath's poetry should not preclude a reading of her as a writer engaged with her world, with history or with art. In *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2000), Tracy Brain examines Plath's wider concerns with environmentalism, national identity, and her relationship with the work of Charlotte Brontë and Woolf. In *Representing Sylvia Plath*, Sally Bayley (2011:91-109), analysing the poems in which trees appear prominently, highlights Plath's use of the Romantic notion of the Sublime and her debt to a painter like Caspar David Friedrich. In the same volume Axlerod (2011:64-87) offers cultural contexts for Plath's Holocaust imagery. In Chapters 2 and 3 we will see how Plath's poetry reaches outward not only mythically but also culturally, socially and historically.

inheritance, that it might function as male projection and fantasy..., that the archetype might be hellish, might be taken on — for Plath certainly takes it on— at considerable cost’. Britzolakis (1999:57), who has similar qualms, states that ‘Plath’s relation to a mythology underpinned by the assertion that [here she quotes from *The White Goddess*] “woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing” is necessarily an ironical one’. Both Rose and Britzolakis raise valid concerns — the mythic frameworks Plath employs come from males, and speak of a male misogynist tradition. The Graves statement Britzolakis quotes sounds, to modern ears, not only offensive, but ridiculous. Graves (1961:446-447) follows this with the qualification that ‘[t]his is not say that a woman should refrain from writing poems; only, that she should write as a woman, not an honorary man’, and while the addition, intended, perhaps, as a kind of consolation, evinces its own troubling, sexist hierarchy, it does adumbrate the way in which Plath escapes the danger of the ‘hellish archetype’. For while she absorbs the archetypes offered by Frazer and Graves, archetypes that, especially in Graves’s case<sup>4</sup>, seem to emanate from the very depths of male fantasy, she redefines them on her own terms. Her mythic heroines are no mere tributes to the goddesses described in *The Golden Bough* and *The White Goddess*, they are fictional creations charged with Plath’s own intentions and concerns. And, as is mentioned above, her use of myth is not limited to Frazer and Graves’s ancient gods and goddesses, but also incorporates folkloric, modern and futuristic entities such as devils, vampires, Nazis and super-humans. The body of poetry does not present a slavish impersonation of male forebears, but rather a sly appropriation and an expansion of their ideas.

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<sup>4</sup> Graves (1961:447) goes on to say that ‘a woman who concerns herself with poetry should... be the Muse in the complete sense: she should be in turn Arianrhod, Blodeuwedd, and the Old Sow of Maenawr Penardd who eats her farrow, and should write in each of these capacities with an antique authority. She should be the visible moon: impartial, loving, serene, wise’.

And the same may be said of Plath's relation to Hughes. Both in her earlier work and in her *Ariel* phase we find her appropriating and distorting Hughes's phrases and images, his preoccupation with animals, predation and the natural world, and his interest in Gravesian femmes fatales. With *Birthday Letters* Hughes returns the favour — he requisitions her turns of phrase, assesses her preoccupations, and reshapes her images in a similar manner. The elements of Plath's personal mythology are recast as Hughes's myth of Plath.

As Clark (2011:225) points out, '*Birthday Letters* owes much to Thomas Hardy's *Poems of 1912-1913*, which elegize his wife, Emma Gifford'. She quotes Peter Sacks (1987:239), who explains that Hardy sought 'not only to review but also to *revise* his marriage', and she concludes that this 'is also true of Hughes'. Such revision also occurs on a poetic level, as we will see in this dissertation. Though Hughes's myth of Plath also incorporates divine beings (in Chapter 2 we will find Plath's father figure reimagined as a saint and martyr, in Chapter 3 Plath herself as a superhuman from the past, not the future), it undercuts Plath's mythology in two ways. Whereas Plath's speakers transcend their divided selfhood by killing off their false selves and the oppressive male figures in their lives in order to emerge as true selves, Hughes's poetically constructed Plath, a hopeful but troubled and mythically doomed poet, a tragic figure who is, like the tragic figures from ancient or Shakespearean tragedy, fated to die, is denied access to transcendence (as we will see in Chapter 1). Plath as literary icon, as poet still alive in her poetry despite the suicide (Plath as her own poetic selves *within* Hughes's poetic construction of her), is, however, permitted transcendence (as we will see in Chapters 2 and 3), but here she, as true, triumphant, resurrected self, is not a heroine of personal liberation but rather an evil and everlasting entity who harms those who were close to her during her mortal life. If Plath's self-made myth, where biographical

details are shaped into a narrative that speaks of transcendence, is made up of vanquished false and triumphant true selves, Hughes's myth of Plath, where her biography is revised as a tragedy of Shakespearean or ancient proportions, is made up of doomed real and immortal poetic selves. And though such an instance of an explicitly intertextual approach may appear as something novel in the career of Ted Hughes, something as equally surprising as the publication of *Birthday Letters* itself, reading the volume in that light would be akin to making the interpretive mistake of seeing it as a narration of actual events.

This is because *Birthday Letters* is simultaneously Ted Hughes's 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 available biographical information pertaining to the work of these two poets — and let us remember that if the poetry should not be relied upon to reconstruct a biography, biographical facts may be relied upon to augment a reading of the poetry — is that a profound creative partnership grew between them during the years of their marriage. This is something that Hughes attested to at several points in his career. Speaking in an interview for the BBC radio programme *Two of a Kind* in 1961 (Plath was being interviewed as well), Hughes (cited in Middlebrook, 2003:xvi) claimed that he often felt he and Plath drew on a 'single shared mind' for poetic inspiration<sup>5</sup>. Four years later, having overseen the posthumous publication of *Ariel*, Hughes (cited in Middlebrook, 2003:226) 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', one that was 'all-absorbing'. Then, in a 1975 letter to Plath's mother Aurelia, written twelve years after

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<sup>5</sup> Plath (cited in Middlebrook, 2003:xv-xvi), interestingly enough, disagreed with this statement, saying that she thought she was 'a little more practical'. Only moments before, however, the interviewer (Owen Leeming) had asked whether their marriage was a 'marriage of opposites', a question that had elicited simultaneous and contradictory responses from Hughes ('very different') and Plath ('quite similar').



Plath's death, Hughes (cited in Middlebrook, 2003:241) states that together he and Plath 'sacrificed everything to writing', and that, if they had not met, they very probably would have pursued different careers. In fact, an examination of a volume like *Letters of Ted Hughes* (Hughes, 2007) reveals Plath as one of the salient subjects — Hughes mentions her and her work right up until the end of his life<sup>6</sup>. Only months before his own death, he writes to Seamus Heaney of the marvellous release he feels, the '[s]trange euphorias of what [he] can only call "freedom" or a sense of self-determination', having published *Birthday Letters* and, in so doing, having 'symbolically unburden[ed]' himself of his weighty history with Plath (Hughes, 2007:718) (though, as has already been suggested, this unburdening must be considered a complicated act). Bearing attestations such as these in mind, we can see that if Hughes was, as he claimed he was, attempting to evoke Plath (or, we should say, a Plath) through his poetry, he was also, as he would have known he was, unavoidably evoking a history of artistic influence and engagement.

That such a history existed is borne out by the work of the two poets, where the influence they exerted on each other is striking. Both 'at turns embrace[d] and reject[ed] each other's influence' during their life together, as Clark (2005:101) indicates, and we can see in retrospect the way in which each broadened the other's poetic range. Often the poems Hughes and Plath wrote during their time together echo each other either in subject matter or in imagery; they even wrote on the backs of each other's drafts. Margaret Uroff, in her *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1979:13), compares Hughes's early poetry with Plath's late poetry, asserting, for instance, that there is a similarity between Plath's interest in 'psychological states and extreme human experiences' and Hughes's 'concern with the non-human cosmos'. She indicates how, through Hughes, Plath

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<sup>6</sup> In the last letter presented in the edition Hughes informs his aunt that he gave the Queen a copy of *Birthday Letters*.

developed an interest in animals and the natural world, the effects of which can be seen right up until her late poems, and how because of Plath Hughes was able to begin a shift to a more identifiably personal point of view (a shift, we could argue, that found its culmination in *Birthday Letters*).

And this partnership, what Middlebrook (2003:191) refers to as ‘the call-and-response manner’ of Plath and Hughes’s ‘productive collusion’, continued even after their separation in 1962, when Plath was composing the poems that would eventually make up her second volume, *Ariel*. At this point, however, and hardly surprisingly, the interaction underwent a significant change in nature. In these poems Plath becomes vengeful. In some cases she even wrote on the backs of manuscripts that she pilfered from Hughes (a symbolic act that illustrates the altered relationship), turning the productive collusion into a ‘militant rivalry’ (Middlebrook, 2003:218) by setting up many of her own poems in opposition to ones by Hughes. Middlebrook (2003: 219) elaborates as follows:

To Hughes, the poems in the *Ariel* binder and the numerous other sheets on her worktable gave vivid evidence of her continuing attachment to the creative partnership that had flourished during their marriage. He found painful evidence in that handful of typescripts Plath had taken secretly, angrily, from his desk at Court Green [the name of the house they had purchased in Devon] during his mysterious absence in September [in the wake of his infidelity], and with which she had been conducting a vigorous dialogue in her own poetry ever since.

So when we consider that Hughes thought of *Birthday Letters* as ‘a drama with the dead’ (cited in Middlebrook, 2003:275), and that in this volume of poetry — after decades of other volumes in which references to her are muted and indirect — he responds directly to Plath and her response

to him through her poetry, it is clear why the book represents the last instance of their poetic dialogue.

Just how Hughes goes about responding to Plath can be seen when we compare poems from *Birthday Letters* with ones from the Plath oeuvre. Though *Birthday Letters* is saturated with references to Plath's poetry, a number of poems go beyond incidental allusion to address specific poems by Plath, many of them even bearing the same titles. There are no fewer than sixteen such instances (see Appendix, p. 121). The aim of this dissertation is to examine critically and in detail three of these Plath-Hughes pairings, supplying an analysis first of Plath's poem, and then of Hughes's poem<sup>7</sup>. This is done in order to reveal the poetic dialogue between Hughes and Plath as it is manifested in these cases. The poems examined have been selected because those by Plath mark important stages in the development of her poetry, and because those by Hughes illustrate his responses to these stages and, in their turn, mark stages in the development of *Birthday Letters*. An additional concern has been to redress the lack of focused, systematic critical attention paid to most of these poems, in other words, the lack of close readings of them. While the Plath poem from Chapter 2, 'Daddy', has been the subject of an enormous amount of criticism, the poems from Chapters 1 and 3, 'Whiteness I Remember' and 'Brasilia', have been neglected. The same is true, to a certain extent, of Hughes's poems, 'Sam', 'The Cast', and 'Brasilia' (and indeed the many others from the volume). Analyses of *Birthday Letters* — from Wagner, Brain, Bundtzen, and Clark — have provided extremely valuable insight into the biographical foundations, poetic revisions and distortions, and overall artistic agenda of Hughes's book, but discussions of the individual poems are generally not comprehensive and are subsumed under the

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<sup>7</sup> The selection is therefore by no means comprehensive, and could be expanded on in a study with a larger scope.

larger arguments. This is also the case with studies that examine Plath and Hughes together. The work of Uroff, Clark and, to a lesser degree, Wagner and Middlebrook, has been of vital importance, but here too there is a lack of isolated, systematic, line-by-line analysis of individual Plath and Hughes poems or poem pairs. What this dissertation offers, then, is a close look at three poems by Plath and three poems by Hughes side by side. In each chapter the poems are analysed from beginning to end. Since the poems speak of a clear artistic interaction between Plath and Hughes, and since the aim is, apart from offering close readings of both poets' work, to investigate the nature of this interaction through the comprehensive analyses, the focus of the study may be said to be, in part, on intertextuality.

The term 'intertextuality' was introduced by the literary critic Julia Kristeva in the mid-1960s, and it has since become very popular in literary criticism. The body of literature pertaining to intertextuality is vast. But this does not mean that there is agreement on what exactly is implied by intertextuality. On the contrary, as Heinrich F. Plett (1991:3) tells us, 'almost everybody who uses it understands it somewhat differently'. Graham Allen (2000:2), author of the Routledge *New Critical Idiom* edition on intertextuality, goes so far as to state that the notion 'is defined so variously that it is, currently, akin to such terms as "the Imagination", "history" or "Postmodernism"'. This statement is somewhat extreme, however, since we *can*, at the very least, posit a general, overarching definition of intertextuality and attempt to describe the processes by which the phenomenon occurs.

An intertext, as Plett (1991:5) points out, is 'a text *between* other texts' — a useful interpretation, since it already hints at the position of any given text in a network of the texts that preceded it

and those that succeeded or will still succeed it. Intertextuality is concerned with the relationships that exist between texts. When Kristeva introduced the term in her 1966 essay on Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', she did so as a way to fuse structuralist semiotics with Bakhtin's poststructuralist concept of dialogism. In the structuralist view, derived from the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, 'the meaning and functioning of language depend on... an existing system of signs and meanings' (West, 1996:165). Language is seen as a self-contained structure, and the elements of language, signs and meanings, come into existence through a process of differentiation and opposition within this structure. Bakhtin's (1992:279-294) poststructuralist concept of dialogism, however, holds that any literary text, any instance of language, for that matter, is an intersection of discourses or voices, voices that, in the construction of meaning, often vie for supremacy and so attempt to cancel each other out. Bakhtin stresses the primacy of context over text, and calls these intersections of voices *heteroglossia* (which translates as 'different speech-ness'). Meaning is derived not from impersonal linguistic forces, but from the dialogic interaction of multiple voices within a single text or word.

In the fusion of these two strains of thought, then, we see that Kristeva conceives of an expansive network in which texts yield meaning not only through their distribution and difference, but also through their relentless dialogic interaction with one another. In her own words, this fusion lends a 'dynamic dimension to structuralism' in that the 'literary word' is viewed 'as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context' (Kristeva, 1986:36). She elaborates on this notion when she writes that 'each word (text) is an

intersection of words (texts)’ and goes on to state that ‘any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another’ (Kristeva, 1986:37).

In attempting to define intertextuality concisely, we may therefore take our cue from M.H. Abrams (2009:364), who describes the phenomenon as

...the multiple ways in which any one literary text is in fact made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and *allusions*, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are “always-already” in place and constitute the discourses into which we are born.

It is clear from this description that intertextuality can be applied either generally, with a focus on the pre-existing conventions, procedures and texts that shape a given text, or specifically, with a focus on a given text’s ‘open or covert citations and allusions’, the way in which it engages with earlier texts that are clearly referenced. Intertextuality, it may be said, has come to encompass such literary features as allusion and influence. (Though this is not uncontested — in their book *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (1991), Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein set out to separate the terms influence and intertextuality and the areas they cover). For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on the specific application of intertextuality, on the way in which Plath and Hughes allude to each other, to themselves, and also to other sources.

The order of the pairings selected follows the order in which Plath wrote her poems, and not the order in which Hughes’s poems appear in *Birthday Letters*. With regard to Plath’s poetry, we go from an early poem, in which her characteristic preoccupations are still forming, to the most anthologised poem from her body of work, where these preoccupations are fully formed, and on,

finally, to a late poem that looks beyond her central thematic concerns. The span of Hughes's volume, insofar as it constructs, poeticizes and mythicizes his biography with Plath, is roughly chronological, and so with regard to *Birthday Letters* we go from a poem which deals with an event that predates Plath and Hughes's meeting, to a poem in which Hughes addresses a key poem of Plath's mythology, to a poem that concerns itself with Plath's poetic legacy in the wake of her death.

Chapter 1 examines closely Plath's 'Whiteness I Remember', a poem about a near-disastrous horse-riding mishap, and Hughes's response to the piece, his poem 'Sam'. To the casual reader, 'Whiteness I Remember' is likely to appear merely as an evocative account of the near-tragedy, but the piece is, in fact, multifaceted. On the one hand, it showcases Plath's reappropriation of distinctly Hughesian concerns; on the other, it serves as a site for the exploration of her own nascent preoccupations. In it we see Plath simultaneously developing aspects of the personal mythology she constructs in her body of poetry *and*, in a shift that anticipates the very last phase of her poetic output, laying the foundation for a transcendence of this mythology. The poem thus functions as a practice run in which she rehearses what will soon become some of her most salient motifs. Hughes, in his 'Sam', which speaks directly to 'Whiteness I Remember', recognises and lays claim to this concept of the practice run, taking it from Plath's mythology and remoulding it to fit the myth of Plath he presents in his volume.

Chapter 2 presents an analysis of Plath's 'Daddy' and Hughes's 'The Cast'. Plath's famous poem offers a speaker who stands in sharp contrast to many of the speakers from her earlier poetry.

Whereas those speakers venerated, deified, longed for, even married a dead father figure, the

enraged daughter of 'Daddy', who tells us she has been oppressed for decades, rejects her father, metaphorically kills him, and berates herself for a lifetime of male worship. Associated with her father is her husband, another representative of patriarchal domination, and he too is cast off, killed off. In this complicated act of liberation the speaker draws alarming parallels to Nazi oppression and the Jewish Holocaust, a fact which has drawn severe criticism from many quarters; both the controversy and the possible reasons for the speaker's metaphorical invocations are discussed. In Hughes's 'The Cast' we find the father recast as a befuddled being recalled from the underworld, shocked and hurt by the accusations his daughter hurls at him. Hughes himself, as fictional character and analogue of the husband in 'Daddy', is notably absent in this account of what Plath does to her father with her poetry. While he acknowledges elsewhere in *Birthday Letters* that Plath's thematic conflation of the father and husband is a prominent feature of her poetry, we see here that this element is viewed as an aspect of Plath's myth, and not Hughes's vision of himself in his myth of Plath.

Finally, Chapter 3 investigates Plath's 'Brasilia' as a foundation for Hughes's 'Brasilia'. Plath's poem, an enigmatic and critically neglected piece, envisions the emergence of a future race of 'super-people', inhuman figures who present a threat to the speaker's child. The poem is part of a group of poems either addressed to or dealing with the speaker's children; together these poems form a subset of Plath's mythology that turns away from the battleground of the self. Hughes's poem, which superimposes his concerns over those of Plath, presents a resurrected Plath herself, an immortal literary icon who becomes the super-human posing a threat to those left behind after her death. In other words, in Hughes's 'Brasilia' Plath is presented as precisely that which



her speaker in 'Brasilia' fears. The poem ends with an image of the ceaselessness of art that, instead of being celebrated, is seen as something to be lamented.

# CHAPTER 1

## **‘That Gallop Was Practice’: A Horse Ride as Practice Run for Things to Come in ‘Whiteness I Remember’ and ‘Sam’<sup>8</sup>**

‘I wrote what I consider a “book-poem”’, notes Sylvia Plath (1981: 288) in her journal on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July in 1958, ‘about my runaway ride in Cambridge on the horse Sam: a “hard” subject for me, horses alien to me, yet the daredevil change in Sam and my hanging on God knows how is a kind of revelation: it worked well’. The biographical germ of this so-called ‘book poem’ (a designation that, for Plath, meant it was worthy of publication in a volume), the poem ‘Whiteness I Remember’ (1981: 102), occurred in December 1955, shortly after Plath arrived in Cambridge on a Fulbright Scholarship, and shortly before she met Ted Hughes in February 1956. She had gone horse riding with an old friend from America when the horse that had been hired out to her, Sam, seemingly gentle and with a history that was, as the poem phrases it, ‘[h]umdrum, unexceptionable’ (l. 7), therefore making it suitable for ‘novices and... the timid’ (l. 9), suddenly bolted, taking her on a wild and terrifying ride. At one point she slipped from her saddle and, in order to avoid being crushed under the animal’s galloping hooves, had to cling to its neck.

And so the scene is rendered in the resultant poem. Plath, never one to shy away from sound devices and their rhythmic potential, and working with lines of nine syllables arguably quite

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<sup>8</sup> Material from this chapter has been published as “‘That Gallop Was Practice’: A Horse Ride as Practice Run for Things to Come in Sylvia Plath’s “Whiteness I Remember” and Ted Hughes’s “Sam”” in *English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies*, Volume 30, Issue 2, 2013, pages 6-20.

equestrian in their cadences, gives us a speaker suspicious of her not-quite-wholly-white horse, whose 'dapple', which tones his 'white down / To safe gray', fails to 'gray his temper' (ll. 10-11) (which is to say, it fails to temper his nature). When the speaker's suspicions are confirmed, and the horse bolts, this is conveyed with quick-fire distress, the rapid alliteration of the 's'-sound, of the 'g'-sound, of the 'h'-sound, of the 'd'-sound evoking the mad whirl of sensations and sights she must endure:

Then for ill will  
Or to try me he suddenly set  
Green grass streaming, houses a river  
Of pale fronts, straw thatchings, the hard road  
An anvil, hooves four hammers to jolt  
Me off into their space of beating,  
Stirrups undone, and decorum (ll. 18-22).

By the end of the poem the speaker is at the horse's mercy: 'I hung on his neck' (l. 28), she says.

To the casual reader, then, 'Whiteness I Remember' is likely to appear merely as a poem of vivid and straightforward narrative description, an evocative account by a speaker detailing a near-disastrous horse-riding mishap, and while such an interpretation is not an inaccurate one (on one level, the poem is exactly that), it is an incomplete one. Apart from evincing the influence of Hughes and displaying Plath's personal appropriation of this influence, 'Whiteness I Remember' is also a piece in which we see Plath simultaneously developing thematic concerns coming to prominence in her early work *and*, in a shift that anticipates the very last phase of her poetic output, laying the foundation for a transcendence of these concerns.

As was mentioned in the Introduction, Margaret Uroff (1979: 13), in her book *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, asserts that there is a similarity between Plath's interest in 'psychological states and extreme human experiences' and Hughes's 'concern with the non-human cosmos'. Her argument is that, through Hughes, Plath develops an interest in animals and the natural world, the effects of which can be seen right up until her late poems. In 'Whiteness I Remember', a poem as much about an interaction with a horse as extreme human experience, this intersection of preoccupations is patent. Obvious antecedents are Hughes's poems 'The Horses' (2003: 22) and 'Phaetons' (2003: 33), both of which articulate a concern with the non-human cosmos, and both of which were published in his first volume, *The Hawk in the Rain*, in 1957. The metatextual 'Phaetons' has a 'gentle reader' (l. 6) who reads the tale of the mythical Phaeton and his calamitous attempt to ride the horse-drawn sun-chariot his sun-god father, Helios, rides. But this reader, in a sudden twist, '[l]oses the words in mid-sentence' (l. 7), is '[t]oss[ed] upside-down' by a 'team' (presumably Phaeton and the sun-horses), and is 'drag[ged]', 'on fire', '[a]mong the monsters of the zodiac' (ll. 9 & 10). The act of reading about a deadly horse ride allows for a displacement of space and time, a momentous personal experience (the reader catches alight), and a shift to a grander perspective: before the celestial monsters of the zodiac, cosmic incarnations of fate, the gentle reader is dwarfed.

