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TED HUGHES AND SYLVIA PLATH: A LITERARY COUPLE

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Introduction

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, two of the most famous and influential writers of the 20th century, are a much-discussed literary couple who still catch the attention of many contemporary biographers on account of their eventful life. Hughes' career is extensive, along his famous collections – *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1962), *Crow* (1970) and *River* (1983) – he wrote many influential books, essays and children literature, all of which contributed to the development of contemporary literary thought – not to mention ecocritical research – culminating in his being appointed English Poet Laureate in 1984. Plath's career is different; she started writing at a strikingly young age and by the age of twenty-eight she had already published the astounding collection of poems *The Colossus* (1960), many short stories and poems in magazines across the Atlantic and given birth to Frieda Rebecca Hughes, Hughes and Plath's first-born, only to be followed by Nicholas Farrar Hughes two years after – years in which she never stopped writing; *The Bell Jar* was published under a pseudonym in 1963 and *Ariel* (1965), published posthumously, was to become an incredibly powerful work of art. In Hughes' 1998 collection *Birthday Letters*, among other beautifully crafted and vivid poems we find 'The Rabbit Catcher', which looks back and responds to a much-celebrated poem of the same title written by Plath. Plath's poem was composed in the incredible period of creative production she experienced in the last years of her life, more precisely, in May 1962 – she would commit suicide in early February the next year, 1963, at the age of thirty.

Plath's 'The Rabbit Catcher':

It was a place of force –
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice, and the sea
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
Unreeling it, spreading like oil.

I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
Its black spikes,
The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flower.
They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
And were extravagant, like torture.

There was only one place to go.
Simmering, perfumed,
The paths narrowed into the hollow.
And the snares almost effaced themselves –
Zeros, shutting on nothing,

Set close, like birth pangs.
The absence of shrieks
Made a hole in the hot day, a vacancy.
The glassy light was a clear wall,
The thickets quiet.

I felt a still busyness, an intent,
I felt hands round as tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him

And we, too, had a relationship –
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also (*SPCP*, p. 193-194).

Hughes' homonymous poem, published more than thirty years later, recalls the same event Plath drew inspiration for her poem from, to which Hughes was present:

It was May. How had it started? What
Had bared our edges? What quirky twist
Of the moon's blade had set us, so early in the day,
Bleeding each other? What had I done? I had
Somehow misunderstood. Inaccessible
In your dybbuk fury, babies
Hurled into the car, you drove. We surely had intended a day's outing,
Somewhere on the coast, an exploration –
So you started driving.
What I remember
Is thinking: She'll do something crazy. And I ripped
The door open and jumped in beside you.

So we drove. West. West. Cornish lanes
I remember, a simmering truce
As you stared, with iron in your face,
Into some remote thunderscape
Of some underworldly war. I simply
Trod accompaniment, carried babies,
Waited for you to come back to nature.
We tried to find the coast. You
Raged against our English private greed
Of fencing off all coastal approaches,
Hiding the sea from roads, from all inland.
You despised England's grubby edges when you got there.

That day belonged to the furies. I searched the map
To penetrate the farms and private kingdoms.
Finally a getaway. It was a fresh day,
Full May. Somewhere I'd bought food.
We crossed a field and came to the open
Blue posh of sea-wind. A gorse cliff
Brambly, oak-packed combes. We found
An eyrie hollow, just under the cliff-top.
It seemed perfect to me. Feeding babies,
Your Germanic scowl, edged like a helmet,
Would not translate itself. I sat baffled.
I was a fly outside on the window-pane
Of my own domestic drama. You refused lying there
Being indolent, you hated it. That flat, draughty plate was not an ocean.
You had to be away and you went. And I
Trailed after like a dog, along the cliff-top field-edge,
Over a wind-matted oak-wood –
And I found a snare.
Copper-wire gleam, brown cord, human contrivance,
Sitting new-set. Without a word
You tore it up and threw it into the trees.

I was aghast. Faithful
To my country gods – I saw
The sanctity of a trapline desecrated.

You saw blunt fingers, blood in the cuticles,
Clamped round a blue mug. I saw
Country poverty raising a penny,
Filling a Sunday stewpot. You saw baby-eyed
Strangled innocents, I saw sacred
Ancient custom. You saw snare after snare
And went ahead, riving them from their roots
And flinging them down the wood. I saw you
Ripping up precarious, precious saplings
Of my heritage, hard-won concessions
From the hangings and the transportations
To live off the land. You cried: 'Murderers!'
You were weeping with rage
That cared nothing for rabbits. You were locked
Into some chamber gasping for oxygen
Where I could not find you, or really hear you
Let alone understand you.
In those snares
You'd caught something. Had you caught something in me,
Nocturnal and unknown to me? Or was it
Your doomed self, your tortured crying,
Suffocating self? Whichever,
Those terrible, hypersensitive
Fingers of your verse close round it and
Felt it alive. The poems, like smoking entrails,
Came soft into your hands (*THCP*, 1136-1338).

Both poems are here quoted in full length as they reveal the different tone Hughes employed in *Birthday Letters* when compared to Hughes' writing in general and to the voice Plath developed in her later career. If the poetic 'I' never coincides with the voice of poets themselves, it is not always the case with Plath and Hughes – Hughes is here addressing his wife, reflecting on her words and on his *inability* to understand. In the aftermath of their marriage, as if conjuring Plath from other realms, Hughes is an actor in his own 'domestic drama'. He adopts a passive voice and is baffled; he wonders: 'How had it started?', 'What had [he] done?'. Plath, on the other hand, is the classic omniscient narrator in 'The Rabbit Cather'; according to Michael Silk (2007) Sylvia knew 'precisely how she felt', she gives the reader

clear-cut 'narrative (…) contours of her feelings': 'I felt a still busyness', 'I felt hands'. [1] In Plath's poem, nature is shaped by her emotions: 'the malignity of the gorse'; in Hughes' narrative, there is 'hypnotic frustration' at the attempt to empathize with Plath's moods – 'I saw', 'You saw', 'I saw', 'You saw' (ibid). Hughes tries to remember and is 'protesting the independent authority of his memory', with an interesting change of colour in his poem, for example, a tactic he used more than once in *Birthday Letters* – in 'The Rabbit Catcher', from the 'white' mug in her version, to the 'blue' one on his (ibid).

The 'morbid' fascination' with Plath's suicide, as Stephen Ennis calls it, is ever powerful and has brought many researchers over the years to look for evidence in Plath's poems, 'distorting' what is known about her life to change readers' perspective on the couple. [2] Jonathan Bate's *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorized Life* (2015), which focuses more on Hughes' life and work after Plath than on their marriage, and the even more recent *Red Comet: The Short and Blazing Life of Sylvia Plath* (2020) by Heather Clarke, which is richer in detail than most Plath biographies, but still focuses on the chronology of facts, rather than on the insinuation and assignment of guilt, constitute essential material in the analysis of both Hughes and Plath's writing career and later criticism. A tragic event in literary history, Plath's death marks the beginning of Hughes' 'new study' on 'all the ways a heart can kill its owner / And how [his] had killed [him]' – 'The Lodger' in *Birthday Letters* (1998, p. 126). Hughes left Plath for another woman, and, thereby, 'set in motion the sequence of events that culminated in Plath taking her own life in the winter of 1963'. Retracing their history, a generation of readers 'have been quick to infer' Plath and Hughes' relationship 'must have been an abusive and exploitative one'. [3] Decades have passed, and the figure in black in Plath's famous poem 'Daddy' has finally been re-shaped into a more 'human' one, thanks to the large quantity of newly published research available in recent years – Robin Morgan's 1972 accusation: "I accuse / Ted Hughes / of (…) the murder of Sylvia Plath" and the "real blood on real hands" are now a thing of the past. [4] Nevertheless, influential essays such as Marjorie Perloff's 'The Two Ariels: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon' published in *American Poetry Review* in 1984 invite us to think of Plath's *Ariel*, a collection edited and published posthumously by Hughes in 1965, as an 'appropriated' version of her writing – Lynda Bundtzen in *The Other Ariel* asks, 'Who

[1] Michael Silk, 'Hughes, Plath and Aeschylus: Allusion and Poetic Language', in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (2007), Vol. 14, No. 3, p. 1-34.
[2] Stephen Enniss, 'Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Myth of Textual Betrayal', in *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (2007), Vol. 101, No. 1, p. 63-71.
[3] (ibid).
[4] Robin Morgan, 'Arraignment III'. *The Feminist Art Journal* (1972), vol. 1, p. 4.

authored Ariel?' (2001, p. 3). It is, as Enniss suggests, an 'inflammatory' question, as if Plath's authorship could be wiped away by Hughes' editing. The posthumous *Ariel* is rather an extension of the mutual support they gave each other in life – which is the aim of this work to portray. Hughes and Plath's writing were so interconnected that 'Billy Hook and the Three Souvenirs', a 1958 children's story which appears under Hughes' name in *Jack and Jill*, has Sylvia Hughes' name in the manuscript. [5]

Essential as it is to gain an in-depth understanding of both authors' engagement with each other's writing and marriage, in the second and third chapter of this dissertation Hughes and Plath's literary development and marriage will be analysed from a factual, biographical perspective in order to shed light on what inspired their early and later works – to give a transparent narrative to the background of some poems by two writers who adopted, in different instances, the confessional mode to express their art in poetic form. These two chapters will also focus on their college years, through university, publications and private life to inform our knowledge on the literary, philosophical and personal background to their works. As Plath's childhood years have become, ever since her suicide, more and more important to consider in terms of the psychological readings of her writing, chapter one will also concentrate on Plath's relationship to her parents and how formative the experiences she had in her infancy were, not only to elucidate matters Hughes was confronted with in his later life but also to give ourselves, as readers, a deeper, more insightful understanding of what Plath might have wanted to express in some of her art. In Jerome McGann's view, it is not only authors who play a part in the entity he calls 'the work' – 'the definitive text, like the author's final intentions, may not exist, may never have existed'. [6]

This dissertation's aim is to explore Hughes' and Plath's literary lives and in so doing deploy a biographical perspective with which one can gain more insight into the work itself. The emphasis on biographical content is up for debate, yet it is the underlying tenor of this thesis to contend that, in the case of Plath and Hughes, the biography and the work are inseparable. In pursuing this arguably contentious line of thought, the thesis aims to disclose the blurred line between selfhood and art, fact and fiction, to reveal the way in which such dualities and dichotomies are always already entangled, interleafed. This reasoning will aim to demystify the myths and legends surrounding their lives and works, to see the way in which the everyday

[5] A typescript of the children's story bears the name 'Sylvia Hughes' in Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory.
[6] Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983), Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, p. 52.

realities of hope and despair, love and hate, and so forth, are the very energies and incarnations that give the poems their substance, their flesh and blood, that which brings the poems alive insofar as it is the everydayness to which readers can relate to and empathize with. That is not to say, however, that this dissertation will detract and veer away from their poetry – on the contrary, it will maintain that the biography is only necessary insofar as it relates to the poetry, not vice versa. The poetry is the most important part of Hughes and Plath's lives, yet to help better understand the poetry this dissertation will claim that the socio-political, historical and biographical contexts from which the poems sprung, are of great importance too.

1.1 Truth or Fiction?

Despite movements such as New Criticism that argue otherwise, many would still posit that artists' lives and biographies should not be overlooked when considering their work. Indeed, one cannot deny the fact that biographical truth is ever problematic and especially so when considering Sylvia Plath, a writer towards whose career we are often assumed 'to "take sides" and be "for" Plath or "against" her' (Churchwell, 1998). Analogously, her husband Ted Hughes' biography is 'more impossible than others' and all the more so since part of his archive still 'remains sealed off, withdrawn from public inspection until the year 2023'. (Moulin, 2017). Biographies are indeed problematic, just as translating literature is (ibid). The nuances of meaning left behind, or misjudged, are unbounded and it is so to a greater extent when reflecting on one of the most discussed literary couples of the 20th century, Plath and Hughes. Lives, as Moulin and others suggest, cannot be simply recounted, and as proven many times in history, they ofttimes become fiction.

