

In Dialogue with the Living and the Dead: Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*

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Simultaneously a revelation and a cover-up, autobiography would appear to constitute itself as in some way a repression of autobiography.

Barbara Johnson¹

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans.
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.

So Los, in fury & strength: in indignation & burning wrath

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 10, line 20.

'Where was it, in the Strand?' asks Ted Hughes, uncertain. It is the first line of 'Fulbright Scholars', the first of the *Birthday Letters* poems, and we need to bear in mind that the sequence opens with a question, a reminder of just how untrustworthy the memory can be. The poet recalls seeing a newspaper photograph of a new 'intake' (l. 4) of Fulbright scholars:

Just arriving –
Or arrived. Or some of them.

(‘Fulbright Scholars’, ll. 5-6)

He cannot be sure. 'Were you among them?' (l. 7) he asks, addressing the dead Sylvia Plath. Again, he cannot be sure. A Cambridge undergraduate himself, he remembers wondering which of these young North American

¹ Barbara Johnson, 'My Monster/My Self', in her *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 144-54 (p. 146).

hopefuls he was likely to meet, but 'not'—with deliberate anti-climax—'your face' (ll. 10-11). He does not remember her face. Hardly love at first sight:

Maybe I noticed you.
 Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely.
 ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 12-13)

Feeling how unlikely a relationship would be, presumably—was she too beautiful? too otherworldly?—but what lingers is the premonitory *unlikeness*. The portrait that follows is entirely speculative, the superimposition of the image of Plath the poet will come to know upon a newspaper photograph he barely remembers. Maybe I 'Noted your long hair, loose waves' –

Your Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid.
 It would appear blond. And your grin.
 Your exaggerated American
 Grin for the cameras, the judges, the frighteners.
 ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 14-18)

Maybe. Even if the poet had noticed her, however, for a first sighting this is far too much knowledge (and this opening poem is all about knowledge, about what or whether we can know and about the loss of innocence). He cannot possibly have intuited in that first glimpse what he will later come to see as Plath's insecurity, her need to put on a face and to present to the world, which is captured here in the 'grin' that is wrested from the reader's expectations and the regular metre by a precipitate enjambment to become a grin *for*, a grin on display (we would expect 'Your exaggerated American grin | For the cameras, *etc.*'). 'Maybe I weighed you up', he says—if only as a female of the species—but 'Then I forgot':

Yet I remember
 The picture.
 ('Fulbright Scholars', ll. 19-20)

But not well. 'With their luggage?' he ponders: 'It seems unlikely' (l. 21)—as unlikely as a relationship with this alien blonde.

The poet is better on details of place and context, however. 'I was walking | Sore-footed', he says—not *sure*-footed, note, which is conjured and denied by its homophone—'under a hot sun, hot pavements':

Was it then I bought a peach? That's as I remember.
From a stall near Charing Cross Station.
It was the first peach I had ever tasted.
I could hardly believe how delicious.
At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh
By my ignorance of the simplest things.
(*'Fulbright Scholars'*, ll. 22-9)

We recall another famous peach, another opening poem, and another, altogether more timorous voice, also on the brink of a sensual experience:

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will ever sing for me.
(T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', ll. 121-4)

Like Plath, Eliot was an American poet come to make a mark in Britain, but the casual irony does not end here. Hughes's peach has biblical as well as poetic precedents. If in 'Fulbright Scholars' the memory itself fails to come into focus and coalesce, the imagery is complex but decisive. The ignorant (innocent?) poet's first, uncertain glimpse of Plath coincides with his first eating a piece of fruit that proves inordinately 'delicious', a sensual experience carrying intimations of the Fall—a rite of initiation into the knowledge of good and evil. I say 'coincides', but coincidences prove fated and fateful in the universe of the *Birthday Letters*.