'The Horses' operates on a similar pattern, only here the horses are not explicitly textual entities, but rather inalienable features of nature. In the piece the speaker, climbing up a hill 'through woods in the hour-before-dawn dark' (l. 1), encounters on the way a group of wild horses, animals appearing '[h]uge in the dense grey — ten together — / Megalith-still' (ll. 9-10). 'They breathed', he goes on to say, 'making no move, // With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves, /

Making no sound' (ll. 10-11). The speaker passes them, 'not one snort[ing] or jerk[ing] its head' (l. 12), and then witnesses a brilliant sunrise, an experience of visionary clarity described as a silent, red eruption that, 'splitting to its core', '[tears] and [flings] cloud, / [Shakes] the gulf open, [shows] blue, // And the big planets hanging' (ll. 21-23). Fleeing from such an overpowering sight, such an explosion of light, the speaker stumbles back 'in the fever of a dream' (l. 27) towards the 'dark woods' (l. 26), and once again runs into the horses. 'There, still they stood' (l. 28), he explains,

[b]ut now streaming and glistening under the flow of light,

Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves  
Stirring under a thaw while all around them

The frost showed its fires. But still they made no sound (ll. 29-32).

Hughes's speaker, the lone human in a vast natural landscape, is, like the speaker of 'Phaetons', made aware of and humbled by a non-human universe dazzling in its potency. As Keith Sagar (1975: 20) puts it, the poem presents 'mortal man all too aware of the lack of anything in himself to set against the sun-rise'. And in these immovable and inscrutable horses mortal man finds essential aspects of this realm so intriguing and, on the surface of it, so foreign to him. That they bookend the revelatory spectacle, are not, like him, cowed by the grand emergence of the sun, but seem rather to be empowered by it, stirred into life because of it, confirms their integral, their integrated position in the world they occupy. In contrast to them, the speaker, who states that he hopes to keep the singular memory of this event alive in his mind '[i]n [the] din of... crowded streets, going among the years [and] the faces' (l. 36) of his future, indicates that his position lies, ostensibly, in civilised society.

What one finds, then, in a poem like 'The Horses', and in many other poems from the early part of Hughes's career, poems such as 'The Hawk in the Rain' (2003: 19), 'The Jaguar' (2003: 19), 'Hawk Roosting' (2003: 68), 'Pike' (2003: 84) and 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' (2003: 151), is what J.M. Coetzee (2003: 95), through the fictional mouthpiece Elizabeth Costello, calls an attempt to enter into 'a different kind of being-in-the world'. During one of the many lectures that take place in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), the eponymous character — who functions, Alan Northover (2009) suggests, as a Socratic figure for the author — refers specifically to the poems 'The Jaguar' and 'Second Glance at a Jaguar'. She explains that, in them, 'Hughes is writing against' (Coetzee, 2003: 95) the kind of poetry in which 'animals stand for human qualities: the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth' (Coetzee, 2003: 94-95). Instead of these two poems, and, we can safely argue, the many others like them, 'The Horses' of course among them, attempt to 'recover an attentiveness that our faraway ancestors possessed and we have lost' (Coetzee, 2003: 97). Rather than 'try to find an idea in the animal', the poems offer 'the record of an engagement' (Coetzee, 2003: 96) with it.

Plath's 'Whiteness I Remember' may also be considered the record of an engagement with an animal, but it is a record of a very different kind. It, like 'Phaetons' and 'The Horses', offers a close interaction with animal force, and ends with an epiphanic widening of consciousness, 'a kind of revelation', as Plath names it in her journal, but such motifs are developed along uniquely personal lines. Indeed, the poem makes for a fascinating example of how Plath absorbs Hughes's concerns, and then remoulds them in such a way as to fit the preoccupations that are just then beginning to take shape in her work.

For Plath's speaker the encounter is not with an animal enmeshed in a larger and even overwhelming natural world; nor is she out to recover some rapt state of attentiveness that, on an evolutionary scale, and as Elizabeth Costello claims Hughes would argue, has had to give way to 'the Western bias toward abstract thought' (Coetzee, 2003: 97). Hers is a domesticated horse, and the 'daredevil change' he undergoes is read as an act of volition. In fact, a striking feature of the poem is that its horse, a subject the author calls 'hard' and 'alien', is dealt with so personally. Whereas Hughes's interest in 'The Horses' is cosmological, in other words, concerned with the titular animals not as intellectual constructions but as creatures to be marvelled at for their ontological indescribability, Plath's interest in her horse is psychological, concerned with the deep private impact the encounter makes on her speaker's psyche. Several lines suggest that the speaker views the interaction with the animal as pivotal, even life-changing. There is the early assessment in the lines 'I've gone nowhere since but / Going's been tame deviation' (ll. 3-4), and the later assertion that '[t]he world' was 'subdued to [the horse's] run of it' (l. 27). The speaker also seems to compare this first horse ride to a sexual experience, the horse becoming something akin to a lover<sup>9</sup> ('I see him one-tracked, stubborn, white horse, / First horse under me...' she says in lines 12 and 13). Such personification is also present in the description of the abrupt change that overcomes the supposedly timid steed. After an initial 'neat trot' (l. 14), the speaker recalls how the animal ominously opted for a 'giddy jog' (l. 17), and how it then, as we have already noted, 'for ill will / or to try [her], suddenly set / Green grass streaming' (ll. 18-20).

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<sup>9</sup> This is at least tangentially supported by the fact that horseback riding may lead to tearing of the hymen (Kyrillou, Son & Chalermthai, 2009: 64).

We have here a clash of wills; Sam is asserting his superiority over the speaker. Thus, like the mythical Bellerophon, who attempted to ascend to Mount Olympus on the tamed Pegasus, and whose flight, appropriately enough, is often regarded as a symbol of poetic inspiration, the speaker is unseated. Unlike Bellerophon, however, she is able to cling to her horse's neck. And that the horse is male is crucial. Plath may not be working within the tradition that J.M. Coetzee refers to, where animals become culturally-determined embodiments of human characteristics, but she does advance a brand of anthropomorphism that echoes, in interesting ways, the thematic concerns that begin to emerge at this point in her poetic development.

For it is at this stage, in 1958, that we hear the rumblings and see the first nascent instances of what Judith Kroll (2007), snatching a phrase from Hughes, calls Plath's chapters in a mythology. Drawing on the work of James Frazer and Robert Graves, whose comparative studies of world mythology provide her with frameworks within which to model autobiographical information, Plath begins to develop a narrative arc that will span her body of work from here onwards. In this narrative, this self-made mythology, individual poems come to function as instalments tracing its progress. And at the centre of the mythology is, as Kroll (2007: 3) shows, the overriding concern of resolving a divided selfhood, a split into true and false selves which, according to the various speakers, is precipitated by the death of a father. So crucial is the event in the narrative the poetry offers that we see Plath's speakers consistently tie it to their notions of personal identity and their constructions of self. Kroll (2007: 9) explains it as follows:

The self that she had defined through her deep attachment to her father continued to press its claims without possibility of satisfaction or development. If her relation to her father was of central importance to her life, then life without



him had the character of absence, of unreality and of stagnation; and life with him, in the suspended time of childhood, was impossible of [fulfilment]... . (When she separates from her husband, she experiences his absence in a similar manner.) The self left back in childhood... must be recaptured and rejoined in order for her to live fully in time. Yet because part of herself and her history has remained in parenthesis, everything that has happened to her since that rupture has, in effect, happened to an incomplete person; all subsequent experience has been added to a false foundation, happening to someone not fully integrated with her own history.

A dead father is first mentioned in the poem 'Full Fathom Five' (1981: 92), also written in 1958, not long before 'Whiteness I Remember'. In her journal Plath states that this poem is about her 'father-sea god-muse' (1981: 13); in the poem itself the father, poetically resurrected, comes in 'with the tide's coming' (l. 2), offering many dangers, 'defy[ing] questions' and 'other godhood' (ll. 39 & 40). We may consider this resurrection an annunciation. After 'Whiteness I Remember' Plath will go on to write such poems as 'Electra on Azalea Path' (1981: 116), 'The Beekeeper's Daughter' (1981: 118), and 'The Colossus' (1981: 129), in which the speaker-daughters, who resemble the many mourning goddesses Frazer identifies in his book, all grieve for the loss of a father, who is seen as an archetypal dead or dying god<sup>10</sup>. These daughters see their loss also as a loss of a crucial aspect of their selves. In 'Electra on Azalea Path' the divided selfhood is first recognized. The daughter, drawing on both psychoanalysis and ancient Greek drama for the construction of a heady psychodrama, avers that her true identity is inextricably locked up with her dead father, that her life since his death has been one long falsehood. In 'The Beekeeper's Daughter' Plath takes the connection one step further and has her speaker marry her father in a

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<sup>10</sup> Frazer discusses mythological pairs such as Venus and Adonis, Isis and Osiris, Ishtar and Tammuz, Cybele and Attis, and Mary and Jesus (these last two later excised from the single-volume edition due to the controversy their inclusion provoked) as manifestations of the motif involving a grieving goddess and a dead or dying god.

sacred grove ritual. Thus we see that these daughters' lives are dominated, steered by the looming patriarch, and while they seem in places to be aware of the necessity of rebirth, the creation of a life separate from the father, they cannot yet, in this phase of the narrative, conceive of or enact it. Instead they tend faithfully to the memory of the dead but alive daddy as though they were tending to an idol — the daughter of 'The Colossus' attempts at length to reconstruct the great ruinous statue that is her father, but views the task as futile, and concludes that her 'hours are married to shadow' (l. 28).

When we then re-examine the nature of the speaker's engagement with her horse in 'Whiteness I Remember', in light of what we know is soon to come in Plath's poetry, certain similarities suggest themselves. 'I've gone nowhere since but / Going's been tame deviation' (ll. 3-4), the speaker says; '[t]he world' was 'subdued to [the horse's] run of it' (l. 27), the speaker says; by the end of the poem all the world's colours are '[s]pinning to still in his one whiteness' (l. 33). It appears as though, in readying herself for the task of endowing her body of work with a mythic dimension, Plath uses 'Whiteness I Remember', only an occasional poem at first glance, as a practice run, a run-through of some of the most salient features of her early phase. The speaker relates to her horse in the same way that the daughters of poems just around the corner will relate to their fathers. The experience with the horse is the true experience; all subsequent experience has been false. And aside from the primacy of this experience in her life, the experience itself is one in which the male horse dominates not only the speaker but her whole world.

But if the daughters of Plath's early phase frequently express themselves in sombre, elegiac tones, the same cannot really be said of the speaker in 'Whiteness I Remember'. She may acknowledge

the falseness of her existence in the wake of her interaction with Sam, but she elaborates no further on her state of frustrating stasis. Instead, she recounts in detail the ‘great run’ (l. 2) the horse gave her, and far from being some crumbling colossus, the horse emerges as a thing potentially alive; the speaker’s description rings with notes of danger and sexual excitement. (We are reminded of the French euphemism for orgasm, *la petite mort*, ‘the little death’, and Roland Barthes’s (1973: 36) argument that a true reading of literature leads to an experience of *jouissance*, ‘bliss’, or ‘orgasm’.) The union of speaker and horse, despite being a source of terror, is also a source of vigour, and quite unlike the shadow-marriage enacted in the other poems. This suggests that the speaker is relating to the male horse in another way, that the personified beast contains more than inchoate strains of the father figure, and it is by once again looking at the other poems from this early period in Plath’s poetic career that we may identify another male presence.

Aside from the mournful daughter poems mentioned above, there are also several others, ‘Pursuit’ (1981: 22), ‘Ode for Ted’ (1981: 29), ‘Firesong’ (1981: 30), ‘Faun’ (1981: 35), ‘Wreath for a Bridal’ (1981: 44), ‘Epitaph for Fire and Flower’ (1981: 45), and ‘Man in Black’ (1981: 119), all, except for the last one, written before the resurrection of the father and the introduction of the mythic drama, that deal with Hughes, and which lay the groundwork for a later role replacement in the constructed narrative.

Almost immediately after meeting Hughes, Plath writes ‘Pursuit’, a poem in which a blood-hungry panther, a ‘black marauder’ (l. 27), stalks down the speaker, who flees for her life and yet enjoys what she sees as an aggressive seduction. ‘It is not bad’, writes Plath (cited in Wagner,

2000: 54) in her journal on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1956. 'It is dedicated to Ted Hughes'. To her mother she writes that her panther poem 'is a symbol of the terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself; death, here', Plath (cited in Kroll, 2007: 255) adds, 'includes the concept of love'. And over the course of the poems in which constructions of Hughes appear as a manifestation of this dangerous love he is repeatedly connected with animals and the natural world. The most notable example is probably 'Faun', where he assumes the mythological form of the half-human, half-goat referred to in the title, 'hoove[s] harden[ing] from [his] [feet]' (l. 13), '[g]oat-horns' (l. 14) sprouting from his head, and where, ultimately, he becomes a 'god [rising] / And gallop[ing] woodward' (ll. 14-15). Such enlargement is finally cemented in 'Man in Black', the only poem mentioned here written after the return of the father, which focuses on a Hughes-like male figure observed by the speaker from a distance, a figure whose central significance is conveyed in lines that remind us of Sam in 'Whiteness I Remember': '[f]ixed vortex on the far / Tip' (ll. 19-20), this man is said to '[rivet] stones, air, / All of it, together' (ll. 20-21).

Plath's speaker in 'Whiteness I Remember' therefore relates to the horse not only in the same way that her speakers to come will relate to their fathers, but also in the way that her past speakers<sup>11</sup> have related to the lover or husband in their lives. And by perceiving these hints of an amalgam of father and husband in the horse, we hit upon another way in which the poem may be read as a practice run. Of Hughes Plath (2000: 447) writes in her journal of December 1958: 'I identify him with my father at certain times, and these times take on great importance... insofar as he is a male presence... [he] is a substitute for my father'. And so too in the poetry. The great and

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<sup>11</sup> Again, the one exception here is 'Man in Black'.

deathly patriarch who dominates Plath's mythology comes to be associated with and represented by the husband figure in her late phase. This occurs at a point — in mid-1962, after her separation from Hughes due to his infidelity — when her tone turns aggressive and impassioned. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October Plath completes her famous poem 'Daddy' (1981: 222), a piece seething with rage and the desire for 'fully[-]achieved selfhood' that Seamus Heaney (1988: 152) identifies as typical of Plath's late style; in it the speaker, cancelling the sacred marriage enacted earlier in the mythology, addresses the patriarch and refers to an earlier suicide attempt when she says

At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

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

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do (ll. 58-67).

Here the 'man in black', the same man in black from the poem written three years before, is conflated with daddy. Hughes himself makes this connection in his poem 'Black Coat' (2003: 1108), one of the poems in *Birthday Letters* that speak directly to a poem by Plath. At the poem's conclusion his speaker has his state of being invaded: Plath's father slides into it.

What 'Whiteness I Remember' offers in this regard, then, is another embryonic origin for a motif that will reappear later in Plath's work. It is not that the horse Sam *is* the father figure or *is* the husband; rather, the encounter with the animal and Plath's treatment of it become sites for the voicing and nurturing of thematic concerns and poetic techniques that have announced

themselves in the poet's unconscious. Kroll (2007: 121), speaking of late poems that seem to stand outside of the mythic narrative, poems which 'present neither the source nor the nature of the myth' and are not 'ritualised resolutions of it' either, poems which instead describe events from the daily life of the speaker, presents an argument that is germane to a discussion of 'Whiteness I Remember'. These apparently extraneous pieces, Kroll (2007: 121-121) says, show

how the myth organizes the elements of daily experience, and they may therefore be called Plath's equivalent of 'occasional poems' in the special sense that each encounter with some element of daily life... releases some aspect of the underlying motifs. Although these occasional poems do not describe the myth, they result from it and are chapters in the mythology, even if not key chapters from the point of view of defining it; but even the occasions for poetry are in a sense solicited by the myth itself<sup>12</sup>.

And there is yet another way in which 'Whiteness I Remember' may be read as a practice run. As Erica Wagner (2000: 56) indicates, it presages the poem 'Ariel' (1981: 239), the title poem of what would become Plath's second volume, and arguably the centrepiece of Plath's late output. (Poems written in the late phase are often said to have been written in the 'Ariel voice'.) As has already been suggested, most of the poems from this period — 'Daddy' being an excellent example — are incandescent in their drive towards fully-achieved selfhood. They bring about new rituals which supplant the earlier funereal lamentations. In them the mournful daughter is transformed into a vengeful queen, a Gravesian White Goddess, a Clytemnestra-like figure who slays her sun-god and claims the moon as her ruling planet<sup>13</sup>. ('The moon is my mother' (l. 17),

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<sup>12</sup> As was indicated in the Introduction, Lynda Bundtzen (1983:11) accuses Kroll of attempting to systematize Plath's poetry into a preconceived myth. A statement like the above one may seem to be doing this, but it is worth pointing out that Kroll's argument is concerned with the mythic narrative as an underlying ordering principle, not as a preconceived plan that Plath consciously made her work adhere to.

<sup>13</sup> While Frazer (2002:331) concludes in *The Golden Bough* that 'a great Mother Goddess, the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature, was worshipped under different names but with a substantial similarity of myth and ritual by many peoples of Western Asia' and that 'associated with her was a lover, or rather series of lovers, divine yet mortal', he maintains in his study a focus on dying and rising gods, what he terms the 'gods of the Waxing

the speaker of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' (1981:172) makes it known.) And yet, as Kroll (2007: 182-221) indicates, there are other poems which go beyond this desire for revenge and agency and which envision a transcendence of selfhood, a movement beyond the drama that has been played out in the evolving poetry. At the head of this group stands 'Ariel'. Plath completed the poem on her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, and in it she envisions a heady rush towards purification through an imagined horse ride. (The poem is named after the horse.) Tellingly, this horse is not alien or hard or male, but a 'God's lioness' (l. 4) with which she grows one. As the poem reaches its conclusion the horse ride becomes a mythical flight into the sun, which is seen as the site for a fiery self-sacrifice, a place where the speaker may finally let go of self and be reborn into a more fundamental state of being, a 'mystical union or transcendence' (Kroll 2007: 193).

'Whiteness I Remember' does not quite depict such a letting go of self, but it does approximate it, and also involves an experience of transcendence that we may label a rebirth. By the end of the poem the speaker, threatened with death and clinging to the horse for dear life, finds herself and her world dramatically altered. The situation is one in which she attains a greater degree of awareness, and that this movement into awareness should be read as a movement into transcendence is suggested by Plath's insistence on associating the event with the colour white.

The word 'whiteness', which begins and ends the poem, is used three times, including the title; the word 'white' four. It is as though all the facets, the 'colors' (l. 32) of the speaker's existence,

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and Waning Year', and their grieving goddesses. Graves, however, builds on this notion of the Mother Goddess in *The White Goddess*, relating it specifically to poetic myth-making, and arguing that behind the multitude of European goddesses of mythology lies a single lunar deity, a Moon-muse, whose worship was inspired by the phases of the moon.

converge at and are subsumed by the horse, ‘[s]pinning to still in his one whiteness’<sup>14</sup> (l. 33). Plath undoes the prismatic refraction of the speaker’s life by reweaving the rainbow of colours<sup>15</sup> and having it end in the one true experience with Sam. And the use of the colour white has a wider application here as well. In Graves’s *The White Goddess*, the colour white is associated with ‘birth and growth’ (cited in Kroll, 2007: 61) and represents rebirth. Though Plath completes her assimilation of Graves’s theories in her poetry only in her late phase, where, as Kroll (2007: 55) so clearly illustrates, ‘the White Goddess myth embraces virtually all of the motifs of Plath’s mythicized biography’, we can identify many early and transitional poems in which evidence of Graves’s influence is visible<sup>16</sup>. ‘Whiteness I Remember’ is likely another such instance, suggesting that the experience the speaker conveys (a near-death experience) is one that entails a metaphorical death followed by a rebirth. If the near-death here is a death of sorts, the rebirth is envisioned as a state of simplicity that is simultaneously a state of purity and enlightenment (quite literally as well, with the emphasis on ‘whiteness’):

Resoluteness  
Simplified me: a rider, riding  
Hung out over hazard, over hooves  
Loud on earth’s bedrock. Almost thrown, not  
Thrown: fear, wisdom, at one: all colo[u]rs  
Spinning to still in his one whiteness (ll. 28-33).

In reconstructing the scene like this, ending the poem on such a frozen moment, Plath cleverly exemplifies Zeno’s arrow paradox. (The moving horse, like Zeno’s hypothetical flying arrow, is,

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<sup>14</sup> Plath’s phrasing here almost certainly echoes Hughes’s description of the hawk in his poem ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ (2003: 19). Hughes’s bird, which ‘[e]ffortlessly at height hangs his still eye’ (l. 5), has ‘wings [which] hold all creation in a weightless quiet’ (l. 6), and is viewed as a ‘diamond point of will that polestars / The sea-drowner’s endurance’ (ll. 11-12), a ‘master- / Fulcrum of violence’ (ll. 14-15).