Sylvia Plath is renowned for having been shaped into many different kinds of characters overtime, many of which may pertain to narratological tropes. Although most of the writings about her are not specifically linked to her as an individual, Tracy Brain (2011, p. 184) sees *Sylvia* (2003), a film by Christine Jeffs, as one of the major representations of 'the obvious efforts of a biopic'. Indeed, the film is said to depict Sylvia with a fact-distorting emphasis which is more than anything else predicated on her marriage and on the deeply-rooted elements of pathology in her life. It seems to reduce her to the figure of a wife rather than an artist in the process of writing *The Bell Jar* (1963), nor does it pay attention to her creative drives in the early poems collected by Hughes as the 'Juvenilia' section in *Sylvia Plath. The Collected Poems* (1965). Plath's *Ariel* (1965) persona is undeniably the one which first surfaces in many works about her, hence the need for the constant debating of her poems and the many reinterpretations of her role in society and art, not to mention the inevitable and recurring discussion on the 'boundaries between fact ("truth") and fiction' in biographies (Churchwell, 1998).

Any writer who is 'sympathetic to Plath is understood definitionally to be antagonistic to Ted Hughes' (ibid). Hughes was to be the executor of her literary corpus, which was not an easy task in a time when feminism was on the rise and spreading through a myriad of academic discourses, only to be compounded by the publicised scandal of Plath's suicide in 1963. What

has often been ignored is Hughes' own 'very ambivalent, very painfully and painstakingly elaborated version' of Sylvia (ibid). Hughes' creative life was in many ways always shaped by his relationship with Plath, especially when considering his late *Birthday Letters* (1998) and, of course, when delineating Hughes' place in the gendered politics of mid-20th century literature. Hughes, the man, and Sylvia, the woman, a literary couple which of course, after Plath's suicide, was scrutinised under the lens of a microscope; not one detail of what caused Plath's untimely death has been left out of the picture. As Janet Malcolm writes in her famous *The Silent Woman. Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*,

> Like Prometheus, whose ravaged liver was daily reconstituted so it could be daily reravaged, Hughes has had to watch his young self being picked over by biographers, scholars, critics, article writers, and newspaper journalists. Strangers who Hughes feel know nothing about his marriage to Plath write about it in with proprietary authority' (1993, p. 8).

'Undeservedly forgotten', as Janet Montefiore puts it in her *Men and Women's Writers of the 1930s* (1996), was the ambiguous position women poets of the Anglo-American traditions developed towards their own identity as writers and within society. When reading Plath's poems in the awareness of her struggle with depression and the eventful life she led, it was 'easy' for scholars to add more conjecture into the puzzle. The figures of Ted Hughes and of Sylvia's father, Otto Plath, especially in her poem 'Daddy', have often been superimposed onto each other creating this figure of an evil, black, looming and crippling man who ruined, silenced, discouraged and humiliated Sylvia (Moulin, 2017). In September of 1950 Plath was to start her freshman year at Smith College in Northampton; a young woman aged eighteen and six years away from meeting the love of her life, Sylvia yearned to provide herself with a definition:

> 'God, who am I? I sit in the library tonight, the lights glaring overhead, the fan whirring loudly. Girls, girls everywhere, reading books. Intent faces, flesh pink, white, yellow. And I sit here without identity: faceless.' (*J*, 16).

All her life Plath tried to understand her identity and confronted it with her marriage, life and work, a quest which took an obstinate, often pathologic and fictionalising path. But no fingers should be pointed. Hughes resisted the 'equation of art and life' and compares those who wanted to make a case about their marriage 'to maggots profiting at her death, inheritors of her craving for fame: 'This is the audience / Applauding your farewell show'' (Bate, 2015. P.12).

Plath lived in a world full of contradictions, a woman writer in a man's world, sometimes refused by publishers and often insecure about her work. Although halfway through her career, it is evident Plath still felt uncertain about her writings, and as stated in 'Stillborn', she felt her poems as 'not [a]live (…) [she was unable to] understand what happened to them' (*SPCP*, p. 142). Many have referred to Plath's literary ambition as pathological, linked to addiction, or that "her 'competitive drive' (…) stemmed from 'interior hollowness'" (Clark, 2020). A rhetoric such as this, as Clark puts it, 'trivializes Plath's commitment to her academic success and her literary vocations. (Male ambition is rarely described in this way)' (ibid). Plath undoubtedly had great ambitions, the child of renowned professor Otto Plath and of encouraging, although pressurising Aurelia Schober, came to be the wife of who she thought to have the 'biggest, most imaginative [mind she had] ever met and where she felt she could 'live in its growing countries forever' (*J*, p. 145). In both contexts Plath felt compelled to impress (Wagner Martin, 2003). On the one hand, she was the child of a 'brilliant scientist' (ibid.) and of a woman whom she looked up to, but failed to 'emulate' (Clark, 2020). On the other, Ted Hughes' wife. The wife of a man who not only 'invoke[s] Wordsworth, but also is 'Hughes the Coleridge (his Crow standing in for the Mariner and his figure of the Goddess for Geraldine)' (Bate, 2015, p.12). The wife of a writer who thought poetry to be the 'expression', and the 'inner life the substance' (ibid) and who was committed to his literary vocation all his life, eventually becoming Her Majesty's Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death in 1998.

In publishing Plath's journals, Hughes' intention was to 'lay some fantasies to rest, but he [did] not elaborate on how they [would] do so' (Malcolm, 1993, p. 4). Hughes wanted to erase the myth of characterisation and fiction surrounding Plath and in his foreword to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) which cover the years between 1950 and 1962 of her life – her thoughts, her writings, evidence of her actual life – Hughes reflected on Plath's 'real' and 'false' selves in terms of her poetical reputation. *Ariel* from then on is considered her 'real self', extricating herself from a web Hughes defines as a 'day to day struggle with her warring selves' and which should be exempted from his overall characterisation of her prose writing as 'waste products' (ibid). He ends his essay, in his first version of it, with a revelation that caused much havoc. It is so 'unexpected and abrupt that one doesn't immediately take in its significance' (ibid):

> The journal exists in an assortment of notebooks and bunches of loose sheets. This selection contains perhaps a third of the whole bulk, which is now in the Neilson library at Smith College. Two more notebooks survived for a while, maroon-backed ledgers like the '57-'59 volume, and continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several

> months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival. The other disappeared (ibid).

The second version of it, published in *Grand Street* in 1982, is much longer and casts aside the first version. Here, the revelation comes in the first lines:

> Sylvia Plath's journal exist as an assortment of notebooks and bunches of loose sheets, and the selection just published here contains a third of the whole bulk. Two other notebooks survived for a while after her death. They continued from where the surviving record breaks off in 1959 and covered the last three years of her life. The second of these books her husband destroyed, because he did not want her children to have to read it (in those days he regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The earlier one disappeared more recently and my, presumably, still turn up (ibid, p. 5).

Edited by Paul Alexander for an anthology of texts studying Plath, *Ariel Ascending* (1985), we notice here two major changes according to Malcolm, the first one being that in one he holds the 'disappeared' journal might still be traceable. Secondly, and most importantly, he himself 'disappears': 'I destroyed' finally becomes 'her husband destroyed'. Fiction and life are again blended, and Hughes needs to

> spell out his awareness of the discontinuity between the observing and observed self: the observed self ("her husband") represents the interests of Hughes' children, (…) whereas the observing self – whom he calls "we" as in "We cannot help wondering whether the lost entries (…) were not the most important section" – represents the interests of the reader, who wants to understand the relationship between the Ariel poems and the poet's life. (Malcolm, 1993, p. 6)

In a kind of 'mockery' (ibid) of the concepts of truth and fiction, Hughes' from then on, and long before that, has been defined as something he is not. He has been portrayed as 'her husband', not as himself. He is seen through the prism of their relationship and the part he might have played in her suicide, not as one of a couple, someone who is fallible but who is also capable of kindness and love. Their relationship was intense. It is almost impossible to think of Ted without thinking of Sylvia; any biography of Sylvia, and there are many, 'is in effect a joint life' (Bate, 2015). The 'very sadistic man' Sylvia talked about with her friend Jane Henderson when she visited her in Cambridge on 4 June 1956 (ibid.) was the man she was to marry twelve days later in London, a few months after they famously met at a party. How did Hughes found himself giving a deposition in the offices of Shapiro and Grace attorneys on Milk Street, Boston, 30 years after that first meeting in 1956? How did it happen that Hughes

had to defend himself from a case against Avco Embassy Pictures Corporation and 'others', the others including him?

1.2 Early Lives

Plath's writing practice started early on in her life. She was encouraged to write by both her parents, Aurelia Schober and Otto Plath, two academics who regarded education as fundamental in raising their children. As Wagner-Martin wrote in *Plath: A Literary Life* (1999), 'Plath trained all her life for her art'. Like

> 'many word people, she loved words and the arrangement of them. [So] (…) she read to learn how to make those arrangements for herself. Her first small poem was published when she was eight; from that time on, she worked diligently – almost voraciously – to hone in on what made writers writers' (p. 3).

Her parents' influence is present in most of her writings and throughout her career. We do not know whether the order of Plath's poems in her final collection *Ariel*, later changed by Hughes in 1965 when published posthumously, was intended to suggest a narrative of 'recovery from anger, depression and self-punishment' in her works (Clark, 2020, p. 20). Nevertheless, in terms of creative evolution, the poem 'Wintering', which was meant to end the collection, holds Plath's father Otto's 'totem as a talisman of recovery and resilience during her own bleak winter' (ibid, p. 19):

> Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
> Succeed in banking their fires
> To enter another year?
> What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
> The bees are flying. They taste the spring.

Sylvia was eight when her father died. The Harvard-educated professor whom she later confessed to her psychiatrist, Dr. Beuscher, she considered to be 'a brilliant [academic] who would have expected her [and her younger brother Warren] to be outstanding' (HM, p. 34), may have 'exerted [his own] pressure on her' as a child, and, inevitably, throughout her career (Clark, 2020, p. 21). She wrote consistently

> about her sudden fall from happiness and despair. At eight years old, she was forced to accept the death of her beloved father – with very little warning or preparation, because neither her mother nor the physicians attending Otto Plath realised that death was imminent – and then adjust to rapid sequence of changes in both living patterns and places (Martin, 2003, p.6).

Otto Plath was passionate about bees and beekeeping. Plath wrote a series of poems on bumblebees and raised bees herself later in her life in Devon, England. Bees in Plath's imagery are closely related to the memory of a loving father, as recorded in 'The Beekeeper's Daughter'; a father whom, nonetheless, 'she felt had abandoned her' and who would become the model for Plath's 'Herr Doktor' – a figure who tortures defenceless creatures (Clark, 2020, p. 19). Sylvia seems eager to end *Ariel* on a note of 'hope and renewal with the word 'spring'', suggesting a reconciliation with her father's death and distancing herself from the tones we find in 'Daddy' and other poems (ibid). Such tones have been criticised and rejected by both Aurelia Plath and Otto's closest friends and acquaintances.