1

Before we look at just how fateful they turn out to be, it is worth asking ourselves what it is, exactly, we are dealing with here. What kind of a text *is* and *are* the *Birthday Letters*? What, for example, is their *genre*? Identifying the genre of a literary work cannot solve our interpretative problems for us,

but it can certainly help. The answer in this case seems to be given in the title: they are, first of all, letters—what we call familiar or private letters—written by the poet Ted Hughes to his dead wife, Sylvia Plath, over the years following her suicide in 1963, and finally (and sensationally) published in 1998, the year of Hughes's death. Hughes always claimed that the birthday letters were a private affair, written originally to 'communicate' with Sylvia Plath, and never intended for publication. 'My book is a gathering of the occasions', he wrote in a letter to the judges of the Forward Poetry Prize he was awarded on its publication:

written with no plan over about 25 years — in which I tried to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife . . . thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself, and to feel her there listening. Except for a handful, I never thought of publishing these pieces until last year, when quite suddenly I realized I had to publish them, no matter what the consequences.²

They are also *birthday* letters. The idea of the '*birthday* letter' combines with the suggestion of a constant and recurrent intimacy something much darker, something traumatic: a 'compulsion to repeat' (Freud),³ to revisit ritualistically; the desire to exorcise. 'Psychoanalytic and psychiatric literature' to quote Lajos Székely,

contains several descriptions of cases where anniversaries of painful and conflictual events in an individual's life possess crucial significances, as in the loss of an ambivalently beloved person. Individuals who seem to function well and to enjoy sound inner stability can suddenly suffer a mental breakdown on anniversaries: neurotic or psychotic symptoms are manifested.⁴

² As quoted in Amelia Gentleman, 'Accolade for Hughes's Poems of Love and Loss', *The Guardian*, 8 October 1998, p. 4.

³ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', translated James Strachey, in *Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, The Pelican Freud Library, 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 269-338 (pp. 290-5).

⁴ Lajos Székely, 'Anniversaries, Unfinished Mourning, Time and the Invention of the Calendar: A Psychoanalytic *aperçu*'. *Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 1 (1978), pp. 115-146 (p. 115).

Critics have noted that the 'birthday' of the book's title alludes to a number of poems by Sylvia Plath that use birthdays metaphorically for renewal and artistic creation: 'Morning Song', 'Stillborn', 'A Birthday Present', 'Three Women', 'Poem for a Birthday'.⁵ As if this allusion to Plath's poetry and to the children she and Hughes bore together were not ironic enough in itself, however, the preoccupation of the *Birthday Letters* is not with birthdays at all, it is with death, and with the deathday: they are, in fact, *Deathday Letters*. What makes them possible—the recurrent occasion and the informing motive—is the suicide of Sylvia Plath.

But even the familiar letters we write to friends and family negotiate between the private and the public realms, and can imply a larger audience than just the person addressed. This is especially true of a writer's letters, of course, more true again when the person addressed is actually dead, and most true when the letters themselves are poems that are actually published by the author him- or herself for other people to read. When the decision to publish had been made, all of the poems were revised and a number of others written for the express purpose of filling out a published volume, turning it from a collection of *poems* into a *collection* of poems, a *livre composé*. If they were ever private letters—and I am questioning the possibility of a purely private writing—they were soon transformed into public documents.

The more we look into it, in fact, the more we realise that the familiar or private letter between two parties in a specific relationship in specific circumstances, written with a directness of communication that is no less performative than it is informative, lies behind many forms of public writing—including, besides the novel and certain kinds of lyric poetry, newspapers and the books of the New Testament. Letters are a flexible medium, in other words, out of which have evolved many more public functions and institutional practices.

If these ostensibly familiar letters cannot be limited to the 'inner contact' they seek between Hughes and his dead wife, then, for whom *are*

⁵ See, for example, Ian Sansom, 'I was there, I saw it', review of *Birthday Letters* in the *London Review of Books*, 19 February 1998
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n04/print/sans01_.html>

they written? As acutely as any other collection of poems by a major writer, *Birthday Letters* raises the issue, beyond genre, of audience—at the same time as it raises corresponding questions of authorship and agency. The very fact that neither the poet nor his commentators have to go into the story behind the letters in too much detail—the story of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, that is—has something to tell us about what the *Birthday Letters* represent and for whom they were written. Following Plath's suicide, the story of her and Hughes's relationship very quickly acquired the kind of communal and proverbial status of a myth, up there with the lovers Antony and Cleopatra and Abelard and Eloise, except that the 'Ted and Sylvia' story is still too recent and is too controversial to have acquired a settled, mythic status. *Birthday Letters* amounts to what Randall Stevenson has called 'a hugely public exposure of the most famous, and troubled, relationship in late twentieth-century poetry'.⁶ Every educated person knew about the relationship and had an opinion, it seemed, or had an opinion even without knowing about it.