<sup>15</sup> cp. Keats’s (2000: 93) idea of Newton ‘[u]nweav[ing] a rainbow’ (l. 237) with his prism.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Faun’ and ‘Maudlin’ (1981: 51), from 1956, ‘Ouija’ (1981: 77), from 1957, and ‘Moonrise’ (1981: 98) and ‘The Death of Myth-Making’ (1981: 104), from 1958, are just a few examples (Kroll, 2007: 43).



at this isolated instant, motionless, since its position cannot change without factoring in the passage of time.) This is further suggested when we consider the poem's geometry: the introductory and conclusive instances of the word 'whiteness', which give the piece a circular quality, pivot on the word '[t]hen', in line 17, quite literally the central word of the poem, and the word that signals the start of the 'great run', the time-bound event made timeless not only by the poem's ending, but also by the poem itself. 'Whiteness I Remember', we may therefore say, also 'spin[s] to still', that is to say, hinges on stillness, on a structural level. If the poem, as tangible, printed object, were to be rotated rapidly, the resultant spinning would mimic the experience of the speaker, who, caught up with her horse in the '[t]hen', perceives her world blurring into white. And the result of this spinning to stillness is a moment of clarity not unlike 'the still point of the turning world' T.S. Eliot (2002: 179) describes in the 'Burnt Norton' section of his *Four Quartets* (1943). Plath was familiar with the poem — she alludes to it in her late poem 'Getting There' (1981: 247), another poem about a movement towards rebirth, with the lines 'Is there no still place, / Turning and turning in the middle air, / Untouched and untouchable' (ll. 52-54). It is possible that 'Whiteness I Remember' offers an earlier reference to Eliot, that in evoking the concluding vision of the poem Plath draws on Eliot's examination of an enlarged consciousness, an ecstatic and fearful apprehension of timelessness within time. Expanding on this notion of the 'still point', Eliot (2002: 179) describes it as being

[n]either from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity... (ll. 63-64)

and a few lines later as

a white light still and moving,

*Erhebung* without motion, concentration  
Without elimination, both a new world  
And the old made explicit, understood  
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
The resolution of its partial horror (ll. 73-78).

The similarities between this and 'Whiteness I Remember' are manifold. It too describes a state of *Erhebung* (German for 'elevation, or upliftment') born of a form of concentration that does not eliminate an awareness of the world at large. It too brings about a new world by redefining the old — it is in this terrifying situation that the speaker achieves her 'wisdom', her new perspective on her life. It too contains both ecstasy (in the sense that the already-mentioned 'wisdom' allows the speaker to stand figuratively outside herself) and horror — what the speaker terms her 'fear' — at its conclusion. And it too stresses the reconciliation of such states ('Almost thrown, not / Thrown', 'fear, wisdom, at one'), presenting a speaker who, caught in the paradox of simultaneously experiencing movement and stasis ('[s]pinning to still'), an experience that is conveyed through the colour white ('in his one whiteness'), apprehends timelessness within time.

Insofar as 'Whiteness I Remember' presents an escape from time, then, it anticipates 'Ariel', which will take this escape to its logical conclusion by dissolving the speaker's selfhood as well. In both poems it is the interaction with a horse that allows for the particulars of a life to be transcended: the speaker in 'Whiteness I Remember' transcends her daily existence through the interaction with Sam, while the speaker in 'Ariel' transcends her mythic drama through the interaction with Ariel.

But in Hughes's poem 'Sam' (2003: 1049), which deals with the same event described in 'Whiteness I Remember', transcendent escape becomes tragic inevitability. In this poem, as in the rest of *Birthday Letters*, the outlook is retrospective, and the world presented one of fixed outcomes, sealed fates. As Erica Wagner (2000: 32) explains, 'it is... destiny that governs the movement and shape of *Birthday Letters*'. In the volume, she elaborates, '[t]he future has its own existence, quite separate from Hughes and Plath', and '[t]his already-existing future allows *Birthday Letters* to share [here Wagner quotes Plath's poem, 'Edge'] the "illusion of a Greek necessity" (2000: 54) that Plath created for her own work'.

That Plath's personal mythology and the myth of Plath Hughes presents in *Birthday Letters* share a certain fatedness is true. By examining *Birthday Letters* we see how marked Plath's influence is in Hughes's last work. (Only fitting, we might wish to say, since the volume deals so exclusively with Plath.) But whereas Plath's fatedness, the foreclosed future of her myth with its focus on selfhood, can be resolved by 'rebirth or transcendence of self' (Kroll 2007: 3), Hughes's fatedness, an absolute fixity, cannot. *Birthday Letters* comes with a set trajectory for its subject; there is only one ending available to her. And when Hughes then simultaneously recreates Plath's runaway ride on the horse Sam *and* assesses her poetic reading of that event in his poem, the tragic, ineluctable end of the narrative that his volume traces is already there, waiting to happen. In fact, what we see in the case of 'Sam' is that it, like Plath's so-called occasional poems, is solicited by the overarching narrative that contains it. The biographical basis of 'Sam', it turns out, renders it suitable for absorption into the myth Hughes develops.

And the myth of Plath presented here, we soon see in the cryptic first lines of the poem, is something that takes account of Plath's mythology. 'It was all of a piece to you', the poem's speaker announces, '[t]hat your horse, the white calm stallion, Sam, / Decided he'd had enough / And started home at a gallop' (ll. 1-4). Such an opening raises questions. How precisely is it 'of a piece' to the Plath we find here that her deceptively calm horse should bolt and threaten her life? And what is it 'of a piece' with? When we consider certain features of Plath's writing, however, answers emerge. There is the divided selfhood of her mythology, which requires that her false selves die ritualistic deaths at the hands of the true selves. Or there is that line from Plath's letter to her mother about the 'terrible beauty of death'. Or the line in 'Lady Lazarus' (1981: 244), where Plath's speaker famously declares that '[d]ying / Is an art, like everything else' (ll. 43-44), that she does it 'exceptionally well' (l. 45), that one could even say she 'has a call' (l. 48), in other words, a calling.

Hughes's speaker is, in other words, echoing Plath's reading — her poetic interpretation — of the horse ride. It is the reading implicit in 'Whiteness I Remember', where the encounter with the animal is another encounter with the terrible beauty of death. 'It was all of a piece to you', the speaker claims, as if to say, 'Of course you were going to read it that way'. In 'Whiteness I Remember', as we have seen, the near-death experience is one that allows for a rebirth, a transcendence of the particulars of the speaker's life, but in Hughes's version, with its terrible and looming conclusion, this kind of transcendence is denied. Not surprisingly, then, his speaker counters his opening words immediately after having uttered them. 'I can live / Your incredulity, your certainty / That this was it' (ll. 4-5), the poem continues. We must remember that Hughes is imagining his way into an experience he has no direct access to; these words signal his take on

the event. Plath, in this conception, does not find in the encounter an experience that harmonizes with her poetic preoccupations; rather, she is faced with imminent and terrifying death. It is as though we have slid from one Plath, the Plath who is able to reconstruct her runaway ride with Sam in a poem that speaks of characteristic transcendence, to another, Plath as she appears in *Birthday Letters*, doomed from the start.

This Plath, with no access to transcendence, can only try her best to survive the ordeal with the horse. Hughes's poem goes on to depict that survival with a music rich in jagged, harsh rhythms, a densely alliterative and assonantal sequence of sounds that both evokes his Plath's panic and the strains of 'Whiteness I Remember'. 'You slewed under his neck', (l. 10) the speaker says,

An upside-down jockey with nothing  
Between you and the cataract of macadam,  
That horribly hard, swift river,  
But the propeller terrors of his front legs  
And the clangour of the iron shoes, so far beneath you (ll. 11- 15).

Yet even in this vivid description redolent of Plath's poem we find a phrase that undoes Plath's vision. Depicting the awful rush of road below the dangling Plath, the speaker calls it a 'cataract of macadam'. The word 'cataract' is obviously meant to denote a 'waterfall... of considerable size' (*OED*, 2013: 'cataract, *n.* 2. a.') or a 'violent downpour or rush of water' (*OED*, 2013: 'cataract, *n.* 2. b.'). This is confirmed by the next line, which calls the road a 'horribly hard, swift river'. But we cannot overlook another meaning of 'cataract': a medical condition which involves 'opacity of the crystalline lens of the eye, or of the capsule of the lens, or of both, producing more or less impairment of sight, but never complete blindness' (*OED*, 2013: 'cataract, *n.* 4.'). In this sense Plath observes the 'hard, swift river' of road as though through eyes afflicted with cataracts.

(‘You saw only blur’ (l. 22) the speaker will say, a few lines later.) And the result is that Plath, far from having the eye-opening experience the speaker of ‘Whiteness I Remember’ has, has her sight taken away from her, making her even more of a subject to the will of the horse and, by extension, the forces of fate Hughes employs in the poem.

Part of these forces of fate, we see as the poem progresses, is the force of poetry. The poetic destiny of Hughes and Plath is a central concern in *Birthday Letters*, an essential element in the delineation of their time together and a partial explanation of the calamity that befalls them. In ‘Fishing Bridge’ (2003: 1098), for instance, which recalls the time Hughes and Plath spent at Rock Lake in Canada (while they were travelling in and around North America), the voice of poetry manifests as an active entity urging them on ‘to find [their] souls’ (l. 35), ‘find [their] true selves’ (l. 36). The discovery this journey leads to is not a joyful one. While it may grant Plath fully-achieved selfhood in her poetry, it also steers her straight to the immovable ending that lies in wait. By the end of the poem the speaker is standing over Plath’s ‘dead face’ (l. 50), ‘dead lips’ (l. 51).

In ‘Sam’, however, poetry becomes a source of temporary salvation. ‘What saved you? Maybe your poems / Saved themselves’ (ll. 19-20) the speaker muses. Then, in line 27, he decides: ‘[s]omething in you not you did it for itself’. As Erica Wagner (2000: 56) explains, Plath’s ‘work... is perceived as the product of an almost separate self, having its own agency’. This, then, is the only form of transcendence permitted by the realm of *Birthday Letters*: Plath’s work, not Plath, transcends the otherwise inescapable fate.

That inescapable fate is enacted at the poem's close (it is enacted many times throughout the many poems of *Birthday Letters*). Hughes goes beyond the frozen ending of 'Whiteness I Remember' by having the horse '[walk] [back] into his stable' (l. 29), with Plath still clinging on, though she has 'probably' been 'nearly unconscious' (l. 28) for most of the ride. Next we have an assessment: '[t]hat gallop / Was practice', the speaker says, 'and quite useless' (ll. 28-29). This gives way to the concluding stanza of the poem, in which the speaker, having assumed the form of a horse himself, is ridden by Plath. The second horse ride ends disastrously:

When I jumped a fence you strangled me  
One giddy moment, then fell off,  
Flung yourself off and under my feet to trip me  
And tripped me and lay dead. Over in a flash (ll. 31-34).

The poem's ending is complex. There is, firstly, the ambiguous phrase 'jumped a fence'. Several readings are possible. Perhaps Hughes's speaker-as-horse attempts to escape the close association with Plath, but finds that she holds him back, strangles him for it, then kills herself because of his act, or is killed by it. Or alternatively the speaker-as-horse and his Plath are making a futile bid for escape, aiming to attain, together, the kind of transcendence the world of *Birthday Letters* makes impossible. Or the speaker is a show-jumping horse, going through the rigours of a test (the test of a relationship?) with his rider, Plath, who will fail the test with him.

Then there is, secondly, the notable confusion of what Wagner (2000: 56) calls 'actor and acted upon'. Either the Plath of this poem falls off her speaker-as-horse, or flings herself off. Neither action is presented as likelier than the other one. We may wish to call this a wilful act of evasion,

but it also indicates to us the difficulties involved in assigning blame when the interaction is as close and as integrated as this.

Thirdly, in calling Plath's ride with Sam a practice run, and by having his speaker become a horse Plath rides, Hughes is pointing to and confirming the tentative motifs bubbling under the surface of 'Whiteness I Remember'. He makes explicit the implicit connection Plath's poem has with him, just as he acknowledges, earlier, that her poem is about transcendence. And the final, frozen moment of 'Whiteness I Remember' is here utterly negated by the last words, '[o]ver in a flash', which imply that any attempt at transcendent escape, be it Plath's or Plath and her speaker-as-horse's, is over before it even began.

Finally, Hughes also reveals why the biographical occasion of this poem has been accorded a place in the narrative of *Birthday Letters*: because it can be requisitioned as a precursor to and metaphor for his, or at least his textual double's, interaction with Plath. In the same way that 'Whiteness I Remember' anticipates 'Ariel', which took its predecessor's concerns with transcendence to their logical conclusion, the interaction with Sam here anticipates the interaction with Hughes, which takes the near-death experience and replaces it with a 'real' death.

Margaret Uroff (1979), aside from investigating how Hughes influences Plath in her poetry, also examines how Plath influences Hughes in his. Because of Plath, she argues, and as was quoted in the Introduction, Hughes begins a shift to a more identifiably personal point of view in his work. This shift finds its culmination in *Birthday Letters*, a book that was widely regarded as being



brimful of intimate revelations. But it is easy to forget that the depictions of the poet and the poet's life on display in the volume are, not only by their very nature, but also in their self-conscious construction, fictional creations. Hughes takes from Plath not a tendency toward confession, or revealing biography, but rather methods and tools for the artistic manipulation of biographical subject matter. And the effect in his work is dramatic, or, more accurately, and in his own words, a 'drama with the dead' (cited in Middlebrook, 2003: 275). From his poems 'Phaetons' and 'The Horses', in which animals are powerful presences of a non-human and unyielding cosmos, we move through the lens of Plath's 'Whiteness I Remember' and 'Ariel', poems in which horses are related to personally, are in fact psychologised, and where they become closely linked to the individual fates of the speakers, and what we end up with is 'Sam', a poem in which a horse is both a psychologised animal *and* an aspect of a cold and unyielding universe, a fate set in stone.

## CHAPTER 2

### Hughes, ‘Your Daddy’? Conflict, Conflation and the Complication of Conquering the Father in ‘Daddy’ and ‘The Cast’

In 2003, David Galenson, an economist working at the University of Chicago, attempted to measure the cultural importance of leading American poets of the Twentieth Century. He did so by examining the frequency with which their poems have been reprinted in forty-seven major anthologies of poetry published since 1980. He collected his findings in an article titled ‘Literary Life Cycles: The Careers of Modern American Poets’. At the end of this article the reader is supplied with several tables detailing the individual poets’ rankings according to various criteria.

Naturally a study of this kind, where a clinical, factual approach becomes tinged with the air of the pop hit parade and its breathless countdown, is likely to ruffle the feathers of literary scholars, who might very well decry the way in which it schematises artistic output, turning creative work into a large-scale competition. Malcolm Gladwell (2008:¶7), referring to Galenson’s article in a piece written for *The New Yorker*, is correct when he acknowledges that ‘some people... would quarrel with the notion that literary merit can be quantified’. Nevertheless, Galenson’s research does provide a valuable breakdown of general critical consensus concerning modern American poets. As Gladwell (2008:¶7) explains, ‘Galenson simply wanted to poll a broad cross-section of literary scholars about which poems they felt were the most important in the American canon’.

Robert Frost emerges from this poll as the most-anthologised modern American poet, with 503 entries. Sharing the top spot as the most-anthologised poems, both reprinted thirty-one times, are T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour'. Sylvia Plath ranks as the seventh most-anthologised poet (203 entries), while her poem 'Daddy' comes in at number seven — a position it shares with Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' — on the list of most-anthologised poems.

As Galenson's research indicates, Plath occupies a prominent position in the American canon. She is *the* most-anthologised modern American female poet. (There are two more in the top ten, Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore, in positions eight and nine.) Her most famous poem is, clearly, 'Daddy' (1981:222), which she completed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October in 1962. And this is not surprising when we consider just how much critical attention has been given to the poem ever since it was first published in Plath's second volume, *Ariel*, in 1965. 'If we had to choose only one poem by Sylvia Plath on which to stake a claim to her importance', says Diane Middlebrook (2004:186), 'it would have to be "Daddy"'.

And yet 'Daddy' is as infamous as it is famous. Its renown seems to rest largely on its notoriety. It is, after all, a poem in which the speaker compares her suffering at the hands of an oppressive father to the suffering of the Jews under the Nazis, and while it is only one of several poems in which such references to the Holocaust appear, it has been *the* target for criticism of Plath's metaphorical invocations. 'For a writer who has so consistently produced outrage in her critics', Jacqueline Rose (1991:205) explains, 'nothing has produced the outrage generated by Sylvia

Plath's allusions to the Holocaust in her poetry, and nothing the outrage occasioned by "Daddy".

'Daddy' is a poem about a daughter's revolution, or perhaps rather, some would say, a revolting daughter. Plath wrote the poem at a critical juncture in her life. She was, by this point, well into her late phase of poetic composition, and with 'Daddy' she obliterates the stance and logic of such early poems as 'Full Fathom Five' (1981:92), 'Electra on Azalea Path' (1981:116), 'The Beekeeper's Daughter' (1981:118) and 'The Colossus' (1981:129). As has already been stated in Chapter 1, these poems centre on a dead father figure who is simultaneously absent and present, and who is mourned, deified, longed for, even married. In 'Daddy' this psychosexual power dynamic is inverted. The enraged daughter rejects her father, metaphorically kills him, and berates herself for a lifetime of male worship. Associated with her father is her husband, another representative of patriarchal domination, and he too is cast off, killed off. (It is telling that, as Middlebrook (2004:187) points out, Plath wrote the poem 'the day after Ted Hughes moved out of Court Green, apparently abandoning his own role as father'.)

These poetic developments alone would, in the 1960s, have been enough to make the piece controversial, provocative. While initial reviews of *Ariel* were generally very positive, several were, despite their praise, marked by a resistance to what was seen as Plath's disturbed psychological condition, which, as it was defined, was really only a way to invalidate her rage against patriarchal forces. In his 1965 review Robin Skelton (in Wagner, 1988:90) writes that '*Ariel*... is filled with violence', but that 'it is the violence of the disturbed mind rather than that of society'. In 1966 Stephen Spender (in Wagner, 1988:69) asserts that '[w]ith Sylvia Plath, her femininity is that her

hysteria comes completely out of herself, and yet seems about all of us. And she has turned our horrors and our achievements into the same witches' brew'. It is hardly surprising, then, that Plath, in the wake of her death, and right at the time when second-wave feminism was gaining momentum, was claimed by feminist scholars as a fallen heroine. But the allusions to the Holocaust that appear in 'Daddy' (and the few other poems) courted an altogether different kind of controversy, and the criticism they drew, even from scholars who championed Plath's poetry, was far darker, more damning than anything crypto-anti-feminists could conjure up.

In her famous 1973 essay on Plath, 'The Death Throes of Romanticism', Joyce Carol Oates (cited in Rose, 1991:206) criticizes Plath for 'snatching metaphors for her predicament from newspaper headlines'. Writing for the *New York Review of Books* in 1976, Leon Wiseltier (cited in Rose, 1991:205) argues that while 'Auschwitz bequeathed to all subsequent art perhaps the most arresting of all possible metaphors for extremity', 'its availability has been abused'. He singles Plath out. Her use of metaphor is, he asserts, 'inappropriate', stating that '[w]hatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews'. He goes on to say that '[f]amiliarity with the hellish subject must be earned, not presupposed', that Plath does not earn it, and that she does not 'respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place'. In 1984 Marjorie Perloff (cited in Rose, 1991:206) calls Plath's Holocaust references 'histrionic', 'cheap shots', 'topical trappings'. And Seamus Heaney (1988:165) censures Plath along similar lines. In an essay first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1988, he has the following to say:

A poem like 'Daddy', however brilliant a *tour de force* it may be acknowledged to be, and however its violence and vindictiveness can be understood or excused in light of the

poet's paternal and marital relations, remains, nevertheless, so entangled in biographical circumstances and rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our sympathy.

Such criticism depends upon certain presuppositions. Jacqueline Rose dedicates an entire chapter of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) to investigating the nature and reasoning of the condemnatory responses 'Daddy' has received. At the heart of the rebuke lies, she argues, a belief in the violation of metaphor. '[E]ither Plath trivialises the Holocaust through that essentially personal (it is argued) reference, or she aggrandises her experience by stealing the historical event' (Rose, 1991:206). In other words, the problem Plath's critics identify is one of distance and scale — the two instances of suffering drawn together by the mechanism of metaphor, one personal, arguably small, the other public, incalculably large, are incommensurable. But the objection also goes beyond a belief in the violation of metaphor to include 'a repudiation of metaphor itself' (Rose, 1991:206) — behind Wiseltier's statement that '[f]amiliarity with the hellish subject must be earned, not presupposed' lies, Rose (1991:206) asserts, the demand that 'only those who directly experienced the Holocaust have the right to speak of it — speak of it in what must be, by implication, non-metaphorical speech'.

By examining these criticisms, then, we also reveal something about the cultural workings of metaphor and its perceived limitations, especially with regard to an event such as the Holocaust. Turn that proposition of Leon Wiseltier about Auschwitz as a metaphor for extremity around, and we find, as Rose shows us (1991:207), not that "Auschwitz bequeathed the most *arresting* of all possible metaphors for extremity", but that in relation to literary representation... Auschwitz is the place where metaphor is *arrested*, where metaphor is brought to a halt'. A sentiment like this

is taken to its logical extreme with the famous declaration made by Theodor Adorno (1983:34) in his 1949 essay, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', more commonly and dramatically rephrased as 'there can be no poetry after Auschwitz'. Adorno's assertion is usually wrenched out of context, a context which does not so much speak of the failure of art in the wake of an occurrence like Auschwitz as it condemns the role of art as a propagation of the self-perpetuating nightmare that is Western history. The critique is not of poetry about Auschwitz but rather of the continuation of poetry as cultural production following Auschwitz. In this sense the claim contains its own repudiation of metaphor, one that could only lead to artistic paralysis. Adorno (1973:362-363) went on to withdraw partially his words later in life, stating that '[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream' and admitting that he 'may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems'. But his withdrawal is replaced immediately by a more severe, more paralysing conviction, that 'it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living'. Thus, from the cessation of metaphor at Auschwitz, we move to the cessation of poetry after Auschwitz, which concludes with the cessation of life itself. The end point is absurd (Adorno was probably very aware of this himself), and impossible too — even as poetry is denounced it is denounced with the use of synecdoche (Auschwitz as representative of the whole Holocaust). Poetry has persisted in the wake of Auschwitz, just as life has persisted in the wake of Auschwitz.

Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy' could therefore be said to be a cultural artefact that, through its apparent transgressions, exposes a nexus of ideas concerning the creative process, the societal norms which govern it, and the culture that produces it. This is the stance Rose (1991:207) takes — view the

poem from this angle, she explains, and the ‘issue then becomes not whether Plath has the right to represent the Holocaust, but what the presence of the Holocaust in her poetry unleashes, or obliges us to focus, about representation as such’.

And yet, if we accept that metaphor should not, cannot be arrested at Auschwitz, the issue of whether Plath has the right to represent the Holocaust persists. Were we to acknowledge that her detractors present credible arguments, are thus right when they say Plath does not have the right to represent the Holocaust, we would also have to acknowledge that their critique rests not only on a presupposition about the acceptable limits of metaphor, but also a presupposition that, in Plath’s case, poetry and biography are one and the same. This conviction emerges clearly in all the statements quoted above — when Oates accuses Plath of snatching metaphors ‘*for her* predicament [emphasis added]’; when Wiseltier asserts that ‘[w]hatever [Plath’s] father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews’; when Perloff calls the Holocaust references ‘topical trappings’; and when Heaney speaks of how ‘Daddy’ is ‘entangled in biographical circumstances’, particularly ‘the poet’s paternal and marital relations’.