By the time he taught his wife in Middle High German at Boston University, Otto 'had won the MS and ScD from Harvard (…), had succeeded in all academic fields (…) and his primary characteristic had become his strong, determined will' (Martin, 2003, p.3). *Bumblebee and Their Ways* represents his lifetime work. Published in 1934 and based on his doctoral thesis at Harvard, it marked his position as a 'highly respected entomologist' (Clark, 2020, p. 17). After having been appointed as a professor at Boston University in 1922, Otto went on to publish in a series of journals, such as *The American Naturalist*, the *Biological Bulletin* o*f the American Nationalist*, the *Annal of the Entomological Society of America*, and the *Handbook of Social Psychology*. He was already considered an authority on bee stings and insect behaviour when his writings were published in the popular press (ibid). In the 1929 Boston University yearbook he was described as a professor who made

> subjects interesting. If you don't believe it, watch the crowds which flock into his classes in Ornithology, Entomology, and even German! If you want to spend an interesting half-hour just get him to talking about birds and insects. You'll not consider it time wasted, we assure you.

Otto's housemates at Bussey Mansion in the years he was studying for his doctoral thesis at Harvard depicted him as a man who 'was "seldom jovial", but (…) "relaxed and happy" [and] (…) "generous" (Clark, 2020, p. 17). One of the Bussey Boys, as they liked to call themselves, confirmed how, like Sylvia, he 'frequently worked to the point of extreme fatigue' (ibid). They 'generally found him "gentle by nature", "serious, but with a sense of humour", "over-

sensitive", "not an aggressive person" and certainly "not violent" (ibid). People who knew Otto during his life found it hard to reconcile the quiet, sensitive person they knew with the 'Nazi father' in Plath's poems (ibid). In 1966, when an article on Plath appeared in *Time*, Thomas Clohesy, one of Otto's students, wrote to Aurelia to articulate his frustration at both the media's and Sylvia's depiction of Otto:

> Otto was not the fearful Teuton which Sylvia apparently thought him to be. I remember Otto Plath with great fondness, having first met him in 1939 when I became a student at Boston University. Another friend and I thought him a very unusual man, and we respected his political opinions even though they did not prevail at the time. (…) He was certainly not the "ogre" that the poem thinks he was. I shall never forget his kindness to me (…) [it] will never be forgotten. [7]

The giant father figure Plath later created in 'Colossus' differs, in Wagner-Martin's views, from the father persona of Plath's early writings; that is, a figure that stands for either the lovingly affectionate grandfather (Frank Schober, with whom Plath and her brother Warren spent a great deal of their childhood in Winthrop due to Otto's academic career and then illness), or the absent man Plath 'yearn[ed] to bring back to her existence' – her father (Ghasemi, 2008, p. 286). As Peter J. Lowe suggests, Plath's

> childhood happiness ends with the death of her father, prompting a move, both physical and emotional, away from the location in which such happiness was found (…). Her dead father's presence remains an integral and psychologically disruptive element, reminding her that although the happiness (…) has been enjoyed, it is also irretrievably lost. [8]

Otto taught at BU from 1922 until 1940, when he died prematurely of diabetes, an illness with which he might have lived for many years. In those years at BU Otto formally divorced from his former wife and met and married Aurelia Schober, Sylvia and Warren's mother, 'on the same day the divorce was granted, January 4 [1932] in a rushed civil ceremony' (Clark, 2020, p. 26). Aurelia Schober was a woman who 'forged her identity around her intellect from an early age' and who 'inherited an intense work ethic which she passed on to her daughter' (ibid). She attracted him, in part, 'because of her able and tenacious mind' (Martin, 2003, p. 3). She 'spent most of her free time reading' as a youngster, and later 'devoured "all the romantic

[7] Thomas Clohesy to AP, 4 Sept. 1966. 29.9, SPC, Smith.
[8] Texas Studies in Literature and Language , SPRING 2007, Vol. 49, No. 1, Genetic Criticism (SPRING 2007), pp. 21-44

historical novels [she] could find in the public library"' (Clark, 2020, p. 24). In her memoir, she gives us a picture of herself as a reader:

> Emily Dickinson's poetry became my new Bible; the novels of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, the Brontës, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy Galsworthy, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville and Henry James – in fact, the world of American and English prose and poetry burst upon me, filling me with the urgency to read, read. I lived in a dream world, a book tucked under every mattress of the beds it was my chore to make up daily; a book in the bathroom hamper, and the family's stock answer to the question "What's RiRi [my nickname] doing?" was "Oh, she's reading *again*." (*LH*, p. 3-4).

As Wagner Martin suggests, while Otto lived, 'even during periods of increasing invalidism, the family emphasis on reading, learning and language permeated every segment of Sylvia's [Aurelia's and Warren's] life'. As Perry Norton, a close family friend, suggests, 'both his and Sylvia's parents expected their children to succeed, but (…) these kinds of expectations were typical in their professional milieu. Academic success, rather than material wealth, was the currency that such families valued' (Clark, 2020, p. 21-22). Aurelia read Montessori and believed that children should create their own interests, learn for themselves. 'It was lucky for her', Wagner Martin suggests, 'that both Sylvia and Warren were so attracted to books, letters, speech. Both talked early; both read long before kindergarten'. (1999, p. 5) Wagner-Martin continues, demonstrating how

> Sylvia showed herself from infancy to be a systematiser: she created order out of buttons, small stones, tiles, blocks, any kind of portable object. After Warren's birth, when she was the likely-to-be-jealous age of two and a half, she became more visibly precocious: her quest was then [already] for attention (ibid).

Nine months after her father's death, on August 10, 1941, Sylvia published her first poem at the age of eight, simply titled 'Poem' on the 'Good Sport' page of the Sunday *Boston Herald*. This was later considered as 'pathological' by critics such as Andrew Wilson in *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life before Ted* (2013). Sylvia was repeatedly labelled as a writer with an obsession with achievement; Wagner-Martin suggests in her biography that Sylvia was obsessive, not capable of simply 'enjoying an activity' unless she could justify it in terms of 'possible payment or publication'. Yet, writers such as Virginia Woolf and the Brontë sisters were never labelled as such, even though they published their works in local newspapers as children just like Sylvia (Clark, 2020). Sylvia, at such an early age, was already able to write in trochaic tetrameter in 'Poem' (*Boston Herald*, 1941):

Hear the crickets chirping

In the dewy grass

Bright little fireflies

Twinkle as they pass.

The poem came with a note to the editor: 'Dear Editor, I have written a short poem about what I see and hear on hot summer nights' (ibid). She continued the poem that same year, showing dexterity with iambic meter: 'I have a little house / Between two trees / And there the birdies always sing / Among the whispering leaves.' (ibid) Her ear 'was already tuned to the darker cadences of Romanticism' (Clark, 2020, p. 56).

When she was fifteen, Sylvia told her mother: "When I am a mother I want to bring up children just as you have us" (*LH*, p. 37). Nevertheless, marriage is not an easy task and Aurelia's relationship with Otto depended on a 'bittersweet transition' for her, as Clark defines it. After their wedding, Otto asked Aurelia to become a 'full-time homemaker' (ibid, 10) and in so doing to give up her promising career as a teacher of English and German at one of the best public schools of Massachusetts, Brookline High School. Otto respected his wife's intellect, but he saw no need for her to work. In the 1930s, being a 'working wife' was indeed a stigma: before the Second World War, in twenty-six of the United States married women were prohibited to work by the law (Goldin, 1988, p. 5).

In this sense, Aurelia and Otto's Marriage was similar to that of Sylvia and Ted. Aurelia, in the first years of their marriage, felt that her and Otto's lives were devoted to 'THE BOOK', that is, *Bumblebee and Theis Ways* (*LH*, p. 13). Then, Sylvia was born, and Aurelia wrote that the couple worked hard on 'THE CHAPTER' which Otto was writing for *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (ibid). Aurelia wrote entire chapters from Otto's notes and indeed the two academic couples, Otto and Aurelia, Ted and Sylvia, 'embarked on their relationships in a collaborative spirit: Ted and Sylvia sought to become the most important poets of their generation, while Otto and Aurelia also saw themselves as partners in a joint intellectual scientific endeavour' (Clark, 2020, p. 26).

In her *Letters Home* (1975) Aurelia wrote that she thought the first years of her marriage would be like the evenings she had spent with a MIT bachelor professor when she was studying in her junior year at Boston University, and who eventually broke her heart. She wrote that she 'listened, fascinated, to his accounts of travel and colourful adventures, fully realising that [she] was in the presence of a true genius in both the arts and sciences' (*LH*, p. 6). Otto nursed her

broken heart when their affair ended, but the immigrant bachelor's life he led had not prepared him for marriage. As Aurelia confesses:

> Despite the fact that he was only sixteen when he arrived in the United States, the Germanic theory that the man should be der *Herr des Hauses* (head of the house) persisted, contrary to Otto's claims that the modern aim of "fifty-fifty" appealed to him (…). The age difference between us (twenty-one years), Otto's superior education, his long years of living in college dormitories or rooming by himself, our former student-teacher relationship, all made this sudden change to home and family difficult for him, and led to an attitude of "rightful" dominance on his part (…). At the end of my first year of marriage, I realised that if I wanted a peaceful home – and I did – I would simply have to become more submissive, although it was not in my nature to do so (*LH*, p. 13).

In a 1988 unpublished letter, 'Mrs Plath expanded on the description of her husband's invalidism, expressing for perhaps the first time how dismal the family life was during the first years of [Otto's] misdiagnosed illness – and how separated the children were from their father's existence' (Martin, 2003, p. 11). Those four years before his death were 'of horrible illness', years in which Aurelia tried to keep 'the children from witnessing' by setting a room in the household as their playroom and making it the centre of their lives, before relocating them at her parents by the ocean in Winthrop (ibid). Upstairs in the playroom, Aurelia could keep them away from a father who 'never hugged, never kissed [them, for fear] that he had something communicable that closeness would transfer (…). [He] never took a walk with them, played [with] or touched them. [There were] no 'talks' – only a pat in the head at bedtime' (ibid). Wagner-Martin suggests that only in her 1959 poem 'Colossus' does Plath catch 'this sense of her father as an unattainable sphinx-like statue, an entity more foreboding than real' (ibid).

Aurelia was 'determined that Sylvia would have the scholarly and literary opportunities she did not; yet she wanted Sylvia, the daughter and granddaughter of Germanic immigrants on the eve of another war with Germany, to be a good American' (Clark, 2020, p. 31). The Schobers, Aurelia's family of Austrian descent, were American citizens; nevertheless, Aurelia remembers in her memoir having been 'ostracised by the neighbourhood "gang", called "spy-face" and (…) [being] pushed off the school bus steps and dumped on the ground while the school bus driver, keeping his eyes straight ahead, drove off'. These images would later appear in Plath's writings, in stories such as 'The Shadow' (1959) and 'Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit' (1955).

When the First World War began, Otto was 'passed over for a permanent instructorship at Berkeley, – on account of his German background, he suspected' (Clark, 2020, p.12). The

Oakland Tribune reported that many professors were forced to return to Germany at that time, and Otto himself was one of the professors in a doubtful position. The university later banned Germans from teaching at all during the war. Otto was reported to the FBI by one Mr. McCay, who claimed that 'Otto seem[ed] to have assumed a rather pro-German attitude towards the War on account of losing his positions'. [9] Otto called the FBI office in October 1918, giving officer Nix a summary of his life up to then and showing a 'rather indifferent attitude' toward the war (ibid). He also denied statements by McCay according to which, eventually, he wanted to go back to Germany. He told Nix that 'he would never dream of going back to Germany' and that 'some things are rotten in Germany, but not all; that the German people and their character is not altogether rotten, but that they are misled' (ibid). This and other evidence demonstrate how

> it is important to study both why and how the Holocaust appears in Plath's poetry, because our reaction to it as readers and the strategies Plath uses to approach it are tied to a wider problem relating to the place of the Holocaust in our culture. If we understand this, it is possible to place the disturbing appearance of the Holocaust in Plath's poems in its proper context, and to see this effect as symptomatic of a more general problem (…). (Al Strangeways, 1996, p. 370).