The controversy surrounding the couple, especially since the copycat suicide in 1969 of Hughes's second wife, Assia Wevill—'the huge outcry that', Hughes says, 'flushed me from my thicket in 1970-71-72 when Sylvia's poems & novel hit the first militant wave of Feminism'⁷—becomes part of the context required to make sense of the *Birthday Letters*. There can be no question that the individual poems comprising *Birthday Letters* were all written or revised with the knowledge of this controversy in mind. More to the point, they were written with the knowledge of the readers' knowledge of this controversy in mind. Hence my title, 'in dialogue with the living and the dead'. Not only is *Birthday Letters* in dialogue with the dead—most obviously and extensively with Plath and her poetry, but also with a whole host of other dead poets (Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas to name but a few)—it is also in dialogue with the living: with his and Plath's shared and separate readerships, that is, and with Plath's reputation. More specifically, the letters are an elaborate rejoinder, an answering or writing back and an

⁶ Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England?*, The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. 12, 1960-2000 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 205.

⁷ Ted Hughes, in a letter to Keith Sagar, 18 July 1998, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 719.

apologia pro sua vita that yearns to persuade, not just the poet himself (though the need to convince himself should never be underestimated), but also his doubters and accusers. 'The book has a clear and practical purpose', writes Ian Sansom: 'correcting distortions, setting the record straight, putting right the gossips and the speculators, the detractors and the critics'.

'But', continues Sansom, 'it is by no means a final statement of "fact"'.⁸ Born out of and into a conflict of perspectives, the *Birthday Letters* implicitly recognise that they are incapable of silencing controversy. The enormous popularity of *Birthday Letters* amongst an educated reading public that had largely given up on poetry, selling upwards of 150,000 copies in its first years, is testament to the rhetorical violence, as well as to the extent and sensation of that conflict. As with the best of confessional literature (Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath) we are left with a busy conflation or *confusion* of the public and the private, one that is impossible to disentangle.

2

Even if we could ignore the controversy, the *Birthday Letters* are, as letters, strange—or, more accurately, *estranged*. Though predicated on separation, letters are designed to close the distance between two intimates (usually the major performative aspiration). Here, in Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, there remains an unbridgeable rupture: the rupture of death, in the first instance, but also the rupture brought about by an intractable selfhood. 'Letter for letter is the law of correspondence', or so the proverb goes. Here, however, there can be no correspondence, nothing corresponding. Note how sparingly Hughes uses the word 'our', for example—even their daughter becomes 'your daughter' in 'Daffodils' (l. 3)—and when he does use the third person plural ('we', 'us', 'our') how often the sense of affinity and intimacy it carries is undercut: 'Our Marriage had failed' ('The Epiphany', l. 63). Alienation and isolation seem to be the very condition of these often willfully, even perversely unsentimental letters. Witness the alienation, not

⁸ Ian Sansom, 'I was there, I saw it'
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n04/print/sans01_.html>.

just in the Gothic imagery, but also in the breakdown of pronouns in this bitter passage on their life in Boston:

Alone

Either of us might have met with a life.
 Siamese-twinning, each of us festering
 A unique soul-sepsis for the other.
 Each of us was the stake
 Impaling the other. We struggled
 Quietly through the streets, affirming each other,
 Dream-maimed and dream-blind.

Your typewriter,
 Your alarm clock, your new sentence
 Tortured you, a cruelty computer
 Of agony niceties, daily afresh –
 Every letter a needle, as in Kafka.
 While I, like a poltergeist fog,
 Hung on you, fed on you—heavy, drugged
 With your nightmares and terrors. Inside your Bell Jar
 I was a mannikin in your eyeball.

('9 Willow Street', ll. 37-52)

The critic A. Alvarez called them 'scenes from a marriage, Hughes's take on the life they shared',⁹ but if the poet shared a life with his object and subject (the poems are written to Plath, as well about her), there is precious little sharing of anything else going on in these poems. 'I was a fly outside on the window-pane | Of my own domestic drama', says the estranged poet in 'The Rabbit Catcher' (ll. 36-7)—then, as now.