These authors are, of course, correct in perceiving biographical subject matter in ‘Daddy’. It is clear and irrefutable that Plath incorporates a great deal of personal experience into the poem. But poetry is not merely adorned life writing, not merely the careful rendering of significant biographical scenes. It would be hazardous to regard even confessional poetry, which strives for intimacy, private revelation and verisimilitude, in this way. And while Plath has been and is still regarded by some as a confessional poet, this categorisation is, as was shown in the Introduction,



and as scholars such as Judith Kroll (1976), Lynda Bundtzen (1983, 2001), Tracy Brain (2001) and Heather Clark (2011) have indicated, misguided.

Indeed, Plath (1981:293) herself indicated that some distance between her and the speaker of 'Daddy' must be apprehended. In a reading prepared for the BBC, she introduced the poem as follows:

Here is a poem by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other — she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.

With this preface 'Daddy' is thus given a crucial context: the piece, the poet wants us to understand, is embedded in a self-consciously fictional narrative. It could, of course, be argued that Plath offers the narrative as a way of evading accusation (little good it did her, then), a way to disguise the fact that the poem is really just about her, but such a stance would not only be unkind, it would also evince a narrow conception of poetry. If we take the introduction seriously, we also have to recognize that the terms of the accusation made against Plath need to be altered. The question becomes not whether Plath has the right to represent, as though it were first-hand experience, the experience of the Holocaust, but whether she has the right to represent as second-hand experience a speaker, a semi-autobiographical character, whose experience of the Holocaust is already second-hand. Is the speaker reprehensible? Certainly. Does this make Plath reprehensible? Only if we assume that she condones the metaphors she has her speaker employ. But why then does she call the 'little allegory' the speaker 'has to act out' 'awful'? What does seem problematic is to condemn Plath for writing a poem with a problematic speaker, or to

assume that because the speaker draws alarming, offensive parallels, it is Plath who does the offending.

Interestingly enough, Plath's contextualising narrative, which speaks of a daughter who used to worship her father and who must now undergo a ritual in order to be rid of him, corresponds to the analysis Kroll has given of the poet's work. For Kroll (2007:120), '[n]o other poem, except "Lady Lazarus", so forcefully and completely recapitulates Sylvia Plath's myth as "Daddy"'. The preoccupation in the early poems with a venerated father, a god-like figure styled, as Kroll argues, and as we have noted in Chapter 1, after Frazer's mythological gods in decline, is recounted and subverted. The poem ends with what Kroll (2007:120) calls 'an act of exorcism'. 'The earlier recapitulation of the myth', she goes on to say, 'is a prologue to and part of the ceremony; the list of charges against Daddy supports the act of sentencing him to death'.

'You do not do, you do not do' (l. 1), the speaker chants ominously in the opening line of the poem; then in line 2 she identifies a 'black shoe' as the thing that does not do, and goes on to explain, in lines 3, 4 and 5, that she has lived in this shoe 'like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo'.

The first stanza therefore immediately conveys a vision of a fearful woman oppressed, a woman who has quietly endured her oppression for three decades. Clearly she feels infantilized. There is the title of the poem, which, with its use of the diminutive, implies both intimacy and dependence. There is also the use of the child-like word 'Achoo', and the introduction of the /u:/ rhyme, which will travel throughout the poem. These elements lend the air of a nursery rhyme.

In fact, this opening alludes to the actual nursery rhyme of the ‘old woman who lived in a shoe’ and ‘didn’t know what to do’, thus offering us another ‘image of passive and victimized domesticity’ (Kroll, 2007:127).

But the victimization, the innocence of these first few lines is deceptive. Already with the reference to the ‘black shoe’ we have an intimation of the unsettling things to come; so too with the speaker’s use of the simile ‘like a foot’. Plath is, of course, evoking an image of a foot trapped within a shoe as a way of explaining her speaker’s confinement, but she is also probably playing with a bit of personal history. Her father, an undiagnosed diabetic, died because of a gangrenous foot, a foot that was amputated shortly before his death. The motif of amputation occurs again and again in Plath’s poetic oeuvre. In a letter Ted Hughes (2007:699) wrote to German translators of his work who had inquired about a poem dealing with his and Plath’s honeymoon in Spain<sup>17</sup>, and which speaks of Plath’s horror of ‘puckering amputations’ (l. 25), he states the following: ‘[Plath’s] greatest single terror, maybe, as a single image, was an amputated limb, as you will know if you are familiar with her work’. In Plath’s poem ‘Thalidomide’ (1981:252), to name just one example, we have the memorable lines ‘Your dark / Amputations crawl and appall’ (ll. 4-5). The speaker of this poem apostrophizes the hazardous sedative which, it was discovered early in the 1960s, caused congenital malformation or an absence of limbs in children whose mothers took the drug during early pregnancy. ‘Daddy’, as an ‘act of exorcism’, brings about its own amputation. The daughter, who is likened to a foot (a foot that, it soon transpires, belongs to Daddy), wishes not only to break free of oppressive circumstances (represented by the black shoe), but also to sever her attachment to her father. In other words, the implication is that the

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<sup>17</sup> The poem, ‘You Hated Spain’ (2005:1068), was included in *Birthday Letters*.

daughter is now the foot that must be amputated, or, more accurately, the foot that amputates itself. And, as Kroll (2007:130) points out, the speaker also severs herself, that is to say, the false self who worshipped Daddy, 'who [was] in his thrall', and whose association with him is now seen as a spoiled history, a gangrenous foot to be discarded.

If these violent changes are hinted at in the first stanza, they are baldly stated in the second.

'Daddy, I have had to kill you' (l. 6), the speaker declares, identifying her antagonist, and shattering the initial facade of innocence. Here is a woman who makes it clear that she, unlike her nursery rhyme shoe-dwelling counterpart, *does* know what to do (Kroll, 2007:127). 'You died before I had time' (l. 7) she goes on to tell her father, and then describes him, in the rest of stanza two and in stanza three, as

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset (ll. 8-13).

Lines 14 and 15 conclude the depiction with words at once self-mocking *and* demeaning to Daddy: 'I used to pray to recover you. / Ach, du' (ll. 14-15). In these two stanzas, we have the evocation of the earlier phase of Plath's myth: as in 'The Colossus' (1981:129), where the god-like father is compared to the Colossus of Rhodes, we are offered a vision of a larger-than-life father, a '[g]hastly statue' who preoccupies the daughter's existence. The father now even seems to have grown in stature. The daughter speaks first of his 'gray toe', which is surely a reference to

the infected flesh around Otto Plath's phalanx<sup>18</sup>. The toe is, we are told, '[b]ig as a Frisco seal', in other words, a San Francisco seal. The simile is not only effective as a straightforward comparison, since seals from the San Francisco Bay area are large and imposing, it also signals, like the earlier simile in stanza one, the absorption of biographical details: Otto Plath, an entomologist with a specialisation in bees, conducted research on muscid larvae in San Francisco Bay.

The daughter then states that Daddy's head lies in 'the freakish Atlantic / Where it pours bean green over blue / In the waters off beautiful Nauset'. The mention of 'beautiful Nauset' is once again significant biographically, as Plath grew up in Massachusetts, first on the coast, then inland, and visited Nauset Beach as a child with her family. Complaining about 'depressingly mucky' English sea resorts, she writes to her mother in 1960 that '[her] favourite beach in the world is Nauset', and that '[her] heart aches for it' (in Wagner, 2000:161). And it is also noteworthy that, in her autobiographical piece 'Ocean 1212-W' (1977:130), she closely associates her childhood by the sea with her father. The passage runs as follows: 'And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle — beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth'. The narrative might also explain why the speaker of 'Daddy' refers to the Atlantic ocean as 'freakish' — hurricanes form in the southern part of the North Atlantic Ocean, frequently affecting, as is only too well known, the United States Atlantic coast,

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<sup>18</sup> It is also quite possible that this image of a 'gray toe' alludes to the Colossus of Constantine, the statue of the late Roman emperor Constantine the Great, built c. 312–315 AD, which stood near the Roman Forum. Parts of the statue can still be seen in the Courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori of the Musei Capitolini (also close to the Roman Forum). This broken statue is alluded to in 'The Colossus' (in addition to the allusion to the Colossus of Rhodes).

and in 'Ocean 1212-W' Plath describes the 1938 hurricane, a phenomenon which to a six-year old child would certainly have seemed 'freakish', that hit Massachusetts.

More significant than these biographical underpinnings, however, is the scale that the move from the West Coast to the East Coast, from San Francisco Bay, the Pacific Ocean, to Nauset Beach, the Atlantic Ocean, brings to mind. If Daddy's grey toe borders (or is, at least, associated with) the Pacific, and if his head lies in the Atlantic, we are dealing with a figure stretched out across America. (And if he seems to be lying down, this foreshadows the final image of him, dead and defeated, lying in some public arena.) The Daddy of 'Daddy' is thus exponentially larger than the father of 'The Colossus', his enlargement already suggesting here that, as the daughter will go on to aver, he has become representative of patriarchal domination in general. That she refers to this gargantuan figure using the informal German pronoun '*du*', instead of the formal '*Sie*', illustrates the changed nature of the relationship between father and daughter. In 'The Colossus' the desperate and doleful daughter attempts to reconstruct her broken statue-father so that she may be properly reunited with him, crucially, so that she may communicate with him. This is why the daughter of 'Daddy' says she used to 'pray to recover' her father; the word 'recover' refers, biographically, to the ailing Otto Plath, and, poetically, to the ruinous father of 'The Colossus'. At one point, the daughter of 'The Colossus' calls out to her personal god with the words, 'O father' (l. 17), her diction, especially the vocative 'O', indicative not only of her immense respect for her father, but also the distance she feels separates them, and the formality of their association. The substitution of 'father' with 'Daddy' suggests that the relationship is now perceived as being far too close, so stifling that it must be terminated. (As Kroll (2007:127) explains, Plath's speaker cancels the sacred marriage — a motif taken from Frazer — that is

implied in a poem like ‘The Colossus’, and enacted in the earlier poem ‘The Beekeeper’s Daughter’ (1981:118)). And while the use of ‘*du*’ attests to this claustrophobic closeness, it also hints at the daughter’s imminent rise to power — it is in ‘Daddy’ that she finally feels capable of squaring up to the father figure, equal to the task of killing him off.

The introduction of the German in line 15 then leads the speaker on to a discussion of her father and her mother’s Germanic origins and, by extension, her own ancestry. What we find over the course of the next seven stanzas is the daughter preoccupied with two things. On the one hand, she systematically alienates herself from her personal history, her lineage, a process which is in keeping with the poem’s agenda of ritualistic exorcism. On the other, she contests the very notion of a pure or true lineage. As before, the biographical foundation of these lines is clear — Otto Plath was born on April 13, 1885 in Grabow, Germany, a town in the Polish Corridor, to strict parents of mixed German and Polish heritage. His father was a blacksmith, and the family was not well-off. In September 1900, at age 15, hoping to find success and fortune in America, Otto Plath sailed to New York, never to return to his country of birth. Many years later, employed as a professor of biology and German at Boston University, he married Aurelia Schober, Plath’s mother, a first-generation American of Austrian descent, who was working towards an MA in teaching.

This biographical basis, which informs the speaker’s asseverations, does not, however, remain intact. The metaphorical association of the father figure with a Nazi oppressor, of the daughter with a Jewish victim, and the implied belief that her mother is, as Plath’s contextualising narrative phrases it, ‘very possibly part Jewish’, are undeniable distortions, distortions which

foreground the fictionality of the 'awful little allegory' Plath constructs. Thinking of her father's home town, the daughter talks about 'the German tongue' and recalls the 'Polish town / Scraped flat by the roller / Of wars, wars, wars' (ll. 16-18). Already with the portrayal of the town's effacement at the hands of war we get the sense that the daughter wishes to negate the hold the past, this particular past, has on her. Immediately thereafter she begins to distance herself from her father's history. 'But the name of the town is common. / My Polack friend // Says there are a dozen or two'<sup>19</sup> (ll. 19-21), she reveals, and then admits, 'So I never could tell where you / Put your foot, your root. / I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw' (ll. 22-25).

The daughter of 'The Colossus' also states that she cannot talk to her father; she seems to spend much of her time lamenting this failure of communication. After the above-mentioned address of 'O father', she calls him 'pithy and historical as the Roman Forum' (ll. 18), a description that is simultaneously sincere and ironic. He lies at the pith of her sense of self, that is to say, is as central to her identity and history as the famed Roman Forum was to Ancient Rome, and yet he is also all too pithy insofar as that he does not speak to her, and in this sense is quite unlike that great plaza and site of communication. The difference with 'Daddy' is that the speaker now consciously moves away from the father, his history and her desire to communicate with him; he is no longer allowed to be the pith of her personality.

The damage and violence implicit in the separation between daughter and Daddy, the damage and violence heralded but not described by that early declaration, 'Daddy, I have had to kill you', is made concrete in stanza 6. Having spoken of her failure to talk to her father, of how her

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<sup>19</sup> This is true — there is one other town in Germany called Grabow, and there are several towns or villages in Poland which share the name.



tongue got 'stuck in her jaw', the daughter goes on, alarmingly, to state that her tongue 'stuck in a barb wire snare' (l. 26). Aside from evoking both linguistic paralysis and physical imprisonment, and warning the reader of the subject material waiting around the corner, the image suggests that association with the father's ancestry holds, for the daughter, great danger. 'Ich, ich, ich, ich' (l. 27), she raps out, I, I, I, I, the repeated guttural pronoun becoming, by virtue of its onomatopoeia, the trapped and injured tongue attempting to articulate, attempting to break free of the *du*, the you, the father. 'I could hardly speak' (l. 28), she continues, 'I thought every German was you / And the language obscene' (ll. 29-30). Fear of the father has thus generalised him into 'every German', and the language is seen as a large-scale, morally offensive weapon emanating from the mouths of all his *doppelgängers* and threatening the daughter's identity, her 'I-ness'.

It is at this point, in stanza 7, that the controversial comparisons commence, though, given what has preceded them, they may seem less surprising. Finding a metaphor for the language she has just called obscene, the daughter draws a connection that, as we know, has widely been called obscene itself. In lines 31, 32 and 33 German becomes '[a]n engine, an engine / Chuffing [her] off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen'. We are in the poem's darkest territory: the daughter has, first with the use of a metaphor (German as an engine), then with the use of a simile ('like a Jew'), likened her oppression, an oppression which she has plainly generalised, to the oppression of Jewish people during the Holocaust. The repetition of 'an engine', the onomatopoeia of the word 'chuffing', and the list of concentration camps (ending in Belsen, which, with 'engine', forms a near-rhyme) convey the relentless rhythm of the metaphorical train that takes the speaker to a figurative death. Plath ends off the stanza with lines that bring the

daughter closer still to the suffering she has evoked: 'I began to talk like a Jew' (l. 34), and 'I think I may well be a Jew' (l. 35).

Stanza 8 operates as a justification and elaboration of the perilous claims made in stanza 7. As we have seen, the fictional context Plath gives to the poem is one in which the daughter's mother may have Jewish ancestry. This is the line of thought the speaker now pursues when she claims that '[t]he snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna / Are not very pure or true' (ll. 36-37). These picturesque emblems of Austrian identity, of Teutonic purity, emblems belonging to the speaker's maternal lineage (again rooted in Plath's biography — her mother, as has been mentioned, was of Austrian descent), cannot be 'pure or true' if her mother is 'part Jewish'. As if to bolster this argument, to other herself more thoroughly, she adds that she also has a 'gipsy ancestress' (l. 38), 'weird luck' (l. 38) and a 'Taroc pack' (l. 39) (a phrase repeated probably for its incantatory effect). These elements further remove her from a steady identity and so, through an association with wandering similar to Jewish associations with wandering, and an implicit reference to the historical fact that gypsies were also persecuted by the Nazis, they too make her 'a bit of a Jew' (l. 40). (There is also, it should be noted, another argument at work here, an argument that undermines the possibility of a 'pure or true' ethnicity ever existing, which will be discussed later.)

In stanzas 9 and 10 the metaphors applied to the daughter are applied to the father in inverse form. If her oppressed state is like that of a Jewish victim of the Holocaust, if she even lays claim to a partly Jewish lineage, her father, with his obscene German, becomes the Nazi oppressor heretofore only implied by her logic. 'I have always been scared of *you*' (l. 41), she announces to

him, 'With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo. / And your neat mustache / And your Aryan eye, bright blue' (ll. 42-44). The father's German, what the daughter calls his 'gobbledygoo', is compared to the Luftwaffe, the German air force during World War II. Luftwaffe can be translated into English either as 'air weapon' or 'air arm', as in 'arms', and so the word serves in this context as an indication of the danger inherent in words. The suggestion is, as with the images of the tongue stuck in the barb wire snare and language as a train leading to doom, that the threat to the daughter is not only psychic, but also physical. And the threat to her body is made even more apparent in the last line of stanza 9: 'Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You' (l. 45). In one sense the father becomes the driver of the armoured tank, but in another it is the father himself who *is* the tank, the impenetrable weapon capable of scraping flat the daughter. Thus the father's body, which she has told us she used to try to reconstruct, and which has indeed been reconstructed to awful effect with a 'neat mustache' and a 'bright blue' 'Aryan eye', now threatens her with her own destruction.

The father-as-Nazi metaphor culminates in stanza 10 with lines that confirm the appalling revision he has undergone and which speak of the representational status he has been given at this point. No longer a 'God' (l. 46) in the eyes of the daughter, he is a 'swastika / So black no sky [can] squeak through' (ll. 46-47). O'Connell, Airey and Craze (2009:499) explain in their encyclopaedia of signs and symbols that the swastika is an ancient ideogram 'first found in Sumeria about 3000 BC[E]'. The name derives from 'Sanskrit *su*, [meaning] "well", and *asti*, [meaning] "being". Used in India, Japan, and Southern Europe', it was 'for thousands of years... a positive sign of cosmic regeneration' until it was 'monopolized by Hitler as [a] sign of the Nazi Party in the 1930s' and was 'degraded into a political emblem of repression and violence'. The

swastika as emblem therefore offers a neat encapsulation of how Daddy's role has evolved, how he has gone from being the keeper of the daughter's true self, the source of her perennial hope for renewal and a figure forever on her mind, to being the baleful, omnipresent overlord from whom she must urgently flee. But with the father abstracted in this manner, metaphorically linked to a symbol, there is also the consequence that his role, the hold he has over his daughter, is related to a larger scheme of male oppression. This argument is already initiated in the second and third stanzas of the poem, where we learn of Daddy's phenomenal increase in stature, and it is strengthened by a line such as 'I thought every German was you' from stanza 6. As Middlebrook (2004:186) makes clear, in 'Daddy' Plath attacks 'Western culture's male authority figures'. Yet it is not only males who are criticised. As Middlebrook (2004:187) also says, the 'poem is poised between a daughter's tender nostalgia for a father loved, feared, and lost early in life, and that daughter's enraged recognition, at thirty, of the cost of her emotional collaboration with domination by a strong man'.

The rest of stanza 10 concerns just such 'emotional collaboration', and it too, like male oppression, is writ large: 'Every woman', the speaker asserts, 'adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you' (ll. 48-50). These scathing lines reveal what the speaker sees as women's masochistic complicity in their own subjugation, a complicity recast in Plath's late phase as repulsive, unacceptable. Heather Clark (2011:132-133) points out that with the line 'Every woman adores a Fascist' Plath 'is mocking Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who [declaiming his views on reading and writing] proclaim[s] [that human beings should aspire to be] "Brave, unconcerned, mocking, violent — thus wisdom wants us: she is a woman and always loves only a warrior"'. During her university years Plath was infatuated with the work of

Nietzsche. The father figure in Plath's poetry, a severe and superior human being who, as far as the daughter is concerned, stands above all other men, is, it could be argued, viewed as an *übermensch*. The reference to Nietzsche is, accordingly, doubly apposite, since the notion of the *übermensch* was adopted and perverted by Hitler and the Nazi Party as a philosophical foundation for their eugenics programme and their belief in an Aryan master race. In this sense we see that, as with the use of the swastika, the reference to Nietzsche functions as a distillation of the horrid transformation of the father and the daughter's new attitude towards him.

Despite the above explanations of what happens in stanzas 7, 8, 9 and 10, and how this happens, these stanzas still raise the question of why the speaker would make such troubling associations. For Middlebrook (2004:188), the allusions to the Holocaust in 'Daddy' come as the consequence of, as she phrases it, the 'wicked logic' of '[r]hyming'. 'How many things can you find to end in "ooo"?' she asks. 'Plath starts out slow', she explains, with "do", "shoe", "blue". But the higher the ground of the trespass, the better the poem — that's the principle of satire. So: how about "*du*", the pronoun reserved for intimacy, for children, and for animals in the German language? Come to think of it, how about "Jew"?' Middlebrook's argument is that the act of rhyming sets in motion a series of word associations, and that these cognitive leaps lead Plath from 'do' to 'Jew'. But rhyme can hardly be called a dictate in Plath's poetry (nor indeed Twentieth Century English poetry in general). Though it may have suggested the movement from 'do' to 'Jew', Plath surely could not have felt *obliged* to make the choices in diction she makes in 'Daddy'. And even if we were to accept Middlebrook's view as valid, it would not be enough to say that Plath takes the route she does because of the limited rhymes available to her. (In other words, 'The rhyme made her do it.') Rather, it is necessary to investigate why her

speaker should invoke Jewish suffering as a parallel to her own, why this speaker should identify with Jewishness as a perceived state of being.

In January 1959 Plath and Hughes moved from Northampton, Massachusetts, where she had taught for a year at her alma mater, Smith College, to Boston. There she began attending a writing seminar held by Robert Lowell at Boston University. Anne Sexton also attended this seminar, and the two poets, Plath and Sexton, became friends. It was during this year that Sexton wrote and published her poem 'My Friend, My Friend' (in Rose, 1991:217). Heather Cam (cited in Rose, 1991:269) claims that in writing 'Daddy' Plath drew inspiration from the piece, which as a precursor offers its own culturally insensitive speaker ruminating on Jewishness. Unlike the speaker of 'Daddy', however, the one in 'My Friend, My Friend' only *wishes* she could lay claim to a Jewish history:

Who will forgive me for the things I do?  
With no special legend or God to refer to,  
With my calm white pedigree, my yankee kin.  
I think it would be better to be a Jew (in Rose, 1991:217).