This and other matters will be dealt with in depth in the second chapter of this work, since for Sylvia and her father the German language and heritage were of great importance. Otto's German background made him the man he was, a 'target of constant harassment who (…) shrank from socialising' and who sought to keep him and his family 'at a distance rather than to share intimacy' (Clark, 2020, p. 14). But as Ruth Freeman Geissler, Sylvia's childhood friend, claimed, the Nazi figure in 'Daddy' was 'very much a fantasy'. [10] Far from being a Nazi sympathiser, 'Otto saw through Hitler's rhetoric and surmised the horror that awaited Europe' (Clark, 2020, p. 15). Aurelia, too, would write that Sylvia's father 'had never had an affiliation with the Nazi party and was utterly revolted by any departure from 'reverence for life'.[11] She wrote to her friend Vandler in 1976 that Sylvia's 'barbed writing' was, more than anything, a way in which she could utilise poetic form in order to express rage against the historical contingencies of her heritage. [12]

[9] FBI File on Otto E. Plath, A. Nix, 1918.
[10] Heather Clark Interview with Richard Larschan, 2017.
[11] AP to H. Vandler, 1976.
[12] (ibid).

In the popular imagination it is Otto, the absent and authoritarian patriarchal figure, who obsessed and tormented Plath. In Edward Butscher's 1976 *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness*, it is suggested that 'a situation was needed', a 'plot ripe with secret tension and geared towards a climax of destruction, betrayal, a re-enactment of an ancient tragedy to forge the tragic poet.' Hughes' *Birthday Letters* reinforced this idea. Yet it was Aurelia, Clark and Wagner-Martin suggest, who had the greatest impact on her daughter. She embodies the 'demure, submissive self that blocked access to the deeper, subversive poet-self' Sylvia fights for in her poetry (Clark, 2020, p. 20). Aurelia stood 'for a particular aesthetic that, from the late fifties on, seemed to Sylvia a vestige of her own early, meticulously crafted, safe verse' (ibid). As Clark explains, 'Aurelia was her daughter's confidante, sounding board, model of womanhood and moral guide' (p. 20). They had 'a close, complicated and often difficult relationship, especially after Otto's death' (ibid). In *Letters Home*, Aurelia notes that' between Sylvia and [her] there existed – as between [her] own mother and [herself] – a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times, an unwelcome invasion of privacy' (p. 32). This is evident in Sylvia's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), published under the pseudonym 'Victoria Lucas' and in which Ester Greenwood's critical mother is to blame, according to critics, for her daughter's suicide attempt. This same mother has often been identified with Plath's own mother, and this will be studied further in depth in the analysis of the novel in this work.

Both Plath and Hughes wanted to explore a different moral structure from the one accepted by society at the time they were writing, a 'self-expansion, rather than self-sacrifice – of which Aurelia would have disapproved' (Clark, 2020, p. 21). The couple would follow a more Lawrentian aesthetic, as Clark defines it, in their readings and artistic endeavours. In 1958 Sylvia famously told Dr. Beuscher that she 'hated' her mother, and Clark suggests

> she was expressing her disgust with the self that had sought her mother's approval for so many years, and the self that had written the kind of poetry that would appeal to her mother's parochial taste. When Marianne Moore criticised the sexual imagery in Hughes' *The Hawk in the Rain*, Plath saw a mirror of her mother's attitude. Moore's grumbles strengthened Plath's determination to write a bolder, less decorous poetry (ibid).

In Sylvia's *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, published posthumously with an introduction by Hughes in 1977, Plath writes that the first years of her life before her father died were 'sealed (…) off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth' (p. 134). Not even with her best friend, Betsy Powley, did she discuss her father's death. Throughout the 1940s, as testified by her unpublished journals, she shared everything

with Betsy, who when asked about Otto only received a vague response – he'd lost a limb due to tuberculosis. [13] Nonetheless, Plath wrote many poems about him, many, again, containing bees. 'Lament', a villanelle written while Sylvia was studying at Smith college and previously titled 'Dirge', is the first elegy she wrote to her father:

> The sting bees took away my father
> who walked in a swarming shroud of wings
> and scorned the tick of the falling weather.
>
> Lightning licked in a yellow lather
> but missed the mark with snaking fangs:
> the sting of bees took away my father.
>
> Trouncing the sea like a raging bather,
> he rode the flood in a pride of prongs
> and scorned the tick of the falling weather.
>
> A scowl of sun struck down my mother,
> tolling her grave with golden gongs,
> but the sting of bees took away my father.
>
> He counted the guns of god a bother,
> laughed at the ambush of angels' tongues,
> and scorned the tick of the falling weather.
>
> O ransack the four winds and find another
> man who can mangle the grin of kings:
> the sting of bees took away my father
> who scorned the tick of the falling weather.

In 1946, Sylvia was 14 years old and was already developing her thematic interests in writing in a sentimental way. She enjoyed writing about nature in poems such as 'The Winter Sunset' (1946), in which dark images are evoked to convey emotional truth within safe, impersonal parameters:

> Over the earth's dark rim

[13] HC interview with Betsy Powley Wallingford, Feb. 2013, Sudbury, Mass.

> The daylight softly fades
> The sky from orange to gold
> And then to copen shades.
>
> The moon hangs a globe of iridescent light,
> In a frosty winter sky;
> While against the Western glow one sees
> The bare, black skeleton of the trees.
>
> The stars come out and one by one
> Survey the world with lofty stare;
> But, from the last turn in the road
> A cosy home beckons to me there. (*L1*, p. 42-43)

This poem is infused with images of dark Romanticism and contains images and tropes that will resurface and mature later in her works – those of winter frost, of threatening black trees and of the cold moon, for instance. Sylvia was already shifting from sentimentality to sublimity, by omitting the final stanza and the image of a 'cosy home' when submitting the poem to the *Philippian,* where it was published that year.

While continuing to earn straight As on her report cards, Sylvia's health began to suffer in that period. She started to fall ill frequently, probably due to her anxiety. As reported in her *Diary*, her English teacher Mrs Warren pleased her when she told her she was writing near-college level and should apply for a scholarship, but Sylvia clearly felt stressed and overwhelmed with work. As Clark suggests, the sudden and consequent illnesses those years may have been psychosomatic, as 'sickness seemed the only way to give herself a break'. (2020, p. 81) These 'breaks' would allow her to write and read for pleasure, as Clark continues,

> she was itching to read two books by Adele DeLeeuw but complained that she wouldn't have time with all her schoolwork. Two days later she was conveniently home sick and 'devoured' both books. Illness became her only respite from the pressures of schoolwork and extracurricular activities, and Aurelia was surprisingly lenient about letting her stay home. This is a pattern that will continue throughout Sylvia's life. (It is possible that Plath's breakdown in 1953, which was partly brought on by the prospect of writing her senior thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, was an extreme version of the illness patterns that had developed in girlhood) (ibid).

Sylvia suffered from anxiety from a very young age and in those high school years she recorded in her *Diary* to have felt 'angry at the world' and to have had 'gruesome' nightmares and

trouble sleeping. This element of difficulty in sleeping would accompany her throughout her life and be the cause of great discomfort. Just before her breakdown of summer 1953, the recovery from recovery included shock treatments and insulin therapy, Sylvia writes in her *Journals* that she felt she '[had] gone through the limit – [she] tried [that] day, after 2 hours only of sleep for the [previous] two nights, to shut [herself] off from responsibility altogether (…); [she] felt scared, sick, lethargic, worst of all, not wanting to cope' (p. 87). She continues, writing she had a 'colossal desire to escape, retreat, not talk to *anybody*'; she 'fear[ed] failing to live up to the fast and furious, prize-winning pace of [those] last years – and any kind of creative life.' She had 'a perverse desire to retreat into *not caring* (ibid).

Young Plath kept developing her passion for reading and writing throughout her childhood and adolescence, expanding her horizons. She started her 9th grade adding Latin, Ancient History and Algebra to her study plan and began art lessons with Miss Hazelton, putting to fruition her real talent for drawing. She read all the classic novels and wrote consistently about her literary preferences in her *Diary*, where she declared her love for Dickens and copied many poems by Sarah Teasdale – one of her early and most important role models. Plath copied some poems by Teasdale in her *Diary*, one of them followed by the comment: 'What I wouldn't give to write like this!'. Teasdale's 'Mountain Water' and 'Full Moon' resemble in style and tone the poems she was writing when in the 1940s. 'The Crystal Gazer' by Teasdale, a poem Plath would transform and re-write in 1956 after marrying Hughes, reminds us of the tropes of rupture, disintegration and renewal, rebirth present in 'The Stones', 'Ariel' and 'Lady Lazarus'. Her readings already reflected her attempts to pull herself together in moments of doubt and crisis.

Hughes, on the other hand, had a completely different childhood in England. The war had a great impact on his family, as it had 'decimated a generation of the Calder Valley young men' (Bate, 2015, p. 40). Ted's older brother Gerald's earliest memory was

> of finding his father's sergeant's stripes in a drawer and wondering what they were. Billie Hughes brought two other relics back from the war: his Distinguished Conduct Medal and the shrapnel-peppered paybook that had been in his breast pocket at Gallipoli. He told his family that he was one of the only seventeen men from the company who had survived. [Hughes' sister] Olwyn had a pearl necklace, which she loved to play with. Her father explained it had been taken from the body of a dead Turk (…). When Ted was four and Olwyn six, for half a year every Sunday their father stayed in bed and they came in with him and said, 'Tell us about the war.' He told them everything, in the goriest detail (…) (ibid).

According to Bate, Ted either suppressed or forgot his father's stories of 'dismembered bodies, arms sticking out of the mud'. When talking to Olwyn about 'The Wound', a story collected in *Wodwo* (1967), he told her that some of the details contained in it he had dreamt. Having forgotten some of the events within the dream, he went back to sleep and dreamt again, hoping to fill in the gaps. As Bate suggests, Olwyn 'thought that part [to be] taken from their father's memories of the war', instead.

Situated by a dark cliff, the Calder Valley, where Hughes spent most of his childhood in West Yorkshire, was notable for its suicides. Ted wrote about the looming presence of Scout Rock in the valley for a BBC Home Service series called *Writers on Themselves*. It was later collected in *BBC Books* in 1964 and broadcasted at a dark time for him: 11th September 1963. In February of the same year, Plath had taken her life in the apartment they used to live in together in London. Here, again, we wonder: 'is the act of remembering at some level reinventing the memory?' (Bate, 2017, p. 24). Maybe, for Hughes, 'to speak of living in the shadow of the Rock was a way of externalising a darkness in his own heart' at that time (ibid).

Ted and his family lived by the Rochdale Canal, on the other side of the valley in the Banksfield neighbourhood. Defined in *Remains of Elmet: A Pennine Sequence* (1979) as Ted's own 'first world-direction', was Mount Zion Primitive Methodist Chapel. In Number 1, Aspinall Street, Edward James Hughes was born on Sunday 17th August 1930. Numbers, here, are important, as for Hughes they were. His mum remembers that when he was born 'a bright star was shining through the bedroom window (…), he was a lovely plump baby and [she] felt very proud of him. [That] Sunday was a wet day and [Ted's sister] Olwyn just could not understand this newcomer' (E. F. Hughes, 'Past and Present', 1965).