To illustrate this, let me take an early poem in the sequence, 'Visit', one that again raises the possibility of intimacy only to disappoint or deny it, emphatically, with a divisive full stop acting as a caesura (or 'cut') in its final line: 'Your story. My story'. With Lucas, a male friend of his, a drunken Hughes has been 'Lobbing soil-clods up at a dark window' (l. 15), Plath's window, before he and Plath had formally met. Not only is there no romantic

⁹ A. Alvarez, 'Your Story, My Story', review of *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes, *New Yorker*, 2 February 1998, p. 58.

infatuation motivating the act itself, but the mock-Petrarchan lover who is the object of their raucous suit (Plath) is not actually there. The action is a parody of the balcony scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* ('But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?' [II, 2]), raising the question that is raised so often throughout the sequence of who, exactly, wrote the script of their lives, the question of fate and personal responsibility:

Drunk, he was certain it was yours.
Half as drunk, I did not know he was wrong.
Nor did I know I was being auditioned
For the male lead in your drama,
Miming through the first easy movements
As with eyes closed, feeling for the role.
As if a puppet were being tied on its strings,
Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes.
I jiggled through those gestures—watched and judged
Only by starry darkness and a shadow.
Unknown to you and not knowing you.
Aiming to find you, and missing, and missing.
Flinging earth at a glass that could not protect you
Because you were not there.

(‘Visit’, ll. 16-29)

Still on writing and difference, the living poet re-experiences the event years later, from her point of view, in the dead Plath's diaries:

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

Your story. My story.

(‘Visit’, ll. 75-88)

The story of Ted and Sylvia is not one story, in other words, but two. Reading her version, the poet feels compelled to tell his.

In the same way that the poems of *Birthday Letters* are a dark parody of familiar letters, so the relationship between the two lovers they project is often a dark parody of romantic love: a deliberate anti-climax or a violent, anti-romantic climax. ‘At the end of the twentieth century’, writes Nigel Glassy, ‘Hughes could not deify his experiences of romantic love, and instead the call in *Birthday Letters* is to convey its dark underbelly, to give the entire, unmisted account’.¹⁰ In the *Birthday Letters*, there is no initial revelation—‘whoever loved that loved not at first sight’ (Marlowe)—just questions, doubts, misunderstanding, misinterpretation (as we saw in ‘Fulbright Scholars’): in short, conflicting perspectives. Familiar letters conventionally communicate to their recipients more or less remarkable events that the recipients have not experienced, sharing their experience. In the memories that comprise *Birthday Letters*, Hughes and Plath have shared the event itself, but not the experience; here, years later, one of the two registers his isolated experience of moments, incidents, events the two have shared, separating event and experience while effecting a separation between the letter writer and the person addressed and discussed. The storied Plath serenaded from the frozen earth below in ‘Visit’ is simply not there. Hughes’s letters sunder, rather than share. They are, in this sense, not familiar but unfamiliar or ‘defamiliarizing’ letters: *unheimlich*, uncanny.

Take the example of ‘Your Paris’, whose very title uses the second person pronoun to enforce a separation between the two lovers:

Your Paris, I thought was American
 I wanted to humour you
 When you stepped in a shatter of exclamations,
 Out of the Hotel des Deux Continents
 Through frame after frame,

¹⁰ Nigel Glassey, ‘Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and *Birthday Letters*: Visions of Power and the Mythology of Containment’, PhD, University of Sydney (2005), p. 106.

Street after street, of Impressionist paintings

(‘Your Paris’, ll. 1-6)

Hotel des Deux Continents: even the hotel insists on difference and separation; the two continents are Hughes and Plath, Britain/Europe and America: continents apart. In ‘18 Rugby Street’, Plath’s body becomes a continent—‘So this is America, I marvelled’—echoing a famously sensual lyric by the poet John Donne: ‘O my America, my new found land’ (Elegy XIX: ‘To His Mistress, on Going to Bed’). America is (momentarily) marvellous, erotically charged. But strange.

Plath and Plath’s Paris, then, are American. Hughes’s Paris, on the other hand,

My Paris

Was only just not German. The capital

Of the Occupation and old nightmare

I read each bullet scar in the Quai stonework

With an eerie familiar feeling

(‘Your Paris’, ll. 9-13)

Plath’s Paris is envisaged by Hughes as the Paris of America expatriates: Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, and Gertrude Stein. Hughes’s Paris, on the other hand, was ‘Occupied Paris’: a Paris still occupied by the ghosts of the German troops of the Second World War.