'In this poem', Rose (1991:217) explains, 'Jewish is an enviable state. It confers origin and divine paternity — the conditions of forgiveness for a crime that is never named'. While Plath's speaker certainly does not invoke a Jewish ancestral line in order to benefit from divine paternity, she does desperately attempt to outline an identity, an origin *other* to Daddy's German roots, an attempt that comes to rest on the gratuitous binary opposition of Jewish victim/Nazi oppressor. Aside from the repeated /u:/ rhyme, strong evidence to suggest that Sexton did in fact influence

Plath, the poem may have served as an artistic precedent in which to be Jewish is to be blameless.

As the poem's speaker continues:

I forgive you for what you did not do.  
I am impossibly guilty. Unlike you,  
My friend, I cannot blame my origin  
With no special legend or God to refer to (in Rose, 1991:218).

The argument here is that being Jewish means being free of guilt; a Jewish person has his or her origin to 'blame' — the word is used ironically — for it. As Rose (1991:218) sums up, for the speaker 'Jewishness offers the possibility of a symbolic deferral of guilt'. If this is the rationale that Plath's speaker absorbs, then it is interesting to note that almost immediately after distancing herself from her father's oppression by making herself seem, through the use of a precarious metaphor, blameless, she relents and acknowledges guilt with the line about adoring a Fascist, which effectively undoes her own attestation that her suffering is like that of a Holocaust victim. It is worth remembering that even as she brings the comparisons into being she voices them with hesitation, uncertainty: 'I *think* I *may* well be a Jew', 'I *may* be a *bit* of a Jew' [emphasis added].

Uncertainty about identity pervades 'Daddy', applying, in the end, not only to the daughter, but also to the father. Tracy Brain (2001:60-61), who examines the poem's concerns with national identity, states that 'Daddy'

is preoccupied with cultural hybridity. [...] [It] explores the status of any national identity as contingent and multiple. One of the ways it does this is to invoke the Jews, who have been historically associated with wandering and homelessness, and have been persecuted for an ethnicity that threatens the supposed purity of others.

In the first draft of the poem, Plath follows the line describing Daddy's 'bright blue' 'Aryan eye' with the line 'I am brown eyed & scared of you' (in Brain, 2001:61). The statement evinces the speaker's belief that her ethnicity cannot intrinsically be 'pure or true', and again she tells us that this is a source of fear to her in her dangerous dealings with her Germanic father, that she feels she 'may be punished for her diluteness' (Brain, 2001:61).

But Daddy's configuration as a pure-blooded German oppressor is not a stable one either. In the last line of the poem he is called a 'bastard' (l. 80), the term conveying both his cruel, overbearing aspect and the speaker's doubts about his parentage (Brain, 2001:61). She has, after all, said that '[she] never could tell where [Daddy]/ Put [his] foot, [his] root'. As Brain (2001:61) clarifies, the father 'is not simply German. He is also the American continent itself, and the geography in the poem is important'. That Daddy stretches from San Francisco on the West Coast to Cape Cod on the East Coast is, for Brain (2001:61), of special significance. 'Given the poem's irony about the cross-breeding of identity', she says, 'it is difficult to resist seeing this picture of Daddy's gray largeness, capped by that head in the Atlantic, as an image also of the Statue of Liberty, that great symbol of America as a melting pot'. It is by taking these implicit meanings into account that we may conclude, as Brain (2001:61) does, that the 'poem systematically destroys any pretence that ethnicity can ever be uncomplicated or verifiable'. And more and more, then, the disturbing references to the Holocaust appear as emanations of an involved fantasy (this is how Rose (1991:229) reads them), a fantasy the speaker allows herself to indulge in momentarily, and a fantasy that she questions herself as the poem continues.



The beginning of stanza eleven presents us with a brief return to biography, specifically a photo of Otto Plath, taken in 1930. ‘You stand at the blackboard, daddy, / In the picture I have of you’ (ll. 51-52), the speaker informs her father. The calm and tender moment allows for a glimpse of the filial piety, the daughterly devotion so evident in the early body of work. It proves a sentiment such as Kroll’s (2007:128), that the venomousness of the poem is ‘ambiguous from the start’ and ‘not the whole story’. “Daddy” is primarily not a poem of “father-hatred”, Kroll argues, since the ‘need for exorcising the father’s ghost lies, after all, in the extremity of the attachment to him’. This belief is articulated already in 1970, in A. Alvarez’s essay on Plath. The poet and critic, who was friends with both Hughes and Plath and did much to champion Plath’s poetry, reasons that

[t]here is a kind of cooing tenderness in [‘Daddy’] which complicates the other, more savage note of resentment. It brings in an element of pity, less for [the speaker] and her own suffering than for the person who made her suffer. Despite everything, ‘Daddy’ is a love poem (in Kroll, 2007:128).

The iteration of the erstwhile mindset is, however, fleeting. Immediately biography is replaced by poetic distortion. The father may in this photo have a ‘cleft in his chin instead of [his] foot’ (l. 53), but, says the daughter, he is ‘no less a devil for that, no not / Any less the black man who // Bit [her] pretty red heart in two’ (ll. 54-56). We are back in familiar territory; Daddy is once more the abominable demon. And in the next line, the second of stanza twelve, the daughter provides, albeit only by inference, the reasoning behind the monstrous changes she subjects her father to.

‘I was ten when they buried you’ (l. 57), she tells him. Following the accusation that he is a devil who bit her heart in two, this line intimates that his burial, or rather, his death, is what caused

her such extreme pain. Indeed, the father's death has caused not simply extreme pain, but the daughter's own death, a death of sorts, a partial death, as the image of a heart bitten in two (offered by a speaker who has somehow continued living) suggests. The speaker is thus referring to the earlier incarnation of her self-constructed myth again, where, as we saw in Chapter 1, it is the father's death that causes the divided selfhood — signified here by the halved heart — the speaker bewails.

The daughter then goes on, in the rest of stanza 12, to speak of an attempted suicide (a reference no doubt to Sylvia Plath's own suicide attempt at age 21 in 1953), which is read within the narrative of the poetry as a desperate endeavour to kill off her false self and recover the true self her father took with him when he died. (Kroll (2007:17-18) terms the false self the speaker's 'death-in-life' state, which she tries to overcome through a process of 'life-in-death'.) 'At twenty I tried to die' (l. 58), she says, 'And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do' (ll. 59-60). So intolerable was the speaker's false selfhood, her separation from Daddy, that she reveals she aimed at twenty to reunite with her father by joining him in the grave, even while she knew that reunion, as she conceived of it, would be impossible, that she would merely have her father's 'bones' to dote on.

But the attempt, the speaker explains in the first part of stanza 13, was thwarted: 'they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue' (ll. 61-62). Though the word 'sack' brings to mind a body bag, the daughter is also possibly recalling her description of her father as a 'bag full of God'. If this is the case, then the argument is that the daughter had in a sense already joined her father before she was yanked back into life. (The line of reasoning is supported

biographically by the fact that Sylvia Plath, when she attempted suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills, lay undiscovered in the crawlspace beneath her mother's house for nearly three days). The precarious re-emergence of the daughter is evoked with the explanation that she was 'stuck... together with glue'. The line alludes to Plath's lengthy 1959 poem inspired by her suicide attempt, the seven-part 'Poem for a Birthday' (1981:131). In the last section of the poem, titled 'The Stones', the speaker, having undergone a metaphorical death, returns to life. 'This is the after-hell', she declares, adding drily, 'I see the light' (l. 22). At the end of the poem she compares her retrieved body, container for her identity, to a glued-together vase containing a rose: 'The vase, reconstructed, houses' (l. 41), she says, '[t]he elusive rose' (l. 42). The final lines offer a tentative confirmation of near-renewal: 'My mendings itch. There is nothing to do. / I shall be good as new' (ll. 44-45).

Stanza 13 of 'Daddy' picks up where 'Poem for a Birthday' leaves off with the line 'And then I knew what to do' (l. 63). It is at this late stage in the poem that the speaker introduces a second antagonist, one who is clearly linked to the first, one who in the personal mythology is, as it were, cast from the same mould as the father. 'I made of a model of you' (l. 64), the daughter continues, 'A man in black with a Meinkampf look // And a love of the rack and the screw. / And I said I do, I do' (ll. 65-67). This is the man the daughter has married (as her emphatic and self-recriminating words, 'I do, I do', disclose), the husband figure who is based on Ted Hughes. As Chapter 1 established, a good number of poems in the early phase revolve around the husband. These poems ring with admiration and respect. But by the time Plath enters her late phase of composition, after the split from Hughes, the husband, who has become a representative of the father (a poetic doubling which is, as we saw in Chapter 1, foreshadowed by journal

entries of Plath's in which she explicitly identifies Hughes with Otto Plath), is characterized in a similar way to the father. He too is now associated with oppression and torture.

In line 64 the daughter appears to acknowledge this change in the depiction of the husband with the phrase 'made a model'. But her argument in stanza 14 may also be that the husband's black clothing, his so-called 'Meinkampf look' (the adjective a compound of the title of Hitler's 1925 autobiographical polemic, *Mein Kampf*), and his 'love of the rack and the screw' are qualities that he already shared with the father (who is, it must be remembered, exposed in the poem as having been oppressive all along). In other words, the qualities the daughter identifies are qualities that made the husband suitable for the role of substitute father in the first place. This means, then, that the word 'model' in 'I made a model of you' refers either to the husband (who is depicted as a likeness of the father), or to the father himself (who exists as the model that the husband echoes). The ambiguity suggests we may even argue that in lines 66 and 67 it is unclear who, the father or the husband, is being described, as the two are not only thematically fused, but become linguistically confused. Both interpretations of 'model' bring us to the same conclusion, however: that the daughter's association with the husband resulted in a continuation of male oppression, and that the daughter herself had a hand in the continuation of this oppression. And with this in mind the rationale for the transformations evident in the depictions of the two males can be better understood. If the daughter loved and looked up to both males at one point, but now feels oppressed and betrayed by them, and wishes to remove them from her life in a ritualised allegory, vilifying them in this manner — associating them with archetypes of masculine malevolence — becomes an effective way in which to achieve her end. Kroll (2007:121) sums up the speaker's dilemma and solution in 'Daddy' as follows:

The history of the 'girl with an Electra complex' runs in ten-year cycles, each decade marked by near-death and revival. This 'Electra' says she was 'ten when they buried' her father — a split in time which originated her false self and which created a permanent need to complete the relationship with him. At twenty, she tried to repair her history by dying and rejoining him (a tacit reference to the theme of sacred marriage to an underground god). Although revived, she was not *reborn*, for she neither escaped his influence nor fully succeeded in 'getting back' to him. Now on the verge of completing a third cycle, she will finally resolve her relationship to Daddy by getting back *at* him, 'killing' both him and the husband whom she married as his proxy.

The connection between the father and his proxy is already hinted at in stanza 10, with the speaker's ironic proclamation that 'Every woman adores a Fascist'. As we saw, with those words Plath deflates both Nietzsche and her own youthful admiration of Nietzsche, and in so doing she reminds us of the father's status as an *übermensch*. But the husband himself also emerges as a dreadful man-above-men; this is particularly evident in his 'Meinkampf look' (assuming that the phrase does refer to him, or does at least speak of an attribute that he shares with the father). Again the notion is fortified by biography: not long after she met Hughes, Plath glorified him in her journal as something akin to an *übermensch* (Clark, 2011:132). On February 26, 1956, in a very hyperbolic entry that is equal parts ecstasy and agony, she writes of having met Hughes the night before at a party in Cambridge, and calls him 'that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women' (Plath, 2000:211). The account of their interaction is all violence and excitement; she says she shouted at him over the music (there was a band playing), and he 'yelled back, colossal, in a voice that should have come from a Pole' (Plath, 2000:211). Later she muses,

Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunks of

words; his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders. And I screamed in myself: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting to you (Plath, 2001:212).

It is telling that Plath's first impression of Hughes as it is recorded in this passage, a passage written years before both 'The Colossus' and 'Daddy', should link him to future artistic representations of the father: he is 'colossal', he shouts 'in a voice that should have come from a Pole'. And, like the poeticized fathers to come, he represents such a pinnacle of maleness that a girl is persuaded to bow down before him. '[T]he only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women', Plath says; 'I can see how women lie down for artists'; '[t]he one man in the room who was as big as his poems'; and then the conclusion, 'I screamed in myself: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting to you'. While Plath presents herself as a force to be reckoned with, it is clear that she feels Hughes dwarfs her in power and stature, and that the thought of submitting to him is a thrilling prospect.

It is precisely this mentality that the speaker of 'Daddy' must swear off, and little wonder, then, that she includes the husband in her accusation, if the man who inspired him engendered such self-effacing thoughts in Plath. But 'Daddy' presents not only the speaker's disavowal of the husband and her former stance toward him, it also serves as an example of how Plath writes in opposition to Hughes in her late phase. Clark (2011:132), who builds on the work of Uroff (1979), maintains that with poems like 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' (1981:244) Plath rails against the influence of Hughes. (It is clear from the biography that, though theirs was a creative partnership that was mutually influential, Hughes often assumed the role of mentor to Plath: he set her writing exercises, encouraged her poetry rather than her prose, and was initially, as she felt

and expressed to her mother in a letter from 1957, 'ahead of [her]' (in Stevenson, 1998:105).)

Plath's *modus operandi* is, as Clark shows, impersonation. She continues:

In these poems, her speakers become exactly the kind of femme fatale that Hughes had written about in early poems such as 'The Woman with Such High Heels She Looked Dangerous', 'Bawdry Embraced', 'The Drowned Woman', 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar', 'The Conversion of Reverend Skinner', and 'Cleopatra to the Asp'. At the same time, 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' incorporate elements of Hughes's poems of predation, violence, and torture, such as 'Law in the Country of Cats', 'Vampire', 'Invitation to the Dance', 'The Jaguar', 'Hawk Roosting', 'Thrushes', and 'Pike'. Plath constructs characters out of Hughes's own words, and gives him back a perversion of his own creation. Like Hughes's Pike, Plath's treacherous females are 'stunned by their own grandeur' as they move through a world of 'delicacy and horror'; like the hawk in 'Hawk Roosting', their 'manners are tearing off heads'.

But Plath's opposition to Hughes does not stop at impersonation. As with 'Whiteness I Remember' (1981:102), we see that her appropriation of Hughesian preoccupations occurs along personal lines. Hughes's femmes fatales in the poems that Clark mentions here appear as abstractions of women, the archetypal idea of the deadly female; Plath takes that archetype and injects it with her personal concerns, portraying her femme fatale as an angry daughter coming to terms with male oppression and her complicity in that oppression. In a clever inversion we find that it is the men who are generalised, turned into archetypes of evil. And so too with Hughes's poems about predation and violence. 'The Jaguar', 'Hawk Roosting' and 'Pike' may offer glorified visions of destructive animals, but the overriding argument is that these creatures have a biological right to destruction. In them, things are as they should be. The predation and violence that Plath exhibits in 'Daddy', however, is born of a hierarchy that the speaker feels is not only intolerable, but *wrong*. 'This is not how it should be', she seems to be saying, even as she resorts to extreme metaphors in order to illustrate her case.

In the rest of stanza 14 the speaker begins the cancellation of the unholy marriage to the father. 'So daddy, I'm finally through' (l. 68) she says, 'The black telephone's off at the root / The voices just can't worm through' (ll. 69-70). Kroll (2007:50) points out that in writing 'Little Fugue' (1981:187), another poem about the father that predates 'Daddy' by seven months (this one is far less aggressive), Plath echoes a specific statement made by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* when the speaker of the poem compares her father to a yew tree. 'Such a dark funnel, my father!' (l. 22), she exclaims, and then says, 'I see your voice / Black and leafy, as in my childhood, / A yew hedge of orders, / Gothic and barbarous, pure German' (ll.23-26). Yew trees, which have toxic leaves and are found in cemeteries all over Europe, are traditionally associated with death and the transcendence of death. Here the yew tree is seen as a conduit of communication for the dead, underground father. (Though Plath's father was buried in America, the speaker of 'Little Fugue', like the speaker of 'Daddy', concerns herself with the father figure's German ancestry.) In an earlier draft of the poem Plath (in Kroll, 2007:50) has the speaker explain that 'The yew is many-footed. / Each foot stops a mouth'. As Kroll (2007:50) indicates, the excised lines echo Graves (cited in Kroll, 2007:50) when he writes of a belief that 'church-yard yews will spread a root to the mouth of each corpse'. Line 69 of 'Daddy' builds on these notions explored in 'Little Fugue'. Communication with the underground father now occurs via a 'black telephone'; only, since the daughter is severing her association with him, the telephone is 'off at the root' and the 'voices just can't worm through'.

And if the association with the father is cancelled, the association with the husband, stanza 15 makes clear, suffers the same fate. Says the daughter, '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' (ll. 71-74). Killing the father also kills his proxy, the husband here depicted as a vampire who drained the speaker of life for 'seven years' (not coincidentally, the length of Plath and Hughes's marriage). The logic is that the husband is a vampire because the dead father is alive in him, and that as a consequence the father and husband exist in a sympathetic relationship — what happens to one happens to the other. Kroll (2007:129) explains that the thinking is derived from Frazer: '[t]he marriage to and killing of her father by proxy are acts of what Frazer calls "sympathetic magic", in which "things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy"'. But the use of the word 'vampire', aside from establishing a sympathetic relationship between father and husband, also complicates the metaphorical murder the speaker describes. It restates both the argument that she, as someone who has become contaminated by a vampire, kills off part of herself — the part that allowed her to be complicit in her own oppression — when she kills off those who oppress her, and the argument that her position as victim is an unstable one. Tracy Brain (2001:62) connects the word to the poem's exploration of identity, gender and nationality, and states the following:

Vampires make their victims what they themselves are. Hence, like gender and nationality, the roles of aggressor and quarry become mercurial in the poem; the speaker is not just drained of blood, is not just killed or bitten, but commits these acts herself. Every character in 'Daddy' is a vampire, and thus filled with other people's blood, so that no identity is left untainted. Every character is 'other', part of someone else in ways that cannot be reliably measured, or even entirely known.

The irony of a poem like 'Daddy', then, is that, in order for the daughter to distance herself successfully from father and husband, oppressive *übermensch*-figures who are, she asserts, neither pure nor true, she cannot maintain the image of herself as a suffering victim (one who is, she

says, like a Jew), but must assume the position of power her overlords occupy, and become a tainted *übermensch* herself.

The last line of stanza 15 moves us into the conclusion of the poem and the completion of the exorcism. The awful little allegory comes to a close with a scene of localized public condemnation:

Daddy, you can lie back now.  
There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always *knew* it was you (ll. 75-79).

In stanzas 2 and 3 we learnt that the father lies stretched out across America. Here at the end, in a shift that marks the decline of Daddy's power, the scale is suddenly and dramatically reduced — he lies, presumably, in a town centre. Though no longer incomprehensibly massive, he is still large, since 'villagers', we are told, 'are dancing and stamping' on him. It seems that the daughter has, in the final act of her performance, returned her father to his vaguely identified Polish town of origin, where he is defeated and displayed as a local monster, a Count Dracula who has finally been vanquished by villagers who, like the daughter, claim they 'always *knew*' he was the villain. His corrupted 'fat, black heart', an image in direct contrast to the 10-year-old daughter's 'pretty red heart', has been stopped with a stake, an instrument that will keep the dead being dead. And this time there is no hope of revival. Before, in the early poetry, the daughter yearned for her father's resurrection; throughout 'Daddy' he is a figure who, despite the fact that we are told he is lying down, exerts great influence, who is, in a sense, constantly resurrected by the daughter as an evil influence. Now he is told to 'lie back', the addition of the word 'back' signifying that the

possibility of his resurrection is over forever. If the scene feels old-fashioned, folkloric, this is because the daughter constructs it so: her father now belongs to the past.

These sentiments are cemented in the final line, 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through' (l. 80). The phrase 'I'm through' yields many interpretative options. The first and most obvious reading is that it signals the end of the father's expulsion — the daughter is through with her ritual. But it could also mean that the daughter is through with her attempts at coming to terms with the image of her father, that she avows, at this point, to give up trying to decipher or relate to him. In this reading it is as though, having turned him into a cruel oppressor and herself his suffering victim, and then finding that the lines along which she conceived of this opposition are insupportable, and then needing to admit her complicity and assume the contaminated role of power in order to eliminate him, she tires of the whole affair, and determines to give it up.

'Daddy' is the last time in Plath's body of work where her speakers explicitly address their fathers. While the husband reappears several times in the 41 poems to come, the father figure never again resurfaces. The word 'father' only recurs once, tellingly as the base of the word 'fatherless' (l. 15) in the poem 'Sheep in Fog' (1981:262).

Finally, the 'I'm through' could also be read, as Clark (2011:149) and other critics have read it, as a doom-laden confession, a portentous utterance warning of the speaker's imminent extinction. Clark (2011:148) writes that 'there is absolutely no chance for regeneration in "Daddy". Neither the murdered Jews nor the speaker, who has killed her husband, will bear children. And, as several critics have suggested, it appears as if the speaker wills her own death at the end of the poem in the line, "I'm through"'. This view is informed by the belief that the

daughter's rebellion is unsuccessful because it takes place on terms that ultimately remain male terms. Clark (2011:134) is of the opinion that by

‘becoming’ dangerous women, Plath’s speakers may successfully mock the idea of the femme fatale... [or] the Nietzschean *übermensch*... , but they are unable to repossess, revitalize and legitimate the idea of female strength. By parodying Hughes’s motifs and language, Plath’s speakers cannot help but parody themselves.