Olwyn and Ted shared a deep interest in astrology. Although Olwyn later in life would be more sceptical about it, the stars and their configurations mattered a great deal to them. As Bates states in *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*,

> [Ted] was born at what astrologers call 'solar midnight'. With knowledge of the exact time and place of his birth, a natal chart could be cast. He was born under the sign of Leo, the lion, which endowed him with a strong sense of self, the desire to shine. But because he was born at solar midnight, he would also need privacy and seclusion. His 'ascendant' sign was Cancer, bonding him to home and family. And Neptune, the maker of symbols and myths, was 'conjunct' (2015, p. 27)

His horoscope, Ted explained in a letter to Leonard Clark in 1974, meant that he was 'fated to live more or less in the public eye, but as a fish was in air'. This would prove to be exactly his fate, as some of his writings suggest.

Ted's father, William Henry Hughes, was a carpenter; his mother Edith Hughes, was a housewife and formerly a Farrar. William's father, by family legend a local sage, 'solved people's problems, wrote their letters, closest friends the local Catholic and Wesleyan Ministers, though he spent a lot of time in pubs' (*Letters of Ted Hughes*, 2007). Crag Jack, as he was called, came from Manchester and was a kind of 'mystery man', who in Ted's imagination was considered a sort of 'bard or shaman, certainly a conduit of Celtic blood' (Bate, 2015, p. 30). 'Crag Jack's Apostasy' is one of the first poems by Hughes in which his family is mentioned directly. Included in *Lupercal* (1960) and first published in the *Spectator* in 1958, Ted 'takes on Grandfather Jack's identity: the cradle stooped over by the dark church [in the poem] is clearly his [grandfather's], shadowed by Mount Zion' (Bate, 2015). There, 'Jack clears himself of the dark influence of the church that 'stooped' over his 'cradle' (ibid). Ted's grandmother was born in Manchester, too. Her father worked as a major in the army and his station was in Gibraltar. He married an Arab-looking Spanish woman who, according to Ted's letters, had 'a high thin nose like Olwyn's'. As Bate argues in his biography of Ted, 'this association with Spain and a distant Rock, an outpost of empire overlooking the Mediterranean, gave Ted the idea that he might have some exotic Moorish blood in him'. But it was the Farrar family who dominated Ted's childhood.

Farrar was a distinguished name,

> woven into the historical and spiritual fabric of English poetry (…). One of Ted's most prominent early poems is 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar' (…) a poem of fire and smoke, evocative of the tradition of Protestant brimstone sermons that still lived in the Mount Zion Primitive Methodist Chapel over the road' (ibid).

The Farrar family settled not far from Cambridge in Little Gidding, where Nicholas Farrar was a 'scholar, courtier, businessman and religious thinker' (Bate, 2015). His famous, fellow-Cambridge poet George Herbert sent the manuscript of his poetry collection *The Temple* (1633) 'from his deathbed with the instruction that it should be either burnt or published' (ibid). Farrar published it, and Herbert's poetry of self-examination has remained in print ever since. Something similar would happen to Ted, entrusted with the poems of *Ariel* by Plath at the time of her death; a decision that would influence most of his adult life.

T. S Eliot, one of the greatest poets of the last century, in his fourth *Quartet* (1941) takes deep religious solace from the example of the Farrar family, who established a community of faith and contemplation in Little Gidding. His meditation on the cleansing fire of faith in 'Little Gidding', which starts in '[m]idwinter spring' and ends with a divine epiphany in a chapel in the English countryside, resonates with Ted's own 'Nicholas Ferrer' in *Lupercal*, located in the same Little Gidding chapel. Nevertheless, Ted's poem

> makes of the death of Nicholas Farrar into a turning point in English history. (…) For Hughes, influenced by the Anglo-Catholic Eliot's idea of a 'dissociation of sensibility' that fractured English culture and poetry at the time of the Civil War, Puritanism was the great enemy of those 'ancient occult loyalties' to a deeper, mysterious world that were embodied by such superstitions as astrology. (Bate, 2015, p. 31)

'Crag Jack's Apostasy' begins this way: 'If I flinch from the pain of the burning, believe not the doctrine that I have preached.' (His words on being chained to the stake.)' (*The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957). Similarly in Hughes' second collection *Lupercal*, 'the fire of God / Is under the shut heart, under the grave sod'.

Ted's belief in other realms came from his mother Edith, who 'felt that the spirit world was in touch with her. Ever since childhood, she had often felt the sensation of a ghostly hand' (Bate, 2015). One night in 1944, she was woken up by a sharp pain in her shoulder. In the sky, above St George's chapel across the road from where they lived, she saw crosses flashing and tried to wake Billie (which is what she called her husband), telling him there was a battle raging and many boys were being killed. The next day, the radio announced the D-Day landings, which had begun that same morning. Ted records this in 'The Deadfall' in *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* (1995), and Olwyn remembers the event vividly, according to Bate. Later, as Bate reports from his interviews with Olwyn, 'when [Edith] and her husband moved to the Beacon, she saw a shadow in the house. She learned that the previous owners had died, and their daughter had sold the house and moved into Hebden Bridge. She told the shadow, who was the mother, where her daughter now lived. It never reappeared'.

It was Edith, again, who inspired Ted's and Olwyn's passion for poetry. Wordsworth was Edith's favourite, and the children's love of nature came from her. Gerald, whom Ted considered to be his hero, inspired in him a passion for wildlife that would influence him throughout his life. In *Listening and Writing*, a sequence of talks for the Home Service's school programme broadcasted by the BBC between 1961 and 1964, Ted states his belief in the 'latent

talent for self-expression in every child' (*Poetry in the Making: An Anthology of Poems and Programmes from 'Listening and Writing',* 1967). Nine out of ten of these talks, together with some illustrative poems by Ted and others, were published later as *Poetry in the Making* and dedicated to Ted's own English teachers, Pauline Mayne and Edward Fischer. In 'Capturing Animals', the first talk, Ted says:

> There are all sorts of ways of capturing animals and birds and fish. I spent most of my time, up to the age of fifteen or so, trying out many of these ways, and when my enthusiasm began to wane, as it did gradually, I started writing poems (ibid, 15).

He then recalls his Aunt Hilda giving him a book about animals, from which he started drawing copies of birds and other creatures and read descriptions of nature repeatedly. The discovery of plasticine opened infinite possibilities: 'the words put together with the things, the poet in the making' (Bate, 2015, p. 38).

As Bate records, Ted would often go with Gerald on his moor expeditions. He and his brother and sister shared the

> peace and magic of Redacre Wood, which seemed like their own private paradise. (…) Time spent indoors meant model-making with Gerald or reading with booking Olwyn. [Edith] wrote poems for them and made up tales. They all loved the one about Geraldine mouse, Olwyna mouse and Edwina mouse because it echoed their adventures (ibid, p. 40).

Ted's first 'thought-fox', as they were later coined by 'The Thought-Fox' poem in *Hawk in the Rain*, consists of a memory which was to become a foundational myth later in his poetry. In a letter to his schoolfriend Donald Crossley dated 21st April 2005, Ted recalls a place that for him was sacred – Crimsworth Dene, north of Hebden Bridge. It was there that one night, while camping with his brother Gerald, he had a dream that transformed all his writing. Before the Great War, the place was often visited by members of their family and was, in the memory of the brothers, a spiritual home. Gerald confessed in a letter to Crossley that the recollection of this place helped him cope throughout the length of his service in the Western Desert campaign.

The two brothers pitched their tent by a drystone wall along the slope above the clearing in the valley. On the second day they were there, the boys found a fox killed by a deadfall trap that had crushed the animal. Ted was unable to sleep that night in the tent. In Gerald Hughes' *Ted and I: A Brother's Memoir* (2012, p. 56), Gerald evokes the moment the next day when Ted recounted his previous night's 'vivid dream about an old lady and a fox cub orphaned by [a] trap'. This was his first thought-fox. In 'The Deadfall', written for a collection of ghost stories

(*Ghostly Haunts*, 1994) and edited by Michael Morpurgo for the centenary of the National Trust, Ted tells the story himself. As Bates recounts it, in the story

> it is Ted's first time in the secret valley, with its steep sides overhanging the woods. He immediately senses that it is the most magical place he has ever been to. The enclosed space means that every note of the thrush echoes through the valley and he feels compelled to speak in a whisper. At night, he can't stop thinking about the fox for which the trap has been set. The idea of the creature nearby, in its den, 'maybe smelling our bacon', makes the place more mysterious than ever. On the second night he is woken by the dream of the old lady, calling him out of the tent. He follows her voice up the slope to the trap, where he finds a young fox, still alive but with tail and hind leg caught beneath the great slab of the stone. He is chocked by 'the overpowering smell of frightened fox'. He realises that the woman has brought him to the cub, wants him to free it. She has not gone to Gerald because she knows that he would be likely to kill it. Summoning all his strength he manages to lift the corner of the slab – the cub snarling and hissing at him like a cat – just enough to set the animal free. It runs away and the old lady vanishes. But when he looks back at the deadfall there is something beneath it. At this moment, his brother wakes and calls him back to bed. It rains. In the morning, they go up to the deadfall and there is a big red fox, the bait, (a dead wood pigeon) in its mouth. (Bate, 2015, p. 42).

As the story goes, when digging a grave for the animal they found something in the soil resembling an 'Eskimo [ivory] carving' of a fox. Ted and Gerald came to the conclusion that, in the dream, the old lady stood for the ghost of the dead fox. In the introduction to *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* (1995, p. ix) 'The Deadfall' and other short stories come together as what he called the 'overture' to his writing; the dream of a ghost fox that becomes a physical figure in the real world is the exposition of his 'creative beginnings'. In the same way young Ted moulded plasticine animals into shape, older Ted recreated images of animals in his poetry and this is made vividly clear in *Poetry in the Making*. In 'Wind and Weather', the second talk in the collection, Hughes expresses the importance of individual experiences. According to him, the best poets achieve success in their art through the exploiting of 'quite a limited and peculiar experience' (*Poetry in the Making*, p. 32). As Bate suggests, 'the deadfall trap in Crimsworth Dene was Ted Hughes' equivalent of what Wordsworth called 'those spots of time' that, 'taking their date / From our first childhood' renovate us, nourish and repair our minds with poetry' (2015, p. 44).

In his collection of short stories, *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, Ted also explains his ambivalence towards his brother's 'obsessive' hunting. Gerald taught him about all the different birds of the area and was passionate about hawks and owls. He often shot rats, wood

pigeon and rabbits and Ted used to help him retrieve them. The story 'The Head' in his collection was thought of as the conclusion of the series, 'The Deadfall' being the first one (*Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, p. vii-ix). In the sinister closing story, a brother finds himself being hunted down after having killed multiple animals. This illustrates the way in which Ted started shifting the perspective from the human to the animal, endowed with a poetic vision of putting earth and nature before mankind. This was when he started writing poems, he recollects, rather than capturing creatures, as if 'to hunt out a new species, to bring not a death but a new life outside one's own' (Bate, 2015, p. 44). Starting from *Poetry in the Making*, Bate continues:

> Like an animal, a living poem depends on its senses: words that live, Hughes insist, are those that belong directly to the senses or to the body's musculature. We can taste the word 'vinegar', touch 'prickle', smell 'tar' or 'onion'. 'Flick' and 'balance' seem to use their muscles. 'Tar' doesn't only smell: it is sticky to touch and moves like a beautiful black snake. Truly poetic words belong to all the senses at once, and to the body. Find the right words for the occasion and you will create a living poem (…) by capturing essences: of a landscape, a person, a creature. (ibid, p. 44-45).

The thought-fox Hughes writes about in his lodgings in London after a year-long writer's block, which culminated in the much celebrated poem 'The Thought-Fox' (1957) much celebrated poem, is, after all, a captured animal: 'Brilliantly, concentratedly…The page is printed.'