I had rehearsed

Carefully, over and over, just those moments -

Most of my life, it seemed. While you

Called me Aristide Bruant and wanted

To draw *les toits*, and your ecstasies ricocheted

Off the walls patched and scabbed with posters -

I heard the contrabasso counterpoint

In my dog-nosed pondering analysis

Of café chairs where the SS mannequins

Had performed their *tableaux vivants*

So recently the coffee was still bitter

As acorns, and the waiters’ eyes

Clogged with dregs of betrayal, reprisal, hatred.

I was not much ravished by the view of the roofs.
 My Paris was a post-war utility survivor,
 The stink of fear still hanging in the wardrobes,
Collaborateurs barely out of their twenties,
 Every other face closed by the Camps
 Of the Maquis. I was a ghostwatcher.

(‘Your Paris’, ll. 15-33)

Both Hughes and Plath are ‘ghostwatchers’, as it happens, occupying 1950s Paris with figures and images from different pasts, and each occupying it differently, seeing it from different, conflicted perspectives. Indeed, Hughes everywhere sees conflict: where Plath’s ‘ecstasies ricocheted | Off the walls’, Hughes hears bullets ricocheting off the walls—the walls, the pavements, and the posters of the Paris that Plath romanticises. (We can hear the sound of the bullets in Plath’s excitement: ‘you stepped in a shatter of exclamations’.) Each has a ‘perspective’ in and on this capital of painters:

My perspectives were veiled by what rose
 Like methane from the reopened
 Mass grave of Verdun.

(‘Your Paris’, ll. 34-6)

Here Hughes extends his meditation on war to include perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most destructive, of all human battles (the battle between the Germans and the Allies in 1916 at Verdun). For Hughes, the artistic Paris of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Paris of the Impressionists and the Modernists—is gone. His are the bleaker ‘perspectives’ of a Paris occupied or colonised by Germans, hers the sentimental perspectives of a Paris colonised by artists, especially American artists.

Beyond this difference of perspectives, however, the poet’s paranoid allusions to the Occupation raise the more general, psycho-spiritual issue of occupation or ‘possession’—of one person entering into and taking over another—that is a recurrent theme of the *Birthday Letters*. (The ‘dybbuk’ that crops up in ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ (l. 6) is the lost soul of a dead person in Jewish superstition, a malicious spirit that takes possession of its victims.) And the German who occupies Sylvia Plath, according to Ted Hughes’s mythic rendering of Plath and of their relationship, is her father, Otto Plath:

the great spoiler; the precursor and harbinger of death, to whose grave Hughes sees Plath returning on her suicide in 1963.

3

I started out by talking of the *Birthday Letters* as letters; what I am signalling in the phrase 'mythic rendering' is the fact that they are *verse* letters—that, before anything else, they are poems. Hughes might have talked of 'direct, private, inner contact with my first wife', but he also recognized that there were artistic demands to be met, no less than personal or psychological ones. 'If things cannot be got off' the autobiographical level 'and onto the creative level', wrote Hughes to Keith Sagar of the *Birthday Letters* not long before he died, 'then they simply stay as if they were a recurrent stuck dream that simply goes on delivering its inescapable blows':

I must take some uplift from the consistency of the interconnections—though I wrote them over such a long time, rarely re-reading them, merely adding another now & again, never regarding them as a single structure—in fact the book has a structure, intricate, & accurate so far as I can judge. Solidly of a piece, somehow. So I can't care what people say. It has worked for me—better than I'd thought possible. Though I see now that any traumatic event—if writing is your method—has to be dealt with deliberately. An image has to be looked for—consciously—and then mined to the limit: but not in autobiographical terms.¹¹

As poems, Hughes's 'letters' use literature to create literature, 'deliberately'. (Poem after poem rewrites a Plath original, often repeating or echoing its title,¹² but Plath is only one among a number of poetic precursors; the closing passage from 'Visit' I quoted earlier, for example, involves an elaborate play on Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', with its frozen stillness and

¹¹ Ted Hughes, letter to Keith Sagar, 18 July 1998, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Reid, p. 720.