Clark does not explain how the ‘idea of female strength’ could be repossessed, revitalized or legitimized in the poem (if not in the way the speaker goes about it), and she does not move beyond a consideration of the poem as parody. But, as has already been suggested, Plath offers more than parody and reaction in ‘Daddy’. Her daughter is not Hughes’s rather thin femme fatale, but a complicated woman involved in a complicated act of self-determination. If she is a femme fatale, she is a femme fatale redefined. Her murderousness is not born of glamorous sexual threat; it is neither titillating nor available for male consumption as an exciting death fantasy. Rather, it is the product, she says, of three decades’ worth of very unglamorous subjugation, and a force that compels her to weave her own fantasies. And even her rise to power, which involves taking power from the males who held power over her, is an act that comes with the acknowledgement of contamination. Instead of viewing her use of the phrase ‘I’m through’ as a gesture of defeat and an ominous death wish (and it is not hard to slide from such a position into the position of reading the poem not as a poem but as some morbid, poeticized suicide note), we should see it as a qualified admission of a death of sorts, and another confirmation of the complex negotiation between self and other the daughter engages in. By casting off her old identity, the false self, by moving from victim to victimizer, she changes who she is irrevocably. In this sense the ‘I’ she was is ‘through’. And, since it is hard to imagine that the daughter

believes her hold on power is absolute (she did, after all, gain it through murder), it is also possible that with the last line the daughter concedes that the 'I' she is now is under threat as well. Having reached the top, a position from which she can only fall, she too is 'through'. In this way the last line of 'Daddy' may be said to anticipate what Kroll (2007: 182-221) deems the last phase of Plath's poetry, in which the speakers, having attained their agency, their true selfhood, begin to see selfhood as an inherently problematic condition.

Selfhood is its own problem in Hughes's 'The Cast' (2005:1158), though this poem's dynamism depends not on a daughter shifting from oppressed to oppressor, but on a husband who appears to withdraw from the fray. While many poems in *Birthday Letters* discuss Otto Plath and Sylvia Plath's troubled relationship with him (to be expected, since the volume offers Hughes's own poetic and mythic representation of Plath), it is in 'The Cast' that Hughes most plainly addresses Plath's rendering of her father, her use of the image of the father, in 'Daddy'. Here we find the father recast as a befuddled being recalled from the underworld, shocked and hurt by the accusations his daughter hurls at him. Hughes himself, as fictional character and analogue of the husband in 'Daddy', is notably absent in this account of what Plath does to her father with her poetry. The fact may seem curious, given that the vampiric husband is an analogue of the father in Plath's poem, and is symbolically killed off with him. It is not unreasonable to wonder why, if Hughes depicts Daddy as a rudely awakened and done-in dead being, he does not allow himself, his poetic alter ego, a similar role of victimhood. But by examining passages from other poems in *Birthday Letters*, and some of the multiple meanings captured by the poem's title, we hit upon an interpretation of this particular artistic choice.

The fourth poem of the volume, 'Visit' (2005:1047), presents a youthful Hughes in the early stages of a courtship with Plath. Half-drunk, and with a drunken friend, he searches out Plath's student lodgings late one night in Cambridge, and throws clods of soil up at what he and his friend think is her window. (The event is, of course, based on biographical happenings, and the window, it turned out, belonged to Plath's roommate, not Plath.) At this point the older speaker, speaking with the weight and knowledge of experience, states that the innocent act held a secret significance, not for him, but for the youthful Plath. He did not know, he says, that he was

being auditioned  
For the male lead in [Plath's] drama,  
Miming through the first easy movements  
As if with eyes closed, feeling for the role.  
As if a puppet were being tried on its strings,  
Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes (ll. 24-30).

'The Shot' (2005:1052), another poem that appears early in the sequence, is one of many that offer a diagnosis of Plath. It opens with the lines, 'Your worship needed a god. / Where it lacked one, it found one' (ll. 1-3), and proceeds to build on this idea. It was Plath's father, we are told, who set her on a trajectory of worship: 'Your Daddy had been aiming you at God / When his death touched the trigger' (ll. 7-8). Thus the Plath of this poem, the deadliest of bullets, is sent hurtling forth in search of men to simultaneously kill and deify. Inevitably, Hughes appears in her path. But then the poem's narrative yields an important twist. '[Y]our real target', the speaker reveals, '[h]id behind me' (ll. 32-33). Unsurprisingly, the real target turns out to be Plath's 'Daddy, / The god with the smoking gun' (ll. 33-34). 'For a long time' (l. 34), the speaker says,

Vague as mist, I did not even know  
I had been hit,

Or that you had gone clean through me —  
To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god (ll. 35-38).

In 'Black Coat' (2005:1108), mentioned in Chapter 1, a response to Plath's 'Man in Black' (1981:119), similar images of shooting occur, only this time it is Plath doing the aiming. The Hughes of the poem walks out to the edge of a shore, and stands there alone gazing at the Atlantic Ocean, while Plath, some distance behind him, gazes at him. 'I had no idea' (l. 27), he states,

I had stepped  
Into the telescopic sights  
Of the paparazzo sniper  
Nested in your brown iris (ll. 27-30).  
...  
No idea  
How that double image,  
Your eye's inbuilt double exposure  
Which was the projection  
Of your two-way heart's diplopic error,  
The body of the ghost and me the blurred see-through  
Came into single focus,  
Sharp-edged, stark as a target,  
Set up like a decoy  
Against that freezing sea  
From which your dead father had just crawled<sup>20</sup> (ll. 35-45).

What is clear from all three these poems is that Hughes does not wilfully ignore Plath's poetic use of his image, does not disregard the fact that the husband in her poetry is fused with the

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<sup>20</sup> This last line is an obvious reference to Plath's 'Full Fathom Five' (1981:92), which, as we saw in Chapter 1, announces the poetic resurrection of the father figure in Plath's poetry.

father<sup>21</sup>. Both ‘The Shot’, in which Plath the bullet strikes first Hughes and then Daddy, and ‘Black Coat’, in which Plath takes aim at Hughes and the father at the same time by merging them, are replies to the last third of ‘Daddy’. But in the poetic vision of Plath Hughes presents in *Birthday Letters* this aspect is part of Plath’s myth, and not part of Hughes’s vision of himself in his myth of Plath. ‘Visit’ states it unequivocally: the young Hughes did not know he ‘was being auditioned for the male lead’ in Plath’s drama, that he was a puppet ‘being tried on its strings’. When Plath kills him and her father in ‘The Shot’, he states ‘I did not even know / I had been hit’. And when Plath sets her sight(s) on Hughes and father in ‘Black Coat’, again Hughes insists ‘I had no idea... [n]o idea’.

The title of Hughes’s ‘The Cast’ refers, therefore, among other things, to the cast of actors — a cast of three — Plath had selected to play, to give life to, the principal characters in her self-made mythology, and also the cast of the father she used in her moulding of the husband. That Hughes is missing in his role as double of the father indicates his rejection of this particular casting choice (a case of ‘artistic differences’, we might call it), and his recasting of the situation. By removing himself from the triad, Hughes the poet allows Hughes the speaker to avoid the paradox of being both victim and victimizer, the paradox that Plath’s speaker in ‘Daddy’ must admit to. The move may even be read as tacit acknowledgement of the husband’s role as oppressor (despite the rejection of his role as father’s double) — if Daddy is presented as a victim of his daughter’s unjust attacks, but the husband is not, it could be argued that this is because the daughter’s attacks on the husband were not, in fact, unjust.

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<sup>21</sup> In ‘A Picture of Otto’ (2005:1167), another poem that enters into a dialogue with ‘Daddy’ (as the title makes obvious), Otto Plath is as surprised as Hughes is (in the above-mentioned poems from *Birthday Letters*) to find himself in such close association with Plath’s husband.



And so we see that the depiction of Daddy in 'The Cast' is not from the perspective of the daughter, but from the perspective of the seemingly-absent and unwilling husband. Since the implicit argument is that the husband never felt the ever-present threat of the father (except as it involved him through the eyes of the daughter), since the husband cannot claim he was oppressed by the father or his memory of the father for decades, the father emerges in this poem not as an evil torturer, a Nazi oppressor, but as a helpless, already-dead victim who must suffer death once more. Indeed, Hughes goes so far as to suggest that Daddy was a saint<sup>22</sup>.

The poem opens with the dead father's resurrection, an event which is tied directly to Plath's poetry. 'Daddy had come back to hear / All you had against him' (ll. 1-2), the speaker tells us. Within the logic of the 'The Cast' Plath's act of writing 'Daddy' thus recalls her actual father to life. In this way Hughes makes it clear that he will not, like Plath, use biography as the foundation for the exploration of a societal, gender-based hierarchy. There is no evidence, no commentary by Hughes himself, to suggest the poem, like Plath's poem, should be understood within a context that separates fictional creations from their biographical origins. For his purposes, the speaker of 'Daddy' *is* Plath. It may seem, then, that Hughes takes the route of those detractors of Plath who believe she, as the writer of 'Daddy', and the speaker of 'Daddy' are one and the same entity. But it must be remembered that Plath as she appears in this poem is a fictional creation. 'The Cast' is not journalistically truer than 'Daddy' because its focus remains

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<sup>22</sup> It must be admitted, however, that in a poem like 'The Bee God' (2005:1140), which Hughes writes in answer to Plath's 'Stings' (1981:214), Plath's father does emerge as a great and oppressive god (a god of the bees, as the title indicates). This god directs his fury specifically at Hughes, even while Plath disapproves of the father's actions. Though a depiction like this seems to contradict the portrayal of the father in 'The Cast', the main thrust of 'The Bee God' appears to be to present Plath's mythic vision of the father figure in her earlier poetry, where he appears as a bridegroom-god with final authority.

on biography throughout. The piece is no less a fantasy, no less an imaginative manipulation, since the biography it presents can only ever be an artistic reproduction, and one obviously loaded with a personal agenda and several distortions at that. What the primacy of biography does indicate is a change in direction. Plath's poem moves upwards and outwards: the speaker generalises her suffering, and frees herself from bondage by rising to power. Hughes's poem moves downwards and inwards: Plath's poetry, which, in its very construction, impersonalises personal content, now reaches her dead father underground, who is brought back to life, only to be sent to his grave again.

Hughes's interest, then, is in the intersection between life and art. Through the conceit of retrieving Plath's 'real' dead father, the father free of her poetic distortions, a move that is of course a distortion in and of itself, he invents a scenario in which the effect of art on life can be seen. Not surprisingly, the reunion of father and daughter is, under these circumstances, not a happy event. Daddy is astounded to hear what his daughter has to say. 'He / Could not believe it', the speaker says in lines 2 and 3, before conveying Daddy's thoughts in indirect speech: 'Where / Did you get those words if not / In the tails of his bees' (ll. 2-4)? The tails of Otto Plath's bees as the source of Sylvia Plath's venom is a fitting choice with respect to both her biography and her poetry. Her father was, as has already been stated, a specialist in bees<sup>23</sup>, and in 'Electra on Azalea Path' the speaker equates herself with 'hieratic' (l. 4) bees who are described as subjects of the father, their god. As a consequence, the image suggests precisely the kind of rebellion by a subject that we find in 'Daddy'. Moreover, the linking of the vengeful Plath and

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<sup>23</sup> Otto Plath was, because his obsession with bees, known as *Der Bienenkönig*, The Bee King, already during his schooldays in Grabow.

her father's bees at this early point prepares us for the self-inflicted death we find at the poem's conclusion.

In lines 5 to 8 we see that the daughter's bee-derived venomousness towards her father is contrasted with the sweetness she offers others: 'For others / The honey. For him, Cupid's bow / Modified in Peenemünde / Via Brueghel'. Who these 'others', the recipients of the honey, are, is not specified, and what exactly the 'honey' might represent is left out as well. It is possible that the honey Plath offers is her poetry, the product of her efforts (efforts that include the spreading of venom). Despite the violence done to the husband figure in Plath's late poetry, Hughes remained a great supporter of her work throughout his life, praising it and her in several essays, letters and interviews. Nowhere is his respect clearer than in *Birthday Letters*, which, despite some aggressive responses to her aggression, his own manipulations to match hers, frequently functions as an echo chamber in which lines of Plath's verse resound.

But for Plath's dead father her poetry does not represent honey. As in 'The Shot' and 'Black Coat', Hughes associates it with shooting. Before we had bullets; here we have arrows. That Plath is said to use a 'Cupid's bow' is noteworthy. Firstly, it underscores an argument like Alvarez's, that 'Daddy' is, ultimately, 'a love poem'. Secondly, it may also offer another reference to Plath's earlier poems, particularly the above-mentioned 'Electra on Azalea Path' and 'The Beekeeper's Daughter', in which her speaker appears as the queen bee-bride of the beekeeper-father. This is because Cupid is traditionally associated with the image of the bee. In a scene from Theocritus' *Idylls* the boy-god is stung by a bee after he steals honeycomb from a hive. Alarmed and in pain, he complains to his mother, Aphrodite (or Venus), arguing that such small creatures should not

be allowed to inflict such hurt. Aphrodite, merely amused, asserts the justness of the situation by drawing a parallel between her son and the bee: like the bee, Cupid is a small being, and like the bee, he delivers a great sting, in his case the sting of love (Theocritus *et al.*, 1912). The German Enlightenment philosopher and writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1970: 88) takes this comparison further when he reimagines the scene in his poem ‘*Die Biene*’ (‘The Bees’). In Lessing’s version Cupid, having been stung, transforms himself into a bee and hides beneath flowers, so that he too may sting unsuspecting victims. Whether Hughes was familiar with either Theocritus’ Cupid or Lessing’s take on the story is not known; nevertheless, his use of ‘Cupid’s bow’ is apt, since it, through the connection with bees, confirms Plath’s position in the poem as angry subordinate out for justice, a bee railing against her beekeeper. It is also possible that Hughes’s title employs the word ‘cast’ as it has been used in beekeeping, meaning a ‘second swarm of bees thrown off by a hive in one season’<sup>24</sup> (*OED*, 2013: ‘cast, *n.* IV. 18.’). If so, Plath as a poet involved in a bid for freedom with the writing of ‘Daddy’ (so as to establish a new life) becomes in ‘The Cast’ a bee or queen bee forming part of a second swarm that abandons its hive and beekeeper, though not before attacking the beekeeper and stinging him to death<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> This possible meaning of ‘cast’ is, aside from being suggested by the references made to bees in Hughes’s poem, given additional credence by biography: Plath and Hughes began keeping bees in June 1962.

<sup>25</sup> In ‘Stings’, as in ‘The Beekeeper’s Daughter’, Plath’s speaker identifies herself as a queen bee — ‘I / Have a self to recover, a queen’ (ll. 51-52), she claims. In this poem, however, the old queen she sees herself to be is one who has become ‘[p]oor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful’ (l. 19), and who must reclaim her superior station. Though the implication is that she is under threat from the birth of new virgin queens all seeking to replace her, she undergoes a magical revitalisation. Instead of being killed by the colony (worker bees usually ball around the old queen, killing her by overheating her), she only suffers a metaphorical death, and is allowed to continue her reign, ‘[m]ore terrible than she ever was’ (l. 57). In this way the poem displays the preoccupation with the death of the false self and the triumph of the true self so evident in ‘Daddy’ and many other poems from Plath’s late phase. What Hughes does in ‘The Cast’, therefore, is to combine the image of Plath’s speaker as a ‘hieratic’ bee-subject — offered in ‘Electra on Azalea Path’ — and the image of Plath’s speaker as superior queen bee — as seen in ‘The Beekeeper’s Daughter’ and, later, ‘Stings’ — in his evocation of Plath who, as the writer of ‘Daddy’, is simultaneously a defiant queen bee, able to triumph over her beekeeper and sting him with impunity (queen bees’ stingers are not barbed, so they may sting repeatedly), *and* a rebelling underling bee who will kill herself as she kills her master.

But Plath's stinging arrows of love are described in a very distinctive manner. For the father, the Cupid's bow is modified 'in Peenemünde' '[v]ia Brueghel'. These modifications are severe. Peenemünde, a village in North-East Germany, was, during World War II, heavily involved in the production and testing of the V-2 rocket, the world's first long-range missile and a prototype of the modern rocket. Plath's arrows are therefore associated with Nazi Germany, and so it is she who, by implication, becomes the Nazi oppressor in 'The Cast'. And, as if this were not bad enough, the devastating arrow-rockets are, as Erica Wagner (2000:174) puts it, additionally 'coloured with Brueghel's apocalyptic shades'. With the reference to Brueghel Hughes is also referring to Plath's early poem 'Two Views of a Cadaver Room' (1981:114). The first part — or view — of the poem takes place in an actual cadaver room, while the second employs the notion of a cadaver room more loosely in a discussion of Brueghel's mid-Sixteenth Century painting *The Triumph of Death*. The painting depicts 'a panorama of smoke and slaughter' (l. 12) (as the speaker describes it) in which a 'carrion army' (l. 13) massacres scores and scores of people who either try to resist the legion of skeletons — and so also the inevitability of their deaths — or try in vain to flee from it. The poem focuses on a pair of 'Flemish lovers' (l. 20) seen in the 'lower right hand corner' (l. 21) of the painting, figures so in love they appear ignorant of their imminent demise. It is this contrast between brutality and tenderness, which plays out in a scene where an inescapable, savage future is visited upon seemingly innocent individuals, that Hughes draws on in 'The Cast'. On the one hand, the doomed lovers resemble the Plath and Hughes of *Birthday Letters*, but on the other, it is the innocent dead but resurrected father who, like these lovers, faces a horrible and surprising death, his second death. In 'The Cast' it is Plath who is the agent of this second death. And Hughes's choice of title can now be seen to include the definition of 'cast' that links it to 'lot' or 'fate' (*OED*, 2013: 'cast, *n.* I. 4. a.') — it evokes the

closed world of *Birthday Letters* with its inexorable movement towards tragedy, and suggests that Plath's poetry is not only a contributing factor to this tragedy (as the ending of the poem makes apparent), but also the cause of another tragedy, the second death of the dead father.

From lines 8 to 16, lines which end off the long first stanza of the poem, the innocence of Otto Plath is portrayed in such a way that, ironically enough, he undergoes an apotheosis:

Helpless  
As weightless, voiceless as lifeless,  
He had to hear it all  
Driven into him up to the feathers,  
Had to stand the stake  
Not through his heart, but upright  
In the town square, him tied to it  
Stark naked full of those arrows  
In the bronze of immortal poesy.

With emphasis on his various privations, and painted as the quintessential victim, a silent and powerless person with no recourse to defence or protection, the wronged Otto Plath must suffer Plath's poetic arrows driven deep into him, all the way, in fact, 'to the [arrows'] feathers'. The use of the word 'feathers' may offer a play on the word 'quills'. If this is the case, it restates the argument that Plath's act of writing — her particular use of words, which would have come into being with the use of the writer's weapon, a pen, or, more fancifully, a quill — is what damages her dead father. In this interpretation the feathers, or quills, which are shot into Daddy, therefore stand in metonymically for the actual words Plath uses.

As with the final scene of 'Daddy', we find the father in the centre of a town square, possibly his town of origin. But the stake from Plath's poem is, in Hughes's revision, not plunged into the

heart of the monster-father, but used as a post to which the father-martyr may be tied, '[s]tark naked full of those arrows'. In other words, Otto Plath resembles, in this passage, Saint Sebastian, the Third-Century Christian martyr who, for his alleged betrayal (he converted several Romans to Christianity), was tied to a stake and shot full of arrows. (While Saint Sebastian is said to have survived his ordeal, the dead Saint Otto will have to die all over again.) In 'Daddy' the father is transformed from an aloof god into a demonic overlord; in 'The Cast' he goes from being a dead man recalled to life to being a saintly murder victim. And this murder occurs, the speaker explains, '[i]n the bronze of immortal poesy'. With this line Plath's poetry is, as a body of work, likened to a timeless bronze statue, an image that is surely also meant to evoke the depictions of the father in 'The Colossus' and 'Daddy', where, as we have seen, he is described as a giant statue. It brings to mind yet another meaning of 'cast', '[c]asting metal... [a] mould [or] model' (*OED*, 2013: 'cast, *n.* IX.'), and in so doing throws into sharp relief once more the difference between the mould of the father Plath shapes — casts — in 'Daddy', a mould that becomes the model, her speaker says, for or of the husband, and Hughes's reimagining of this mould, his remoulding or recasting in 'The Cast'. The use of the antiquated and ambiguous 'poesy' should be connected to the metaphor associating Plath's body of work to a bronze statue. The connotations could be positive, suggesting that Hughes's speaker endows Plath's work with an ageless quality and so implies that it is allied with other masterpieces of the past (the phrasing recalls Keats's 'viewless wings of Poesy' (l. 33) from his 'Ode to a Nightingale' (2000:68)). Such an interpretation is supported by the above-mentioned fact that Hughes publicly praised and defended Plath's poetry. But the connotations of 'poesy' could also be negative, implying that the work is effete, slight, pretentious, precious. This reading would undercut the claim that Plath's 'immortal poesy' is a fixed 'bronze' and insinuate instead that it is malleable, liable to be added to

or updated, recast<sup>26</sup>. And of course this is what Hughes does with Plath's poem. Even the placement of the line attests to this. We are told that the murder of Saint Otto takes place in the 'bronze' of Plath's 'immortal poesy', but we also know that Plath's poem does not depict the father as martyr; Hughes's does. Thus the phrase, as it recounts the injustice done to dead Daddy in the undying poem 'Daddy', accentuates Hughes's poetic revision as well, which now emerges as a 'bronze immortal' 'poesy' in its own right that serves to counter the 'bronze immortal' 'poesy' of Plath.

The second stanza of 'The Cast' deals with the ritualistic exorcism Plath achieves in the writing of 'Daddy'. In Hughes's reading we see that, since the two are fused, what holds true for the speaker of 'Daddy' holds true for Plath. 'So your cry of deliverance / Materialized in his / Sacrificed silence' (ll. 17-19), the speaker tells Plath. By making Daddy into an evil oppressor — an act that requires the maddening silence of the dead father to be sacrificed for the noise of poetic distortion — she is able to free herself of him and from the part of herself that wished to reunite with him. The 'cry of deliverance' is simultaneously a cry of freedom from Daddy and a birth cry heralding the arrival of the true self and the death of the false self. 'Every arrow' (l. 19) that nails her father to his stake, the speaker elaborates, is 'a star / In [Plath's] constellation' (ll. 20-21). Constellations of stars are often identified with mythological figures; here Plath's arrows, her accusations against her father, are seen as constituent elements in the construction of her liberated self, a self which in her mythology emerges as a mythic heroine.

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<sup>26</sup> Even if Hughes's use of 'poesy' is not meant pejoratively, it is in all likelihood ironic, since 'Daddy', the poem it speaks of, is so emphatically at odds with any traditional notion of poetry (conjured by 'poesy'). A line like 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through' is certainly not what one associates with the word 'poesy'.



In the rest of stanza 2, from lines 21 to 29, we find an extended account of the father's expulsion:

The giant  
Chunk of jagged weapon —  
His whole distorted statue  
Like a shard of shrapnel  
Eased out of your old wound. Rejected  
By your body. Daddy  
No longer to be borne. Your words  
Like phagocytes, ridding you with a roar  
Of the heavy pain.