Olwyn inspired Hughes in his literary vocation. He followed her steps and got a scholarship at the local grammar school in Mexborough, where the family eventually moved in 1938 when Ted was eight. Mexborough Grammar School was where, according to Bate, Ted's life-long love of literature began and where we find the foundations of the 'intellectual making of him'. This same passion for literature 'began to intersect with his love of nature' (Bate, 2015, p. 49). He entered Mexborough Grammar School in 1941 and started exploring the library, where he found Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* – Williamson's first novel, published in 1927. Written from an animal's point of view, *Tarka the Otter* is a book which refuses to anthropomorphise. As Hughes suggests in a one of series of introductions to children's classics published in *Sunday Times* in 1962, its protagonist 'is not one of those little manikins in an animal skin who think and talk like men'. It was as if both his passions, literature and the natural world, had met in a book. Hughes was 'enchanted' (ibid).

Williamson wrote in a style that Hughes would later study in depth and which resembles his own in a kind of prose-poetry. *Tarka the Otter* would also inspire Hughes' interest in

typography in literature, how printed words look on a page. At the end of the book, Tarka's death in drowning is evoked by the diminuendo in the typesetting:

> and while they stood there silently, a great
> bubble rose out of the depths, and broke, and as
> they watched, another bubble shook to the
> surface, and broke; and there was a
> third bubble in the sea-going
> waters, and nothing
> more (ibid, p. 51).

Ted's first English teacher, Miss McLeod, was sensitive and attentive towards his talent and praised his writings. His mother bought him a second-hand library of classic poets, which Ted cherished, and a children's encyclopaedia later introduced him to folktales and myths – Rudyard Kipling, with his rhythms and rhymes, would become one of his favourites. He would show Miss McLeod his Kiplingesque sagas, marked by the influence of the writer as we see in his *Letters* (2008, p. 624-5), for instance: 'And the curling lips of the five gouged rips in the bark of the pine were the mark of the bear'. Kipling's voicing of animals and the fables about their origins, such as those contained in the collection *How the Leopard Got His Spots* (1942) fascinated young Ted.

Pauline Mayne, his second English teacher, would then introduce him to the more demanding vocabulary of Gerard Manley Hopkins and to the complexities of T. S. Eliot's poetry. John Fisher, who got back from the navy at the end of the War in 1945 and was said to be the best English teacher in Yorkshire, later taught both Olwyn and Ted with passion. In 1947, the sub-editors of the school magazine were Olwyn and Ted – under Fischer's tutelage and with Olwyn's achievements to inspire him, Hughes continued to read and cultivate his passions. Guided by Fisher's tutoring Ted discovered W. B. Yeats; he dreamt the *Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) and was fascinated and absorbed by Yeats' epic poem which altogether combine mythology, magic, folklore, rhythm and more. He writes in his *Letters* (p. 625) that his own poetry 'jumped a whole notch in sophistication'.

When introduced to C. G. Jung's *Psychological Types* (1921) by his sister Olwyn, Ted started to develop a more psychological, philosophical and mystical poetic system. Jung's philosophy, well known for its theories on the unconscious and the detailing of all psychic processes, opened the door for infinite creative possibilities. At the same time, Ted was inevitably

fascinated by Shakespeare from the start, 'the most unsystematic of geniuses' (Bate, 2015, p. 54).

As Bate indicates,

> Many of his contemporaries at the grammar school remembered [Ted] as a loner, but others recall him imposing his personality on the class, larking about (sometimes egotistically), dressing scruffily, and writing vigorous reviews for the school magazine (2015, p. 55).

In 1946 he passed what at the time were the equivalent to GCSEs in eight modules: 'English Language was very good; English Literature, History, Geography, French and Physics all credits; Mathematics and Chemistry passes' (ibid). To enter top universities a credit in Latin was a requirement, so the following summer he obtained it. He passes the equivalent of A Levels in 'English Literature (good), Geography (distinction) and French (pass)' (ibid). With Fisher's support, he was given the possibility to go to Cambridge.

He spent the summer of 1947 taking long walks in the fields in Mytholmroyd with his girlfriend of the time, Edna Wholey. They read and recited poems to each other for hours. As recorded in the interview with Ted published in *Paris Review*, he 'used to sit around in the woods, muttering through [his] books. [He] read the whole of The Faerie Queen like that. All of Milton. Lots more. It became a sort of hobby-habit'. He wrote a letter to Edna when he was seventeen, saying that some 'things in life held places of high wonder' in his mind, things 'posterity may wonder at' and which, when placed in the perspective of the lens of common and day-to-day life, 'invariably shattered the lens, burnt the film and slew the photographer' (*LTH*, p. 3).

The image of a caged animal frequently recurs in his writing: they are 'things which, when put on the public view, slew the unlooking population by the thousand, melted the iron bars which encased it and leaping for freedom, reduced the room which contained it to general matchwood and lumber' (ibid). As mentioned before in this text and as figured by Hughes' 'jaguars', Ted came to hate being 'put on the public view' and his imagination suffered from it. His thirst, when only a teenager, was already for the creation of 'places of high wonder'. He wanted 'posterity to wonder' at him (ibid).

1.3 Early Influences

Out of all of Plath's English teachers, Wilbury Crockett had the greatest impact on her as a writer. Mr Crockett had considerable influence on Plath's literary education – in their senior year at Wellesley, Sylvia and her fellow 'Crocketteers' read the most influential American as well as modern Irish and British authors including Woolf, Yeats, Lawrence, Joyce, Auden, Hardy and Dylan Thomas. Mr Crockett taught Shakespeare, Donne, Milton and Blake and did so with great passion; he encouraged his students to write and be critical and passionate about their literary preferences. With essay topics such as 'What is the good life?', Sylvia and her colleagues realised that those years would become the 'opening' of [them]'. [14]

In one of her letters to Aurelia, Sylvia expresses her excitement about her new honours class: 'I could sit and listen to Mr Crockett all day (…). My English Class has so stimulated me that I'm chock-full of ideas for new poems. I can't wait to get time to write them down' (*L1*, p. 108). In her *Diary*, she confessed she was 'trembling inwardly' when she presented her poems to Mr Crockett. Her poetry had then completely changed from what she used to write in her childhood. Mr Crockett, she wrote, 'liked 'Alone and Alone' and 'I Thought I Could Not Be Hurt' above the rest and encouraged [her] greatly by remarking that [she] had a lyrical gift beyond the ordinary'. [15] 'I Thought I Could Not Be Hurt' is a poem about a pastel drawing Sylvia had made that her grandmother ruined by mistake. The drawing had been assigned to Sylvia by the demanding Miss Hazleton, her art teacher, who, as she wrote, had become 'stricter than ever about every little speck of colour going in the right place'. [16] Sylvia was heartbroken when her drawing was smudged. She transformed her emotions into art in what she considered then her best composition, written in 'a very new, modern style'[17]:

> I thought that I could not be hurt;
> I thought that I must surely be
> impervious to suffering—
> immune to pain
> or agony.
>
> My world was warm with April sun
> my thoughts were spangled green and gold;
> my soul filled up with joy, yet
> felt the sharp, sweet pain that only joy

[14] Harriet Rosenstein interview with Pat O'Neil Pratson, 1972. 3.12, MSS 1489, Emory.
[15] *Diary*, 10 Oct. 1947.
[16] ibid, 16 May 1947.
[17] ibid, 30 May 1947.

can hold (ibid).

The poem ends with an intense self-reflection about the depth and frailness of human emotion:

> (How frail the human heart must be—
> a mirrored pool of thought. So deep
> and tremulous an instrument
> of glass that it can either sing,
> or weep) (ibid).

Critics and biographers such as Anne Stevenson in *Bitter Fame* (1989) have gone so far as to describe this poem as the exaggerated depiction of a rather 'minor mishap'. Nevertheless, when placed in its actual context, Heather Clark notices how 'I Thought That I Could Not Be Hurt' 'stands out as a creative experiment and an artistic turning point' which

> represents a courageous turn, for it is the first poem in which Plath dares to write in the first person about 'mental pain' and 'agony' – risky terrain for a daughter raised in a household that tried to banish the spectre of tragedy. Sylvia recognised that the poem was 'new', 'modern' – an exciting departure from the emotionally safe landscape poetry of her juvenilia. For the first time, her poem's speaker refuses to keep quiet about anger and disappointment. Plath has left Plato's shadow cave to emerge into the bright glare of a world in which suffering occurs, and is deeply felt. The poem sounds, at times like the clergy, in mourning of the loss of her perfect art, she hints obliquely at a deeper, unspoken grief. This poem, far from being neurotic, was a healthy way to redeem and transform her disappointment into art' (Clark, 2020, p. 91).

This poem is thus a testimony to Plath's poetic and personal development in those adolescent years.

Not only was Plath an outstandingly clever and creative girl but she was also growing into a beautiful young woman. She started being noticed by boys at the age of eleven and was given *Growing Up* by *Karl De Schweinitz* (1965) by her mother, a book which shows sexuality as a wonderfully beautiful, innocent and fascinating revelation. Plath knew all the full facts about sex by the age of fifteen. In a 1953 interview with Dr Beuscher, Aurelia explained how, like most mothers in the 1950s, she warned Sylvia about the dangers of sex before marriage. Although Sylvia was not a rebel teenager, she began expressing doubts about what was familiar and common to her:

> I don't know what it is, but my thoughts begin to feel very hazy. I can usually be comfortable in building up my little life with natural hopes and fears of what goes on about me, but lately I have acquired the discomforting habit of questioning those truths which my life has been based upon – such as religion, human nature and other laws. [18]

What is more, Plath started to think in political terms. Her interest in the politics of pacifism were deepening; an interest suggestive of a mind drawn to yet and yet at the same time repulsed by violence. In the 1940s pacifism was not a popular ideology; connected to other 'isms' – communism as well as atheism, liberalism and Marxism – pacifism and to be a pacifist meant to be 'soft' in Cold War America. The dialectic between 'hard' and 'soft' was transforming political discourse at the time; Joseph McCarthy publicly deemed Truman as 'soft' on communism before Dwight D. Eisenhower won the presidential race in 1952, ending twenty years of Democratic power in the United States. The Soviets had already installed a communist government in 1948 in Czechoslovakia and Mao Tse-tung's communist government was to come to power in China, all of which was taking place in the new era of the Atomic bomb whereby the apocalyptic prospect of nuclear warfare was becoming an existential threat to humanity. Thus in turn – with the growing threat of communism on the rise – dissent and difference were not to be tolerated in the United States, where a book such as *Rebel Without a Cause: The Story of a Criminal Psychopath* by Robert Lindner (1956) could state that communism was 'a haven for neurosis and a refuge for neurotics' (Miller and Nowak, 1977, p. 38).

'Peace' became an ideology to be wary of during the Cold War in the United States. Plath was influenced by Unitarian Church ethics, her parents and Perry Norton – who then became a Quaker – developing much scepticism towards jingoistic nationalism. In her social study report entitled 'The United States and the World' (1946), Sylvia shows an acute awareness of the risks of 'atomic diplomacy' implying left-wing tendencies and demonstrating insight about her nation's past and future relationship with war. Some of the drawings accompanying another school report entitled 'A War to End All Wars' (1946) suggest the impact the war had on her. One of the drawings, as Clark describes it, depict

> a wounded man with a bloody, bandaged head stand[ing] as a sobering counterpoint to the ditty that instructed soldiers to 'pack up' their troubles in their kit bag and 'smile, smile, smile'. In another drawing, a neatly dressed schoolgirl reads a book about the war, a tear rolling down her cheek as she imagines a scene of carnage that includes cannons, smoke, barbed wire, and dead bodies. The

[18] *Diary*, 11 Oct. 1947.