¹² For extended account of Hughes's revisionary incorporation and contestation of Plath's poetry, see Lynda K. Bundtzen, 'Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in *Birthday Letters*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.3-4 (2000), pp. 455-69.

its coupling and contrasting of the father and child.) As poems, moreover, Hughes's 'letters' draw upon mythology—upon a variety of mythologies—while aspiring in a characteristically mythopoeic way to create their own personal myth. Ted Hughes is one of the great mythmakers of modern English poetry, deriving his inspiration from W. B. Yeats and, before him, from William Blake, whose mythic embodiment of the spirit of poetry, Los, famously strove to 'Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans'. In the confessional poetry of *Birthday Letters*, no less than in the darkly anti-biblical, anti-humanist *Crow*, Hughes seeks a primal narrative sequence to explain otherwise bewildering and perverse human and natural phenomena, and to express what he takes to be a common cultural intuition or anxiety—what he calls 'the deeper shared understandings that keep us intact as a group'.¹³

In a poem like 'The Minotaur', the personal and the mythic—and the personal mythmaking—all come together. Hughes utilizes the myth of the half-human, half-bull familiar from Greek mythology, in which the Minotaur is the monstrous offspring of the Cretan queen, Pasiphæ, and a bull that was given by the sea god, Poseidon, as a gift to Pasiphæ's husband, king Minos. Minos had deceived Poseidon by not sacrificing the animal as he had promised and Pasiphæ had 'disgraced herself by her unnatural passion for a bull'.¹⁴ Most commonly figured with the body of a man and the head of a bull (though sometimes the reverse), the Minotaur is a deity of darkness, death, and winter whom king Minos had enclosed within a labyrinth built by Dædalus, where he was fed on the flesh of maidens and youths. As half bull, and therefore hugely powerful, and as a devourer of humans, the Minotaur was the god of cannibalistic sacrifices, and (by extension) symbolic of devouring and destruction generally. Later the Minotaur would be killed by Theseus, who was able to escape the labyrinth with the help of a thread given to him by Ariadne (daughter of Minos) that allowed him to retrace his steps.

The occasion commemorated in this uncharacteristically stanzaic poem of Hughes (the majority of the *Birthday Letters* are in an irregular verse,

¹³ Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 310.

¹⁴ See the entries on the Minotaur and on Pasiphæ in J. Lempriere, *A Classical Dictionary*, seventh edition (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809).

hovering somewhere between blank and free, and divided into verse paragraphs rather than regular stanzas) is one on which Plath has been overcome (possessed) by a superhuman passion:

Demented by my being
 Twenty minutes late for baby-minding.
 ('The Minotaur', ll. 7-8)

The immediate object upon which she vents her wrath—Hughes's 'mother's heirloom sideboard'—is obviously symbolic of Hughes himself, of his family rather than hers, of the past (inheritance, tradition) rather than the present, and it comes 'under the hammer' (l. 5) in a quite savage, literal way: rather than being auctioned off, as the expression suggests, it is smashed 'into kindling'. It is a climactic, even apocalyptic moment. But even as Plath is possessed by this superhuman passion, giving her superhuman strength—even as she becomes the monstrous Minotaur of the title—the poem gathers the incident into the larger, composite myth of the *Birthday Letters*, as Plath, with Hughes's encouragement (not to say goading), succumbs to her fate:

'Marvellous!' I shouted, 'Go on,
 Smash it into kindling.
 That's the stuff you're keeping out of your poems!
 And later, considered and calmer,

'Get that shoulder under your stanzas
 And we'll be away.' Deep in the cave of your ear
 The goblin snapped his fingers.
 So what had I given him?

('The Minotaur', ll. 9-16)

The bullish shoulders of the Minotaur focus its enormous strength. It is precisely this Dionysiac passion that Plath has been 'keeping out of [her] poems', but her tapping into this—as indeed she does in her confessional art, again and again—is seen as having fatal consequences. At the centre of her labyrinthine ear lies a goblin, at the centre of her labyrinthine mind a Minotaur. In an image that inverts that of the salutary thread given by Ariadne to Theseus in the myth to enable him to escape the labyrinth of the Minotaur, Hughes sees Plath's evocation of her superhuman, hitherto repressed passion as both empowering and overpowering, disastrous:

energizing her poetry but 'unravelling' their marriage, alienating her from her children, abandoning her mother, and driving her back to her father, the 'real' Minotaur at the centre of the labyrinth of her disturbed mind:

The bloody end of the skein
That unravelled your marriage,
Left your children echoing
Like tunnels in a labyrinth.