By employing a reverse chronology, Hughes presents us in stanza 2 with the manipulations of the father figure that result in the damage done to the actual father in stanza 1. The father now appears as he appears, poetically distorted, in Plath's poetry. The broken statue of 'The Colossus', the 'ghastly statue' 'panzer-man' of 'Daddy' is here rendered as a 'giant / Chunk of jagged weapon', a 'whole distorted statue' which is 'eased out of [Plath's] old wound' as though it were 'a shard of shrapnel'. Again the argument is clear — it is through these distortions, by turning the father into a 'jagged weapon' thrust into her, that Plath is able to expel Daddy from her body (and so also her mind). This is why her words are described as 'phagocytes' (cells that engulf and seal off bacteria in order to protect the body) — they contain the father as malevolent entity so that the daughter can no longer be harmed by him. And the speaker's assertion that Daddy is 'a shard of shrapnel' '[r]ejected / By [Plath's] body' even suggests that the beekeeper-god is here, in Hughes's take on Plath's poem, pictured as a bee who stung Plath, then died, and whose stinger, still lodged in Plath, must be extracted. If this is the case, the logic echoes the logic of 'Daddy', that the father's death is something he *inflicted upon* the daughter, something which '[b]it [her] pretty red heart in two'.

Since stanza 2 supplies us with Plath's poeticized Daddy, it is only right that it, like 'Daddy', should end on a note of triumphal relief. Plath's words rid her 'with a roar / Of the heavy pain'. But 'The Cast' has a short third stanza, a piece we may see as a coda to both stanzas 1 and 2 and 'Daddy'. As with his poem 'Sam' (2005: 1049), which went beyond the ending of Plath's 'Whiteness I Remember' (1981:102) to reveal the inevitable conclusion *Birthday Letters* keeps on returning to, we find in the ending of 'The Cast' another manifestation of Plath's inescapable fate. But whereas the near-death experience of 'Whiteness I Remember' is read as a practice run for survival that fails to prevent Plath's eventual death, 'Daddy' is read as a reason for Plath's death:

Healed you vanished  
 From the monumental  
 Immortal form  
 Of your injury: your Daddy's  
 Body full of your arrows. Though it was  
 Your blood that dried on him (ll. 30-35).

Having rid herself of the heavy pain, an action that 'heal[s]', and, as a result, releases her, Plath dies, and so vanishes as a mortal creator of poetry, the mortal creator of *her* poetry, described now as the 'monumental / Immortal form' (a variation on 'the bronze of immortal poesy') that is the record of '[her] injury'. The injury is, in one sense, and as the colon after the word in line 33 makes apparent, the damage done to the 'real' dead father through the poetry; this is, after all, the main argument of 'The Cast'. But the phrase 'your injury' is ambiguous, and can yield several meanings. The speaker of 'Daddy' indicates that Daddy has injured her (the first meaning), and so she turns him into a Nazi oppressor, which allows her to injure him by killing him off (the second meaning). This poetic event, orchestrated by Plath, then has the effect of injuring her

actual dead father (the third meaning). But, as the third stanza, particularly the last sentence of the third stanza, shows, this is not where the story ends. Plath wrote 'Daddy' on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 1962; on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1963 she committed suicide. *Birthday Letters*, published decades after the suicide, is a volume as much preoccupied with Plath's death as it is with her life and her poetry. This ending is a foregone conclusion right from the start, a fate that has always-already been cast (yet another meaning of the title, 'The Cast'), and the final destination of all the visions and revisions of Plath. If the speaker of 'Daddy' acknowledges the great cost of her victory in the last line of the poem, the speaker of 'The Cast' contends, with his last line, that the cost was too great. It is '[Plath's] blood', he says, that 'dried on [her father]'. This is the fourth and final injury: in order to free her body and her mind of her father she must not only attack him, but herself as well, and such is the violence of the attack that neither she nor her father survives it.

## CHAPTER 3

### ‘These Super-People’: The Superimposition of Hughes’s ‘Brasilia’ on Plath’s ‘Brasilia’

Plath’s ‘Brasilia’ (1981:258) opens suddenly, with the speaker, perhaps in the middle of a line of thought, considering the possibility of the emergence of a race of ‘super-people’ (l. 6), ‘people with torsos of steel / Winged elbows and eyeholes’ (ll. 2-3), a race of people so fierce, blank and inhuman they require the shade of ‘masses / Of cloud to give them [or their faces] expression’ (ll. 4-5). Plath completed this poem on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1962, and though it may at first appear to be enigmatic, abstruse (it has been neglected critically), a familiarity on the one hand with its geographical references, and on the other with Plath’s personal mythology, in particular a group of poems — either addressed to or dealing with children — that forms a subset of this mythology, is soon able to illuminate the piece. And while the opening may seem abrupt, decontextualised, the title already suggests an interpretation.

Brasilia, the capital of Brazil since 1960, did not evolve in a ‘natural’ fashion, but was a planned city, designed and developed in 1956 by the urban planner Lúcio Costa and architect Oscar Niemeyer, and constructed, remarkably, in only four years. (It was positioned in the centre of Brazil so as to draw people away from the overcrowded coastal cities, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in particular.) Anthony Daniels (2011:34), in an otherwise scathing assessment of the city published in *The New Criterion* as recently as October 2011, summarises the capital in the following way:

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. 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.

Costa and Niemeyer were both admirers of the architect Le Corbusier, a pioneer of modernism, and particularly heroic modernism, which was often concerned with grand visions for cities, and ‘argued for an imminent, Utopian... future’ (Aliaa, 2013:2), and so they emulated this aesthetic in the architecture of all the major structures in Brasilia, something that has elicited both high praise and severe criticism (tellingly, Daniels (2011:35) calls it ‘inhuman’). (See Figure 1 below<sup>27</sup>.)

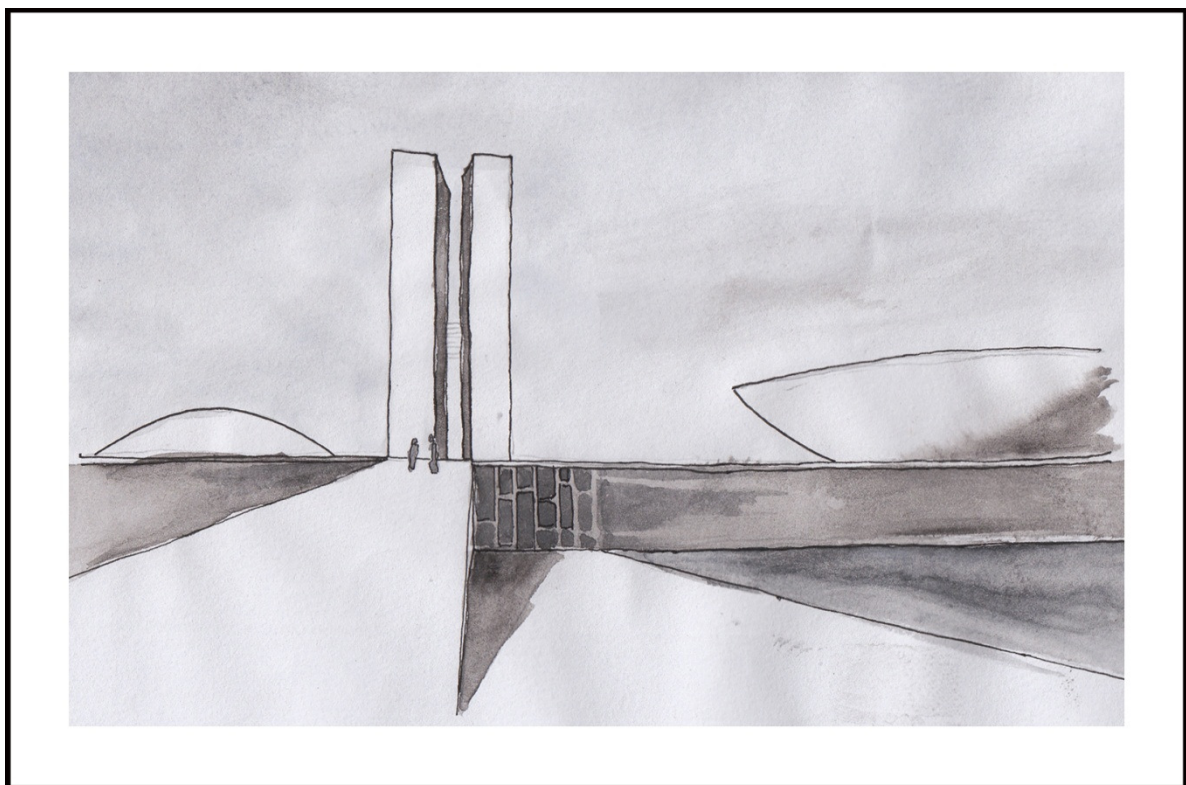


Figure 1. ‘National Congress of Brasilia, designed by Oscar Niemeyer’. Illustration by Stephen Steyn.

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<sup>27</sup> All the illustrations from this chapter were specifically commissioned for the dissertation.

For Plath, then, who doubtless in 1962 would have heard of the construction of Brasilia and seen photographs of its architecture, the city becomes symbolic not only of humanity's conquest of nature, but also its oppressive obsession with self-improvement, something that is represented in the poem by the race of improved humans. It is quite possible that the sculpture of 'The Warriors' or 'Os Candangos' (see Figure 2 below), by Bruno Giorgi, which was completed in 1959 and which stands in *The Three Powers Plaza* in Brasilia, could have been a source of particular inspiration to Plath. These two large figures, with their winged elbows and eyeholes, match the description of the super-people Plath gives, and exemplify the futuristic vision of humanity the city's aesthetic promotes.

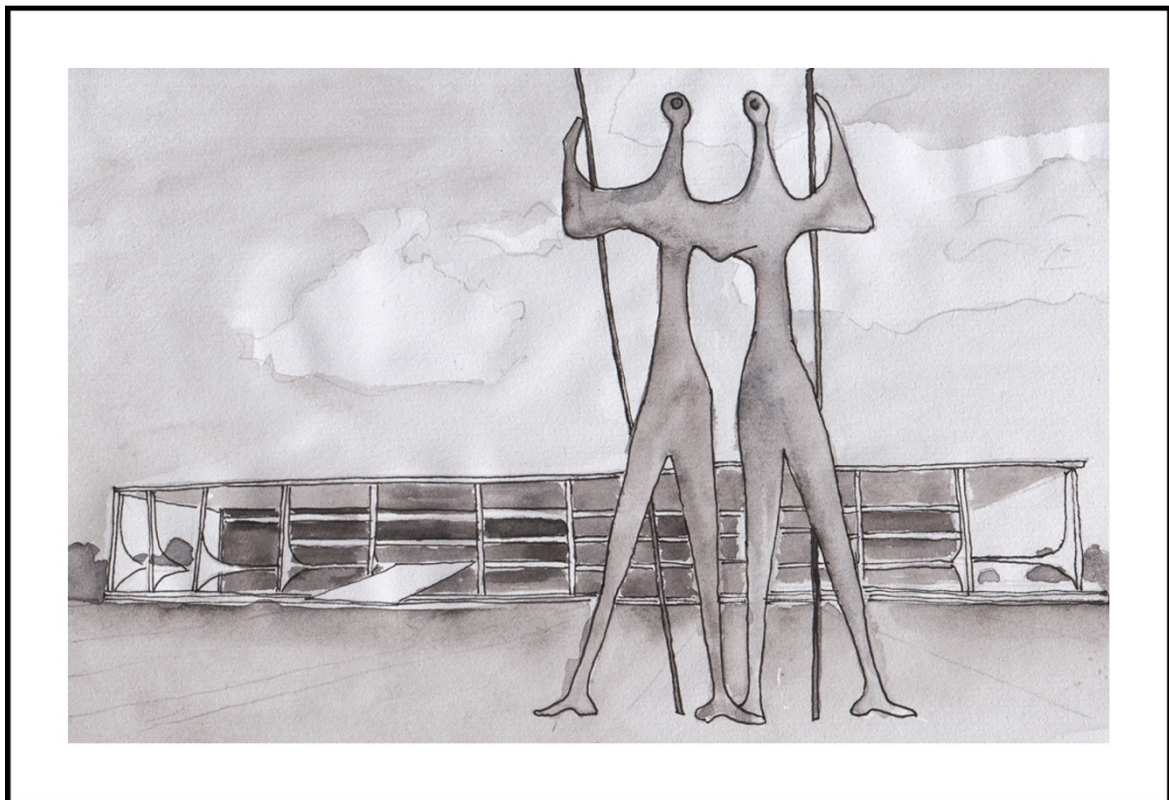


Figure 2. 'Os Candagos, by Bruno Giorgi'. Illustration by Stephen Steyn.

What is also noteworthy about a poem like 'Brasilia' is that, in it, we can see Plath writing against Hughes and a primary concern established early in his poetic career. Keith Sagar (1975:4) argues that, from the beginning, we can see Hughes in his work 'searching for a way of reconciling human vision with the energies, powers, presences, of the non-human cosmos'. Several poems in *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960), his first two volumes, which Plath would have been as intimately acquainted with as she was intimately acquainted with their author, show human subjects humbled before the forces of nature. In the title poem 'The Hawk in the Rain' (2005:19) the speaker, involved in a desperate and apparently futile fight to delay being 'swallow[ed] [by] the earth's mouth' (l. 2), 'drown[s] in the drumming ploughland' (l. 1); in 'Wind' (2005:36) the speaker and a companion must suffer the overwhelming force of a wind that 'wield[s] / Blade-light, luminous and emerald' (l. 7); and both 'October Dawn' (2005:37) and 'Crow Hill' (2005:62) contemplate the threat of a landscape that can effortlessly nullify any human endeavour. With 'Brasilia' Plath reverses this power gradient, presenting a natural world cowed by the aspirations and domination of humans. The reversal becomes particularly piquant when we examine — as Plath may very well have done — the sketch plan for the city (see Figure 3 on page 104), which, though it was described by Lúcio Costa (in Sträubli, 1965:12) himself as a cross, resembles a large bird with wings outstretched. At the end of Hughes's 'The Hawk in the Rain', the speaker imagines the soaring titular hawk, which seems quite at home in the hostile environment and which therefore serves as a foil for the floundering speaker, yielding to the necessity of death 'in [its] own time' (l. 16), in other words, when it chooses, by allowing the tumultuous weather to hurl it to the ground so that the natural cycle may be completed when the landscape, which gave birth to it, reabsorbs it. That the plan for Brasilia, a city founded in the wilderness and which Costa (in Sträubli, 1965:12) called 'a deliberate act of conquest', should



resemble just such a bird on the ground, could have seemed to Plath like an ironic perversion of Hughes's thematic preoccupation, a mocking confirmation of humanity's superiority.

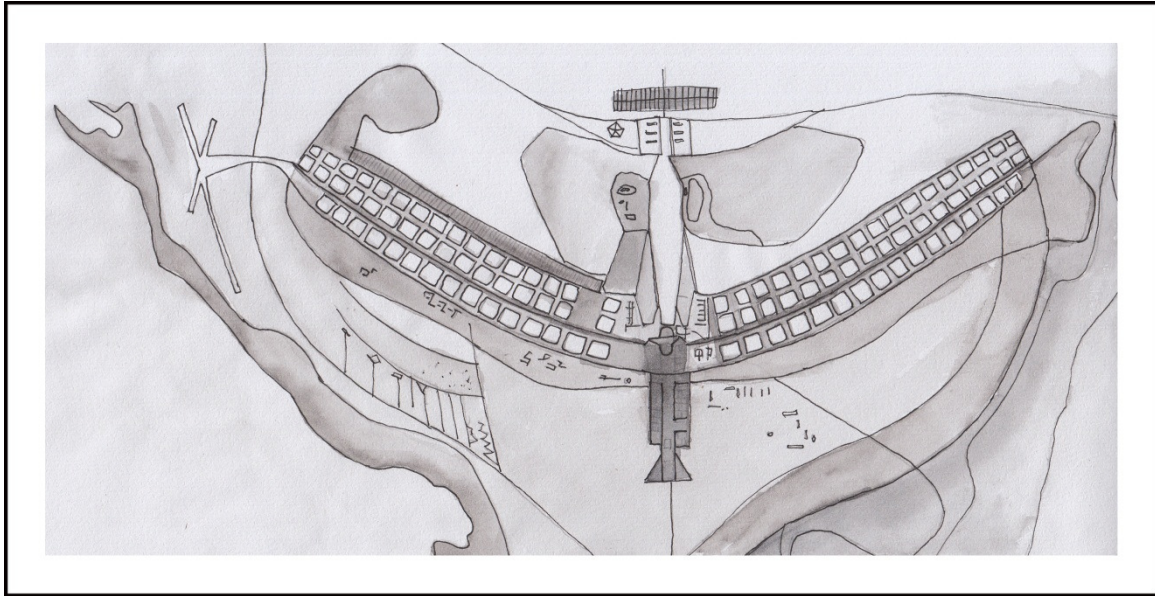


Figure 3. 'Sketch Plan of Brasilia (*Plano Piloto*), by Lúcio Costa'. Illustration by Stephen Steyn.

But if 'Brasilia' emphasises humanity's superiority, it does not celebrate it. These super humans, we learn as the poem progresses, are seen as a threat to the speaker's child. 'And my baby a nail, / Driven, driven in' (ll. 7-8), the speaker tells us. The allusion is twofold. Firstly, the speaker's child becomes, metaphorically, part of the architecture of this brave new world; the child, stripped of its humanity, reduced to a tool, is sacrificed to a cold vision of the future. Secondly, the cherished child, as this sacrifice, becomes, conversely, a Christ-like figure, a figure who must be absorbed into a larger system as Christ was absorbed into heaven.

These sentiments are echoed in other poems of Plath's late poetry. In fact, if the primary, mythically-structured narrative arc of Plath's poetic output is centred on the overriding concern of resolving a divided selfhood, a split into true and false selves which, according to the various



speakers, is precipitated by the death of a father, and if in her late phase her speakers set about reclaiming their true selves by killing off their false selves and the father figure, we should also take note of the poems that deal with children. In these poems the speakers find a temporary redemption in their children; they offer respite from the battleground of the self. In poems where the configuration is that of a mother and a son, the relationship is often described with reference to Mary and Christ. (It is worth mentioning that both Plath's parents were lapsed Catholics.) So in the last line of 'Nick and the Candlestick' (1981:240), for example, the speaker calls her child the 'baby in the barn' (l. 42). And yet some of these poems indicate that the wonderful escape goes hand in glove with a pervasive fear for the future of the child. In 'Mary's Song' (1981:257), where the speaker also clearly identifies with the mother of Christ, the fear is expressed (once more in the last line) that 'the world will kill and eat' her 'golden child' (l. 21); so too with the speaker of 'Brasilia', another Mary-like figure, who emphasises the humanity of this Christ-like child, a humanity that is paradoxically superior to super humanity, and which will be lost once the child has been claimed, has been called to play its role in the new world.

And it is not only the child that is under threat in the poem, but the mother and the environment too. Alarmed by a premonition of the future she sees in her baby — 'He shrieks in his grease // Bones nosing for distances' (ll. 9-10) — she goes on to describe herself as 'nearly extinct' (l. 11). Then, after confirming the dramatic Christian allusions with reference to 'the star' and 'the old story' (ll. 14 & 15), she offers a portrait of a nurturing natural landscape and an agrarian way of life wholly at odds with the model of Brasilia and what it represents: 'In the lane I meet sheep and wagons, / Red earth, motherly blood' (ll. 16-17). Interestingly enough, the poem ends on an anguished plea only for the fate of the son, as though the doom of the

landscape and the speaker were a *fait accompli*: ‘O You who eat // People like light rays,’ (l. 18) the mother implores, ‘leave / This one / Mirror safe, unredeemed // By the dove’s annihilation, / The glory / The power, the glory’ (ll. 18-24). In ‘For a Fatherless Son’ (1981:205) the heroine equates the purity, the blank, innocent beauty of her son, to a ‘blind mirror’, something she looks in to ‘find no face but [her] own’ (ll. 8 & 9), and a quality she feels separates him from the contaminations of the world. Here too the word ‘mirror’, whether it is used as an adjective to describe a state (‘mirror safe’) or a noun to refer to the child (who must, as a mirror, be kept safe), carries implications of innocence and the security it can offer, which, like the above-mentioned humanity, is superior to knowledge and purpose, and which is also threatened by a glorious higher power, represented now by a dove. Given the framework of the poem, the choice of a dove here is particularly apt. Biblically, it represents of course the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Christ’s baptism, an event which marked the beginning of his public ministry and, one could argue, the beginning of the process that saw him fulfil his purpose on earth and transcend his humanity by ascending to heaven. As the catalyst of such a dreaded transformation in the poem, the dove, traditionally a symbol of peace and holiness, is accorded a fearsome aspect (it is capable of annihilating<sup>28</sup>), and this allows for a neat encapsulation of the contradiction inherent in the change the speaker imagines, which, much like contradictions inherent in Christianity itself, simultaneously sanctifies and devastates. Geographically, the reference to a dove echoes the proliferation of the image of the dove (or pigeon) that can be found in Brasilia’s iconography, the most notable example of which is probably Niemeyer’s seven-storey dovecote (see Figure 4 on page 107), designed in 1961 and, like ‘The Warriors’ sculpture, located in *The Three Powers*

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<sup>28</sup> It is possible to read ‘the dove’s annihilation’ as ‘the annihilation of the dove’ rather than ‘annihilation by the dove’. This would imply that the dove is representative of Christ, whose annihilation brings about the mentioned redemption, but this reading seems unlikely, since the dove is a religious symbol for the Holy Spirit, not Christ, who is traditionally associated with the lamb.

*Plaza*. This structure places real doves at the very centre of a deeply Catholic city. The fact that the poem concludes with an altered form of the doxology from the Lord's Prayer, one that importantly stresses the glory, the terrible magnificence of the super humans, crystallizes the Mary-like speaker's overwhelming fear that, just as Christ was required to join, or rejoin, the Holy Trinity (it is no accident that the name of the plaza at the heart of Brasilia, whose three powers are ostensibly judicial, legislative and executive, has Christian connotations), so her precious Christ-like son will be required to join the society of awful beings, a fate that will not only remove him from her but will also obliterate him as she knows him.

If Plath's 'Brasilia' registers trepidation at the thought of horrors to come, Hughes's 'Brasilia' (2005:1157) relates them as intractable history.