> landscape of war stands in obscene contrast to her honey room; the schoolgirl will never be the same' (2020, p. 101).

Sylvia started writing letters to her German pen friend Hans-Joachim Neupert and soon realised how 'unfortunately nationalized and carefully taught to hate those who challenge[d] [American] complacent mode of living' Americans were. [19] Through Neupert's letters Sylvia could gain a more European, first-hand perspective on the war and the devastation it brings. She was proud of being in dialogue with a German and often mentioned her German background in her letters to him. Plath considers the war and her pacifist views in many instances, sometimes defending her nationals in their political stand: 'We want so much to have peace – we students… Do you not feel as I do – that war is futile in the end?' [20] Hans, a pen pal who lived in another continent an ocean away, became someone through whom she could develop her own political ideas and to whom she could speak freely about the human capacity to commit atrocities that would later influence her poetics. One could venture to say that this invoked a new vision of humanity that may have completely belied the middleclass ideals of her upbringing.

In a letter to Hans in August 1950 Plath cited an anti-war poem by Thomas Hardy and called the war a 'sin'. Many were the manifestations of her anti-war stance in that period. Although Sylvia denounced the use of the bomb, she understood the metaphorical power of violence and the imagery of apocalypse. In 'Youth's Appeal for Peace' (1948), four horsemen come 'Thundering, thundering over the hill… / And out of the cloud-blank from whence they came / the whine of shill bombs and a burst of flame'. The trochaic rhythms here suggest Sylvia's revelling in the violence of war, which would later be reprised in 'Ariel' within which the four horsemen are reduced to the figures of one horse and one woman, depicted as journeying into a sun of regenerational potentiality. These poetic techniques were to be encouraged by Hughes for whom a 'strong' voice was paramount in the construction of new poetics that veered away from the conservative formalities of genteelism (*J*, p. 470).

This poetic turn coincides with what she called, in a 1954 college paper, the 'bible of individualism at present': Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). [21] The emphatic nature of Nietzsche's writing and philosophy had a profound impact on Sylvia's own philosophical outlook, insofar as his aesthetics of violence were henceforth placed in a dialectical tension

[19] SP, high school scrapbook, 10.O3, Lilly.
[20] *L1*, p. 87-88.
[21] History 38b, with Mrs. Koffka.

with her own pacifist views. It has been argued that such an aesthetics became an artistic compass by which many writers of the twentieth century – including Ted Hughes, D.H. Lawrence, not to mention the modernists, among others – would try to navigate the horrors of war through a new poetics.

In accordance with the growing theme of violence in her literary development, Sylvia was becoming drawn to other taboo subjects such as adultery, suicide, and madness. Writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose Gothic narratives of Puritanical sin often evoked tropes of morality, had an influence on Plath; and, in addition, Virginia Woolf's modernist masterpiece *Mrs. Dalloway* chimed with her growing intrigue with madness and evil in that the character of Septimus Smith, who is a World War I victim of shell-shock and who in the novel commits suicide, prevails as a moralistic prism through which the undercurrents of horror and insanity in modern civilisation are shone. Her interest in the representation of mental illness was again enhanced by the depiction of the schizophrenic writer in a mental asylum in *The Snakepit* (1948), a film based on Mary Jane Ward's novel on which Plath wrote a short report for Crockett. The report reveals an early stage of Plath's admiration for moral stands in the way in which the mentally ill are portrayed in literature, an interest she would explore extensively in her poetry and which, furthermore, was a source of inspiration for *The Bell Jar* (1963), a novel based on her own experiences at the McLean Hospital. In her report, she writes that she realised there was an expanding market for what she called 'mental-hospital stuff'. She continues, 'I am a fool if I don't relive it, recreate it. (…) In this woman's fight for her sanity we see the struggle of the individual against the institution'.[22]

During her time studying under Crockett, she became more and more beholden to the theme of mental illness insofar as many of her readings at that time stressed an allegiance to an individual's interiority in a world by which it had become estranged and oppressed. This tendency is highlighted in her high school poems; she began utilising an introspective and melancholic disposition reminiscent of writers such as Robert Frost, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot who also deploy first-person speakers ruminating on a world from which they have become alienated (Clark, 2020, p. 110-11). Moreover, this shift in voice was also marked metaphorically in the use of the season of Autumn – the symbolism of which synchronised more suitably with a tone and tenor of spiritual desolation – adopting imagery of dead, dry leaves and cold rain, as seen in 'Bereft,' where 'the thin rains fall, / And autumn is lonely bitter

[22] Assignment on Schweitzer, Mormonism, and *The Snakepit* for Crockett, English 41. 10.1, Lilly.

brown' (Ibid.). This incorporation of autumnal themes, it may be argued, illuminates the way in which nature could be reconciled with a person's mood, and an objective phenomenon with one's own subjectivity. In addition to this, the discovery of T.S. Eliot shed new light on the way in which an urban landscape could also be used as a thematic backdrop to accentuate leitmotifs of despair and dereliction in the modern world, substituting natural elements of decay with that of urban debris, thus exposing to her the possibilities of unifying mindscape and landscape in rendering, often through a starker free-verse form later also propounded by Hughes, the universal condition of violence – in all its multifarious configurations, including depression, suicide, and death. Sylvia was expanding her literary horizons and experimenting in writing consistently. She went to Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1950.

Hughes, on the other hand, due to the introduction of the National Service Act in 1949, had to serve before going to university. Ted could apply before or after university and, following Gerald's footsteps, he applied for the Royal Air Force instead of the army before going to Cambridge. His period of service was then extended from twelve to eighteen months, because of the events of the Cold War; then to two years as the Korean War started. Although not pleased, Ted did not have to serve actively; there was a lot of sitting around which allowed him to read and write extensively. He wrote many letters to his (then only) friend Edna Wholey, to whom he complained about the dreadful food, the useless exercises, the relentless rain and the opportunity to read as soon as he was appointed flight plotter (Bate, 2015).

When on night duty, Ted explored Jung's philosophy more in depth and delved into the canon of English literature. His favourites were Shakespeare, Yeats and Blake and the prose of William Hazlitt which he later considered 'what-prose-ought-to-be'. [23] Ted composed poems for Edna and he eventually wrote an 'epithalamium' for her marriage; she was someone about whom Ted was possessive and nostalgic when thinking of the special bond they shared in their Crookhill secret places. The landscape of Mexborough in South Yorkshire, where Ted moved to with his family in his childhood, informed the imagery of his poetry to a great extent. There, on the Crookhill estate, was a large pond filled with big pikes he later compares to giant 'railway sleepers' in his 'Capturing Animals' talk. In 'Pike', a poem first published as a broadside in 1959 by the Gehenna Press, Ted did not capture just a fish but 'the whole pond, including the monsters [he] had never even hooked' (*Poetry in the Making*, 1967, p. 21).

[23] To Tom Paulin, 17 May 1994, Emory, 880/3.

This is telling of Hughes' poetics as, throughout his life, Ted was 'hooked by the mystique of the pike' (Bate, 2015, p. 60). Bate continues:

> They filled his dreams. If he was feeling good about life, he would dream of giant pike that were also leopards, full of energy, connecting him to the vital forces of the universe. If he was feeling bad, he would dream that the pond of the pike was filled with concrete and bereft of fish (ibid).

In 1968 Ted and his brother Gerald went back to Mexborough to find how the pond had 'shrunk to an oily puddle (…) in a black basin of mud, oil cans and rubbish'. It was a 'ceremonial farewell (…) among the rubbish' in which Ted hooked 'a huge perch' in a 'very weird, complete dream' (*LTH*, p. 187). The magic landscape that was once there now only survives in Hughes' poetry:

> A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
> Whose lilies and muscular tench
> Had outlasted every visible stone
> Of the monastery that planted them –
>
> Stilled legendary depth:
> It was as deep as England. It held
> Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
> That past nightfall I dared not cast
>
> But silently cast and fished
> With the hair frozen on my head
> For what might move, for what eye might move.
> The still splashes on the dark pond,
>
> Owls hushing the floating woods
> Frail on my ear against the dream
> Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
> That rose slowly towards me, watching (*Poetry in The Making*, p. 21).

The only poem he preserved from his early writings is 'Song', later collected in *Hawk in the Rain*. It is a poem about a girl he had met when he was at Mexborough Grammar School, Jean Fidley, whom he used to meet when he went home on leave from service. It was written in a rush of inspiration at 3 o'clock in the morning one night in 1950 while on night watch, and it

captured a natural music he later said he never recaptured until, according to Bate, the 'more personal' voice of his later collections. Influenced by Yeats's early poems and the medieval tradition of courtly love in general, it transforms Jean Fidley into an 'ice lady' who 'will not die, nor come home' and who makes the poetic voice 'worn out with love' (*THCP*, p. 24). Thinking and writing poems about Edna and Jean in the all-male world of National Service reveals an early reflection on the nature of women and, in turn, on the muse as a fundamental source of inspiration. 'You stood and your shadow was my place: / You turned, your shadow turned to ice' – in 'Song', according to Ann Skea (2016), Ted

> gave his heart to the Goddess, knowing already the enthralling wonder of her presence, her fickleness, and the desolation of losing her. She was his Muse, his Moon Goddess, Nature, governor of the wind and the waves and Mistress of the animals, and throughout his work he remained faithful to her. [24]

Hughes was already following a long poetic custom, whereby the Goddess, as Robert Graves defines her, is Nature: 'mistress and governess of all elements', 'chief of the powers divine', commander of 'the planets of the sky, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the lamentable silences of hell' (Graves, *The White Goddess*, 1977, p. 21-26). The Greeks turned themselves to the nine Muses when in need of inspiration; Homer asked for their help in the first lines of the *Iliad*: 'Rage – goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles'.[25] This figure of the Goddess as a Muse was to be recapitulated and appropriated by the Roman poets and, in time – as the ancient texts began to proliferate around Europe – by the key literary figures of the Renaissance too; as Joseph Campbell postulates, the Muses became for poets the 'openers of the senses to the music of the spheres' [26]. The Renaissance poets had a profound influence on English poetry, on whom writers such as Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton all depended to develop their own vision and poetics, and for whom the figure of the Muse became a way in which the Classical tradition could be readapted and replayed in the present – Milton's *Paradise Lost* famously begins with the words 'Sing heavenly Muse'.

Hughes' early contact with the aforementioned English poets bestowed upon him a highly-tuned traditional perception of things, which is manifest in 'Song'. According to Skea, it is possible that Hughes read the Roman Poet Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*, which had

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[24] Skea A. '"O Lady": Hughes and his Muse' (2016). Viewed 24th Dec. 2021 <https://ann.skea.com/HughesMuse.html>

[25] Fagles, R (trans.) (U.S.A: Viking Penguin, 1990), p. 77.

[26] Campbell, J. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 80.

been translated by Milton and upon which many of the English poets, such as Spencer, had drawn in their own writings (Skea, 2006). Furthermore, it is a poem in which the Goddess of Venus is addressed providing a detailed delineation of her role in Nature; indeed, it is she who holds the key to the powers of Nature – the powers of procreation, death and renewal, all of which became central to the figure of the Goddess in Hughes' own work (ibid). Nature as the supreme Goddess tied in with Hughes' own development as a writer, who was an avid reader of the Romantics such as Coleridge and Wordsworth for whom Nature was also the main source of inspiration (ibid). Dovetailing his upbringing in the Northern English countryside, within the valleys and dales of which he came into close contact with natural wildlife, Hughes was beginning to see components of the divine in Nature's creations, the primal energies of which were then invoked in poems such as 'Pike', 'Hawk Roosting' and 'Jaguar', among others.