Left your mother a dead-end,
Brought you to the horned, bellowing
Grave of your risen father –
And your own corpse in it.

(‘The Minotaur’, ll. 17-24)

It all began (according to Hughes’s psychoanalysis of his dead wife, after Plath herself¹⁵) with the unresolved death of Otto Plath from untreated diabetes when the young Sylvia was aged eight; the utter disproportion of Plath’s reaction to Hughes’s lateness in the poem is identified as a kind of existential anger triggered by her father’s untimely death. At once disastrous and inevitable, Plath’s compact with her own rage has all the fatal consequences of a Greek tragedy. Hughes figures himself throughout this tragedy (and this is true of a number of other poems in *Birthday Letters*) as a not quite innocent audience, the instigator of a calamity that he is as powerless to control as Plath herself is—as powerless to control as his own readers are, he also suggests, including amongst those all the accusers who would make scandal or ideological capital out of her life and death.

The conflict of perspectives in *Birthday Letters* is not simply a conflict between Hughes’s ‘version’ and Plath’s ‘version’, nor is the conflict just one between Hughes’s version and the version of those who felt he had callously

¹⁵ ‘In *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes lifts the plot of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Daddy” and offers it as the “true story” of her death’, writes Sarah Churchwell, ‘Secrets and Lies: Plath, Privacy, Publication and Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 42:1 (Spring 2001), pp. 102-48 (p.124). Compare Alan Williamson on Hughes’s ‘obsession with Plath’s father-obsession’, ‘A Marriage between Writers: *Birthday Letters* as Memoir and as Poetry’, *The American Poetry Review*, 27:5 (September/October 1998), pp. 11-13 (p. 12).

and culpably contributed to Sylvia Plath's mental breakdown and suicide. The conflict is also between Hughes's version and Hughes's version—which is only to say that Hughes is large, and contains multitudes, if not directly contradicting himself (though there is that) then offering many and various versions of Sylvia Plath, and of the events of their lives. This is in part to do with the uncertainties of memory, of course, but if we are looking for conflicting perspectives in *Birthday Letters*, we should never ignore or underestimate Hughes's own. In one poem after another he will resign Plath to her preordained fate; her death was, we are told, beyond her or him or any of us, puppets as we are of fate. Or is it of poetry, or of some childhood trauma, or of some more arcane, not to say superstitious impulse from within or from outside? Or are we puppets of all of the above?

Your worship needed a god.
 Where it lacked one, it found one.
 Ordinary jocks became gods –
 Deified by your infatuation
 That seemed to have been destined at birth for a god.
 It was a god-seeker. A god-finder.
 Your Daddy had been aiming you at God
 When his death touched the trigger.

In a flash

You saw your whole life. You ricocheted
 The length of your Alpha career
 With the fury
 Of a high velocity bullet

(‘The Shot’, ll. 1-12)

Hughes cannot be sure. Plath is by turns a child, a priestess, a dybbuk, Cinderella, an American naïf, an unexplored continent. It may be that Plath was protean, changeable—that, certainly, is part of the myth—but the poet himself contributes to that changefulness, seeing her from conflicting emotional and interpretative perspectives. There is no doubt that, throughout *Birthday Letters*, Hughes returns obsessively to certain explanations (or rationalizations) of the failure of his and Plath's marriage and of her suicide, but he is not consistent, exploiting the occasional nature of the different lyrics' composition to rehearse different attitudes, different emotional responses, different myths: ‘Your story. My story’. ‘That intimate voice’, writes Katha Pollitt, ‘is overwhelmed by others: ranting, self-justifying,

rambling, flaccid, bombastic'.¹⁶ There are indeed plenty of conflicting voices in *Birthday Letters*, which (and this is a point too often overlooked) *reflects on*, no less than it reflects, the changeable nature of human emotion and allegiance, and the vulnerability of our understanding. Perhaps, after all, the best way of approaching the story of Sylvia Plath told by Ted Hughes in *Birthday Letters* is simply to acknowledge its fictive nature, to read it as mythopoeic and (as Hughes suggests) look for a patterning of poetic statements that reaches beyond trying to make sense of Plath's, or of any other human life, to what the story figures as to the primal mysteries of mind and fate.

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¹⁶ Katha Pollitt, 'Peering into the Bell Jar', review of *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes, *New York Review of Books*, 1 March 1998, p. 4.