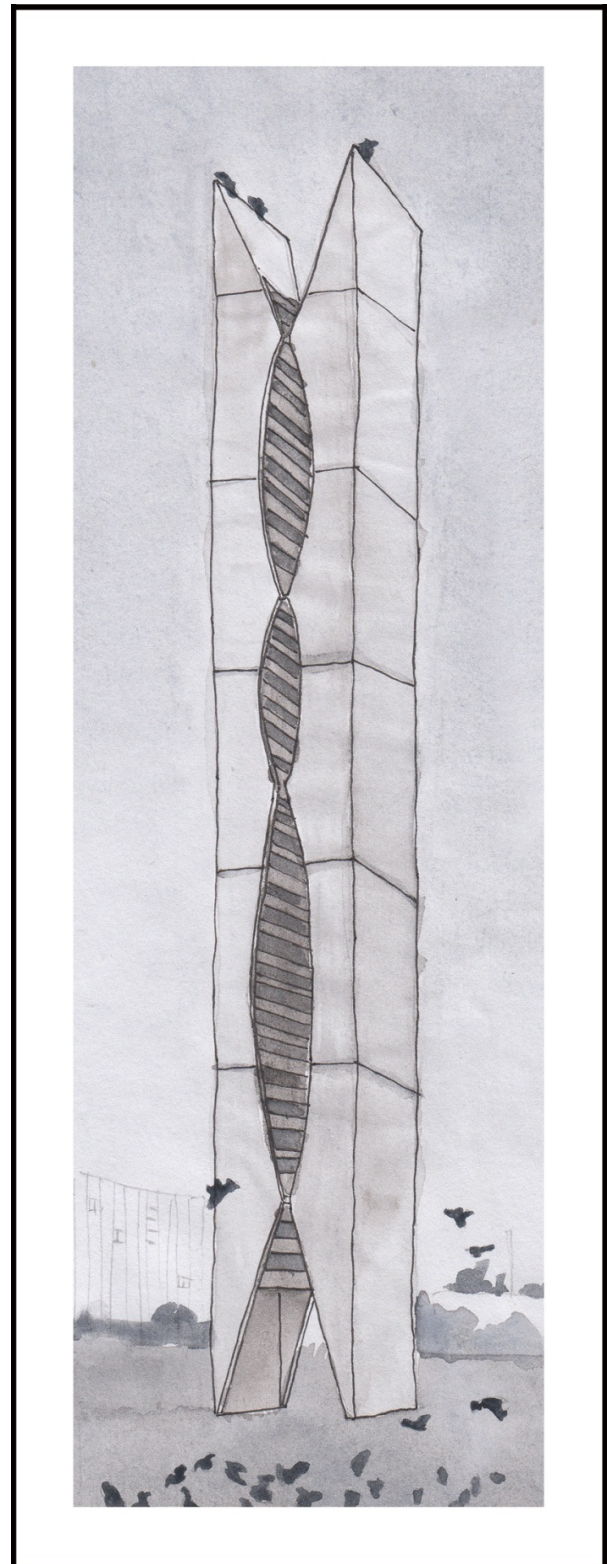


Figure 4. 'Dovecote, by Oscar Niemeyer'.

Illustration by Stephen Steyn.

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 in the near future, records the emergence, or rather 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' (l. 1), the opening line declares. As we saw in Chapter 2, at the end of 'The Cast' (2005:1158), the speaker claims that the 'healed' Plath 'vanished' (l. 30). Now she has returned. And not only does this Plath return (and the return is from the afterlife, it becomes apparent), but she does so in a 'steel helm' (l. 2). Indeed, the construction of a Plath that Hughes's poem offers is a character who boasts her own 'Empire' (l. 24) in which 'effigies cry out on their plinths' (l. 28). The account of her return is one of post-mortem revenge, divine retribution. 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' (l. 3), later described as a 'Colosseum' (l. 18), and after delivering three sentences, one for each person singled out, a 'blade of lightning' (l. 13) descends that at once decapitates all three of the accused. (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 the way in which the speaker of Plath's 'Brasilia' feared her child would be absorbed into heaven.

In Hughes's poem, which superimposes his thematic concerns over those visible in the Plath poem, it is Plath herself who becomes and brings about what her speaker in 'Brasilia' fears: *she* is now a member of the race of super-people, a Bellona-like figure, and it is through her insistence on divine order and justice that those who were nearest to her must be annihilated. And, as we

have attempted to show in Chapters 1 and 2, a scene such as this is in keeping with the narrative *Birthday Letters* displays. Just as it is vital to recognize that Plath's poetry is mythically structured, so too is it vital to understand that in *Birthday Letters* Hughes presents the myth of Plath, *his* myth of Plath. Neil Corcoran (2010:231) explains that 'mythical method' and 'autobiographical impulse' are fused in the volume, and this is true to such an extent that Hughes arguably goes further than Plath in that regard. From the roughly chronological sequence emerges a portrait of a Plath (the 'real' Plath, not the poetic and immortal Plath) so doomed as to resemble a character from ancient Greek drama; with Hughes she forms a pair of lovers so star-crossed as to be Shakespearean. In fact, as Corcoran (2010:231-232) points out, the presence of Shakespeare is 'deeply entwined in the relationship as Hughes recalls, refigures and reinvents it'. Aside from the Shakespearean air of the depictions, numerous poems allude to Shakespearean plays and characters, and the result is that his 'drama with the dead' plays out like a tragedy. In 'Setebos' (2005:1128), which relies heavily on *The Tempest*, we find the arresting line 'Then the script overtook us' (l. 25), and this statement evinces the world of *Birthday Letters* and the particular sense of fatedness Hughes evokes (as Chapter 1 has shown us as well). The two aspiring, energetic and naïve poets we find early in the book edge clearly and ineluctably closer to a dark future, a future that, when it arrives, destroys them both, though in separate ways. In this way the damned pair of *Birthday Letters* recalls the damned pairs of Shakespeare's tragedies, pairs such as Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet and Ophelia, Othello and Desdemona, or even Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. And the narrative of the volume also presents us with an older Hughes attempting a fraught and sometimes downright dangerous negotiation with the memory of his wife. Here too the presence of Shakespeare can be detected. Shakespeare's late romances are famously preoccupied with death and rebirth, especially the resurrection of dead wives. In *Pericles* Thaisa,

Pericles' wife, appears to die during childbirth, but she is later revived, and becomes a priestess in the Temple of Diana near Ephesus. In *Cymbeline* the wronged wife Imogen is also revived. More resonant still is *The Winter's Tale*<sup>29</sup>, where we find Paulina conjuring back to life Leontes' wronged wife Hermione (who is oddly not vengeful towards her guilty husband, and is, in this sense, quite unlike Plath). The scene is full of eeriness and the fear of something illicit and sinister: 'Either forbear, / Quit presently the chapel' (V, iii, 85-86), Paulina tells the spectators, 'or resolve you / For more amazement... you'll think — / Which I protest against — I am assisted / By wicked powers' (V, iii, 86-91). And again: 'Then all stand still; / Or those that think it is unlawful business / I am about, let them depart' (V, iii, 95-7). Looking beyond Shakespeare, we also see the older Hughes in the poems 'appropriat[ing] an Orpheus-like identity for himself, as Bundtzen (200:459) phrases it, in his endeavour to retrieve his Plath-Eurydice through poetry.

Hughes's 'Brasilia', one of the last poems in *Birthday Letters*, shows the resurrection of Plath in the wake of her destruction (she needs no Orpheus), and makes this particular kind of resurrection the source of destruction for those close to her. In emphasising this movement from death to rebirth Hughes takes up one of the central motifs of Plath's late work, where her speakers, in order to reclaim their true selves, must first kill their false selves ('Dying / Is an art' (ll. 43-44) Plath's speaker says in her famous 'Lady Lazarus', after all). Once such a false self has been done away with, the heroine may, in Kroll's (2007:123) words, realize her 'true identity as a triumphant resurrecting goddess, the fully liberated, fiery true self which is the protagonist, manifest or underlying, in most of the late poems'. The differences in Hughes's poem, however, are that the incarnation seems final, static, and that, far from being a celebrated, positive state,

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<sup>29</sup> The quotations from *The Winter's Tale* come from the Arden edition (third series) edited by John Pitcher.

the new selfhood is viewed much as Plath's speaker in 'Brasilia' views the super-people, as unfeeling, all-powerful and terrifying.

In constructing his version of the myth of Plath, Hughes is here portraying a vengeful Plath immortalised in art who, as a literary icon, made art and is made by art, and who is capable of accusing and assigning blame *ad infinitum*. After his super-Plath has delivered her three sentences (the word 'sentences' referring not only to her judgement, but to the poetry as well), the speaker explains that her 'great love ha[s] spoken' (l. 10), and these lines make for a noteworthy moment during which, it seems, art and artist are conflated, since the 'great love', a phrase at once earnest and sarcastic<sup>30</sup>, most 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' (ll. 11-14). These lines are a reworking of words from Plath's poem 'The Colossus' (1981:129), where, as has already been mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, the speaker describes a ruinous statue that represents her father, a statue she attempts to reconstruct; in lines 22 and 23 she says of this broken statute that 'It would take more than a lightning-stroke / To create such a ruin'. As with Hughes's commentary on the fears of the speaker in 'Brasilia', the implication here is severe: the Plath of Hughes's poem is the true cause of the ruin, the one responsible for what the speaker of 'The Colossus' laments.

And even 'the dogs [are] stunned' (l. 15) by the violence of the punishment on display, Hughes's speaker goes on to say. These dogs are intended to represent admirers of Plath's work, or, more specifically, a certain kind of admirer of Plath and her work, a person who, as Hughes

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<sup>30</sup> The phrase is, in its ambiguity, similar to Hughes's 'bronze of immortal poesy' (l. 16), from 'The Cast' (2005:1158), discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 90).



(2007:553) saw it in a letter to the *Guardian* in April 1989, ‘live[s] in some kind of Fantasia’ about Plath. Such admirers, who Hughes felt went too far in their fanaticism, were almost always against him (Sylvia Plath’s gravestone in Heptonstall was repeatedly defaced during the 1970s and ’80s so as to remove the ‘Hughes’ at the end of it), and he dedicates an entire poem in *Birthday Letters* to attacking them, the distressingly titled ‘The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother’ (2005:1168), which is addressed to his and Plath’s daughter, Frieda. That even the dogs are stunned by the spectacle before them cements the speaker’s belief in an unjust punishment. And the presence of the dogs at the scene serves as a reminder of how very public this family affair has become; we are, after all, in something like the Colosseum, as the poem tells us. This is fitting in that it illustrates effectively how private suffering and personal blame have become entertainment. Hughes’s relocation to Rome also 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. And it is worth noting that the choice of a Roman setting foregrounds the intertextual nature of the piece. As with Plath’s poem, the title becomes crucial for a close reading, except that in Hughes’s case it does not point to the city, but rather to Plath’s poem dealing with the city.

Hughes’s ‘Brasilia’ ends with an unnerving image of the ceaselessness of art. ‘Every day since’ (l. 24) the super-Plath’s judgement and destruction, the speaker explains, and throughout the empire she has created for herself, her ‘effigies cry out on their plinths / Dry-eyed’ (ll. 28-30), her ‘portraits, tearlessly, / Weep in the books’ (ll. 29-30). The ‘effigies’ and ‘portraits’ could refer to followers of Plath, those so-called dogs who now fashion themselves after her, but it is more



likely that Hughes's diction once again signals a conflation of artist and art; they become extensions, proxies of their originator, and as such are capable of voicing eternally the judgement of injustice. If they do so dry-eyed, tearlessly, this is because of their secondary nature.

What is also revealing is that the effigies and portraits are said to cry out and weep '[l]ike the motherly wraith who nightly / Wailed through the streets of Tenochtitlán / Just before Cortés ended it' (ll. 25 – 27). The 'motherly wraith' is an allusion to the Meso- and South American legend of *La Llorona*, 'The Wailing Woman'. As Ray John De Aragon (2006: 2-12) explains in *The Legend of La Llorona*, the narrative was inspired partly by Aztec folklore<sup>31</sup>, and in particular the goddess Cihuacoatl, whose appearance in Tenochtitlán shortly before the arrival of the Spanish, where she apparently wept for her lost children, was said to herald doom. According to the legend, the beautiful woman, Maria, murders her children to be with the man she loves. But the man rejects her, and so she commits suicide. Having ascended to the gates of heaven, she is asked about the whereabouts of her children and is told she may not enter until she has recovered them. Thus Maria is forced to return to earth, where she wanders eternally and wails as she searches for her children.

With this simile Hughes subtly suggests that the vengeful Plath he presents in his poem, and by extension her 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. (A significant addition, since the children have been wholly absent in the poem up until this point.)

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<sup>31</sup> De Aragon (2006:11) also indicates that the tale, which, he imagines, 'would be recounted by early colonists on cold wintry nights while family members gathered near a warm fire place', and which was eventually recorded by the Spanish, also has origins in Greek mythology, particularly in a figure such as Medea.

The suggestion is strengthened by the fact that the Mary-like speaker of Plath's 'Brasilia', who cries for her child in one way, and because of a fear for the future, finds a dark twin in the Maria of the legend, who cries for her children in another way, and because of knowledge of the past. And the inclusion of the historical reference to Hernando Cortés, who conquered Tenochtitlán in 1519 and overthrew the Aztec empire, something which the poem avers silenced the Wailing Woman<sup>32</sup>, echoes, we could argue, the way in which Hughes's 'Brasilia', in its reworking of Plath's 'Brasilia', silences her wailing woman.

Contemplating the poetic interaction between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath in *Birthday Letters*, Gill (in Gifford, 2011:59) ponders whether Hughes's letters 'are the first in an exchange of letters to which Plath, as implied addressee, is invited to respond'. 'Or', she goes on to ask, 'are these Hughes's responses to messages which he has already received through the medium of Plath's extant writing? The collection', she answers herself, 'leaves this question open as a sign of the fluidity, or indecipherability, of meaning and as confirmation of the backwards and forwards flow of ideas across and between the two poets' work'. Gill's answer is in keeping with Hughes's statement that he tried, through these poems, 'to open a direct, private, inner contact' (cited in Wagner, 2000:22) with Plath (see above, p. 4). It implies that Plath, through her work, was an active presence in Hughes's work, and this is undeniable. But Gill's statement gives the impression that the nature of the exchange between the poets is innocent, innocuous, and this it is not. *Birthday Letters*, in its treatment of Plath, runs a gamut of emotions and intentions, from explanation to puzzlement to diagnosis to rebuke. If the 'single shared mind' (cited in

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<sup>32</sup> There is some illogicality here, since the legend of the Wailing Woman, though inspired partly by Aztec folklore, only came into being after the arrival of the Spanish. It is possible that Hughes assumed the narrative predated the Sixteenth Century, was, in other words, wholly of Aztec origin.

Middlebrook, 2003:xvi) of poetic inspiration that Hughes referred to during the BBC radio programme of 1961 (see above, p. 15) was turned into a divided psyche by Plath only a year later, when she wrote her *Ariel* poems, Hughes honours that division in his response to Plath's 'Brasilia', where he imposes his thematic concerns upon hers. In this particular instance of the poetic dialogue, Hughes is speaking over Plath.

# CONCLUSION

‘Not easy to state the change you’ve made. / If I’m alive now, then I was dead’ (ll. 1-2), run the opening lines of Plath’s ‘Love Letter’ (1981:147). ‘I wasn’t fooled. I knew you at once’, the speaker states in line 24, and then, in lines 27 to 32:

I started to bud like a March twig:  
An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.  
From stone to cloud, so I ascended.  
Now I resemble a sort of god  
Floating through the air in my soul-shift  
Pure as a pane of ice.

‘It’s a gift’ (l. 36), are her concluding words. This poem, completed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1960, speaks of a love so influential it engenders a transformation. That transformation is a characteristically Plathian one. From a death-in-life state the speaker moves into a brilliant exaltation. The ascension — precipitated by an instant recognition of kinship, of fated rightness — allows for the particulars of an old life to melt away, and for a new, truer and pure state of being, a state of power, to exist.

In Hughes’s ‘Lovesong’ (2005:255), from *Crow* (1970), we find another take on transformative love, one that is distinctly Hughesian, ringing, as it does, with a predatory hunger:

He loved her and she loved him  
His kisses sucked out her whole past and future or tried to  
He had no other appetite  
She bit him she gnawed him she sucked  
She wanted him complete inside her  
Safe and sure forever and ever  
Their little cries fluttered into the curtains (ll. 1-7).

By the poem's end the two lovers have fused:

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 (ll. 40-44).

Whether Plath's poem was inspired by Hughes, or whether Hughes's poem was inspired by Plath, we do not know with certainty. Nevertheless, both poems evince, in their narratives, a sense of indebtedness that we may apply to Plath and Hughes as poets who were, together and apart, involved in a creative partnership that started when they met and lasted all the way to *Birthday Letters*. From Plath, then, we get the joy of discovering creative authority, a discovery that is, in part, due to another — she and Hughes came to poetic maturity in their respective ways partly because of the influence they exerted on each other, and because, as Hughes (cited in Middlebrook, 2003:241) explained to Plath's mother (see above, p. 15), they 'sacrificed everything to writing'. From Hughes we get the violent passion of close poetic interaction that can ultimately become hostile, blur identity and prove inescapable. As Clark (2011:214) writes, 'much as the poets sought to purge their lives and their work of each other, they were never able to do so'.

In *Birthday Letters* Hughes provides another scene that betokens profound influence. Here we know that Plath is the inspiration. At the end of 'St Botolph's' (2005:1051), a poem centred on Plath and Hughes's meeting in Cambridge, Hughes the speaker, addressing Plath, says, 'You

meant to knock me out / With your vivacity' (ll. 51-52). Confirming her success immediately, he continues: 'I remember / Little else from that evening' (ll. 52-53). At the poem's close, Plath having bitten him on the cheek after he snatched her scarf from her, he leaves with 'the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks / That was to brand my face for the next month. / The me beneath it for good'. And as the Hughes of the poem tells us he is, quite literally, marked by Plath, Hughes the poet testifies to this enduring mark with his poem and with the volume it comes from.

Hughes's choice of medium, his decision to write in verse rather than in prose, indicates that he is not out to set the record straight, to offer a corrective biographical narrative, but that he wishes to engage with Plath on the grounds of poetry. His letters are *Birthday Letters* because they respond to a body of work preoccupied with rebirth. In Plath's mythology her speakers recover their true selves by being reborn; in *Birthday Letters* Plath is reborn in Hughes's myth of her, even if she is, in this depiction, doomed as a poet and immortally vengeful as a surviving poetic entity.

'Without each other's influence', Clark (2011:13) argues, 'Plath and Hughes might have become very different poets, for each forged a voice through and against the other's'. In all three pairs of poems examined in this dissertation we have found this to be true — in 'Whiteness I Remember' and 'Sam', where Plath's uniquely personal account of a speaker's transcendent experience during a horse-riding mishap draws on Hughes's earlier poems about horses as cosmological forces, and where Hughes reimagines the incident as a doomed attempt he and Plath make to transcend a sealed fate; in 'Daddy' and 'The Cast', where Plath redefines Hughes's preoccupations with femmes fatales and predation in a poem that presents an angry daughter removing a father and a husband from power, and where Hughes investigates the effect of art on life by unearthing

Plath's dead father and turning him into a wronged innocent; in 'Brasilia' and 'Brasilia', where Plath, negating the superiority Hughes accords the natural world in his poetry, gives us a speaker who fears a race of super-people coming into being and threatening her child, and where Hughes, inverting the hierarchy of Plath's poem, depicts a vengeful, immortal and superhuman Plath who returns from the past as a literary icon and threatens the mere mortals who were closest to her.

And while these pairs make for illustrative examples of the rich interaction between Plath and Hughes, it must be remembered that there are thirteen other poem-pairings of the kind identified here that are available for study (see Appendix, p. 121). There is, for instance, Plath's 'Stings' (1981:214) and Hughes's 'The Bee God' (2005:1140), both already mentioned in this dissertation. In 'Stings' Plath's speaker identifies herself with an old and 'unqueenly' (l. 19) queen bee who is then magically revitalized and thus reasserts her power and authority. In Hughes's 'The Bee God' the speaker shifts the attention away from the queen bee and onto the ominous beekeeper-god father figure, who holds sway over both his daughter and the speaker. Or there is Plath's 'Ariel' (1981:239), also mentioned in this dissertation, and Hughes's 'Night-Ride on Ariel' (2005:1155). In 'Ariel' a horse ride becomes a mythical flight into the sun, which is seen as the site for a fiery self-sacrifice; 'Night-Ride on Ariel', instead of focusing on the sun, highlights the moon as a central image in Plath's poetry. Connected to the discussion of the moon are comments Hughes's speaker offers on what he perceives to be the insidious influences certain women in Plath's life had on her. The final image recalls the ending of 'Ariel', with Plath heading for the sun, only here the flight fails and, like the mythological figure of Icarus, she comes crashing down. In a dissertation with a scope larger than this one, pairings such as these could be

investigated in order to provide a fuller account of how *Birthday Letters* interacts with the poetry of Plath.

The poetic dialogue between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes is, as we have seen, never an innocuous affair, but even as they plunder each other's work they pay tribute to the impact each had on the other. What they leave us with is a complex and compelling network of shifting associations, a series of to-and-fros, a sequence of actions and counteractions: 'It's a gift'.



# APPENDIX

## A List of Poems by Plath and the Poems from *Birthday Letters* Which Respond to Them Directly<sup>33</sup>

SYLVIA PLATH	TED HUGHES
'Whiteness I Remember'	'Sam'
'Pursuit'	'Trophies'
'The Goring'	'You Hated Spain'
'Wuthering Heights'	'Wuthering Heights'
'The Lady and the Earthenware Head'	'The Earthenware Head'
'Ouija'	'Ouija'
'Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers'	'Child's Park'
'Man in Black'	'Black Coat'
'Two Campers in Cloud Country'	'Fishing Bridge'
'The Rabbit Catcher'	'The Rabbit Catcher'
'Apprehensions'	'Apprehensions'
'Stings'	'The Bee God'
'Daddy'	'The Cast'
'Ariel'	'Night-Ride on Ariel'
'Brasilia'	'Brasilia'
'Totem'	'Totem'

<sup>33</sup> Plath's 'Fever 103' and Hughes's 'Fever' are left out of this list since their biographical foundations differ, but they could nevertheless be included to make a seventeenth pair.

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