This growing fascination with Nature and the figure of the Goddess evolved when he first read Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1948), which he interpreted through the philosophical lens of Carl Jung before going to Pembroke. For it was in Jung's *Psychological Types* that the concept of the unconscious mind was assimilated by Hughes' (Bate, p. 64), the idea that the unconscious is the domain in which sensation and intuition operate, and that there is a need to find an equilibrium between the so-called irrational (female) forces and rational (male) ones. Such dualities thus informed his reading of Graves' claims about the female Goddess being suppressed by the male God and the dangerous effects that lie therein, which is a line of thought he later expresses in his analysis of 'The Tragic Equation' in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992) in which he again articulates the issues involved in repressing unconscious desires. [27]

Perhaps what attracted Hughes the most to Graves' *The White Goddess* was not only his ideas on how poetry was rooted in the ancient rhythms of the past but rather how poetry was rooted in magic – that is to say, poets are plugged into a mystical primal magic of which only they have true knowledge (Bates, p. 65). This relates to the theme of the Goddess insofar as, according to Graves, it is a figure that looms large in the mythologies of all cultures. Indeed, the following paragraph loomed large in Hughes' imagination for the rest of his writing life:

> The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman with hooked nose, deathly pale lips, lips red as rowan-berries, startlingly blue eyes and long fair hair; she will suddenly transform herself into a sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag… The test

[27] Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber, 1992)

> of the poet's vision, one might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and of the island over which she rules (Graves, *The White Goddess*, 1977, p. 20).

Years after his first reading of Graves' work, Hughes wrote he felt 'slight resentment to find [Graves] taking possession of what [he] considered to be [his] secret patch'.[28] Thus Graves' Goddess became that to which Hughes consummated his poetic vision, in that a true poem has to embody the primal power of 'the lost rudiments, and (…) the active principle of poetic magic that govern them (ibid, p. 13). Graves' poetics saw a 'true' poem as the invocation of the White Goddess, the Muse and Mother of All Beings, 'whose embrace is death' (ibid). It derives from the belief of the Welsh poet Alun Lewis – one of the great poets of the Second World War – that the one and only poetic theme is Life and Death and 'the question of what survives of the beloved' (ibid, p. 20). This Theme, in capital letters,

> is the antique story which falls into thirteen chapters and an epilogue, of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird. All true poetry (…) celebrates some incident or scene in this very ancient story, and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial inheritance that they not only assert themselves in poetry but recur on occasions of emotional stress in the form of dreams, paranoiac visions and delusions. (ibid).

Hughes, with his obsession with dreams, fascination with the unconscious and allurement with reading and writing was forever enthralled by Graves' vision of the Goddess. According to the latter, the function of poetry is the 'religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites' (ibid, p. 10). He continues, adding that 'nowadays (…) function and use [of poetry are] the same: only the application has changed. This was once

> a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience of the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. 'Nowadays is a civilization in which the prime elements of poetry are dishonored. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus-tent; ox, salmon and boar to the cannery; racehorse and greyhound to the betting ring; and the sacred grove to the saw-mill. In which the Moon is despised as a burned-out satellite of the Earth

[28] Hughes to Gammage, 7 April 1995, in Reid, C. (Ed.) *Letters of Ted Hughes*, Faber, 2007, p. 679.

> and woman reckoned as 'auxiliary State personnel'. In which money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet (ibid).

This passage posits both ideas and images to which Hughes would bind his poetry. The symbolism related to nature is a central motif in Hughes' own work and moral implications of adhering to the traditional, 'religious' tenants of both poetry and the Muse. The above passage also evokes the idea of redeeming something sacred in poetry – and nature at large – that in recent times has been lost. Before going to university Hughes had already absorbed both the canonical works and, perhaps more importantly, the ideas that were found in Graves' labyrinthine book on mythologies and, in particular, the role of the Goddess in literature. Indeed, the Goddess assumes a myriad of forms in Hughes' poetry as she does in nature. What is also paramount here is the way in which, having subscribed to Graves' notions, he rejected the Socratic stress on rationality and in lieu of this attributed importance to myth and intuition – that is to say, to embracing the female aspect of *anima*, of Nature, of the Goddess. In doing so Hughes could unlock the dark inner world of the imagination, the unconsciousness, through which he could not only represent the power of nature but also unleash the power of Nature and its violence in his own poetry via the magical alchemy of words. It will be explored – in Hughes' work at least – how the traditional alchemy of poetry and myth might be the cure for a sick world, fleshing out the ways in which a new harmony between mankind and nature might be established through the medium of poetry.

2.1 Fulbright Scholar

Before her relationship with Dick Norton – Perry's brother – became serious, Sylvia went on many dates while at Smith that, overall, did not meet her expectations; she started wondering whether she would ever meet someone who would not 'swallow up [her] desires to express [herself] in a smug, sensuous haze' (*J*, p. 16-17). Eddie Cohen, who studied at Roosevelt college in Chicago and described himself as a semi-bohemian in his letters to her, fascinated Sylvia – due to his quasi-unconventional life-style (reminiscent of some character out of the Beat Generation) which advocated 'spiritual independence' and renounced the stiff conservatism of the time. [29] But more important than the bohemian ideals of Cohen was the

[29] Eddie Cohen to SP, 8 Aug. 1950. Lilly.

writing, insofar as they began critiquing each other's work and encouraging each other to commit to the writing discipline. Even the medium of the letter became a mode in which Sylvia could express herself freely and subversively without the hindrance of shame and convention. She wrote him openly about her 'increasing bouts of depression and anxiety'; she 'worried that she might be a schizophrenic' and have 'an inferiority complex' – Eddie reminded her of 'her beauty, her astonishing intellect, and her literary achievements. (…) His most helpful reassurance came on the subject of sex. He esteemed her for 'admitting desire for sex and reminded her that this desire was entirely natural – not pathological or shameful' (Clark, 2020, p. 187). In one of his letters, he reminded her how 'society [was] maladjusted to the welfare of the individual' and that 'there [was] nothing wrong with [her]. [30]

However, the non-conformist ideas of Cohen were not to be found at Smith College in which one was educated 'for the greater moral good', an academic edict that failed to hold much sway over the deeply individualistic Sylvia (Clark, p. 146). Indeed, Plath and her classmates were later informed in a famous commencement speech delivered by Adlai Stevenson in 1955 that it was their 'civic duty' to become a 'housewife' – a statement that was indorsed and prescribed around the college campus, yet one that would not get in the way of Sylvia's own values and ambitions, maintaining her 'peculiar rough edges' in a bid to not become 'a nice neat round peg in a round hole' (*L1*, p. 172). However, the academic life was not suited to her creative endeavors and soon the stringent methods of pedagogy proved to be exhausting. She thus succumbed to her first bout of depression (Clark, p. 151). This was an existential crisis as much as anything else, for it was the passing of time that weighed heavy on her, as is evident in her journals when reflecting on a possible failure to achieve her goals: 'there isn't time, because there isn't time at all, but instead the quick desperate fear, the ticking clock, and the snow which comes too suddenly upon summer' (*J*, p. 32). Reflecting on the heavy burden of time, she also wrote this final couplet in the sonnet, 'To Time': 'Time is a great machine of iron bars / That drains eternally the milk of stars.'[31]

Sylvia was also experiencing a form of existential nausea due to a fundamental tension between submitting to convention and flying past the nets to embark upon her own art in an innovative and ground-breaking way, the dilemma of which was alluded to in 'Metamorphoses of the Moon,' which she wrote in 1954:

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[30] Eddie Cohen to SP, 13 Feb. 1952. Lilly.
[31] 8.4, Lilly (c. Sept. 1950-June 1952)

The choice between the mica mystery
of moonlight or the pockmarked face we see
        through the scrupulous telescope
is always to be made: innocence
is a fairy-tale; intelligence
        hangs itself on its own rope.

Either way we choose, the angry witch
will punish us for saying which is which;
        in a fatal equilibrium
we pose on perilous poles that freeze us in
a cross of contradiction, racked between
        the fact of doubt, the faith of dream (*SPCP*, p. 307).

This poem signals the inner conflict in Sylvia; a woman agonizingly oscillating between that which society expected of her – that is, to become a humble, if respected, housewife – and her drive to find her own independence as an artist in her own right. Even so, a turn of events would displace this mood: when she returned to Smith after a brief visit home, she found a 'three page letter' from Dick Norton suggesting that they spend a weekend together, a letter that left Sylvia 'overawed' (Clark, p. 162). After having spent a weekend with Norton, Sylvia was later invited to his prom; after which the relationship grew into something more serious, a state of affairs that her mother Aurelia happily condoned since Dick represented the kind of stability and security she felt her daughter needed (ibid, p. 165 – 167). This promise of courtship in Sylvia's mind became problematic in that it seemed a somewhat arranged agreement between both her mother and Dick; and, moreover, she began to envisage a life spent 'cooking scrambled eggs for a man… hearing about a life at second hand, feeding my body and letting my powers of perception and subsequent articulation grow fat and lethargic with disuse' (*J*, p. 88). Indeed, it turned out that Dick would not be a suitable person to continue seeing and, after Dick fell ill with tuberculosis – about which Plath had fantasized to dedicate more time to reading and writing – the affair eventually ended on account of her feelings of guilt and anxiety towards Dick, having already realized that she was not in love with him.

Plath became more and more hard on herself: 'I will seek to progress', she wrote Aurelia, 'to whip myself on, to more and more – to learning, always' (*L1*, p. 521). She continued to publish in *Seventeen*, growing in confidence and academic success; nevertheless, Sylvia felt 'unsure of

everything she did'. [32] College work was taking its toll on her; in her letters she mentions how she was writing two papers a week and was taking phenobarbital to help her sleep (*L1*, p. 525). Sylvia was pondering her emotional state and was troubled by her inability to control her 'attitude', despite her success. 'I am weak, tired, in revolt from the strong constructive humanitarian faith which presupposes a healthy, active intellect and will' (*J*, p. 149). In a famous passage of her journal written on November 3rd, 1952, Plath analyses her depression with what Clark defines as 'Dostoevskian precision' (2020, p. 209):

> God, if ever I have come to wanting to commit suicide, it is now (…) I fell into bed again this morning, begging for sleep, withdrawing into the dark, warm, fetid escape from action, from responsibility. No good. (…) To annihilate the world by annihilation of one's self is the deluded height of desperate egoism. (…) I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness. I never thought. I never wrote. I never suffered. I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb. I do not know who I am, where I am going (…) I long for a noble escape from freedom. (…) I am drowning in negativism, self-hate, doubt, madness (…). No, I go plodding on, afraid that the blank hell in back of my eyes will break through, spewing forth like a dark pestilence, afraid that the disease which eats away the pith of my body with merciless impersonality will break forth in obvious sores and warts, screaming 'Traitor, sinner, imposter' (*J*, p. 149-150).

Plath wondered whether she would 'go either mad or neurotic' if she was unable to artistically express herself and at the same time observe her social duties, graduate successfully and get married. She acknowledged she was in need of professional help; nevertheless, her financial situation and the stigma around the practice intimidated her:

> I'll kill myself. I am beyond help. (…) How can I selfishly demand help, solace, guidance? No, it is my own mess, and even if now I have lost my sense of perspective, thereby my creative sense of humor, I will not let myself get sick, go mad, or retreat like a child into blubbering on someone else's shoulder. Masks are of the order of the day – and the least I can do is cultivate the illusion that I am gay, serene, not hollow and afraid. Someday, god knows when, I will stop this absurd, self-pitying, idle, futile, despair' (ibid, p. 151).

When Sylvia decided to see a psychiatrist for the first time, it was not to cure her depression but to help her finally get out of a science course she described to Aurelia as a 'devouring, malicious monster' (*L1*, p. 526-28). All the same, Eddie's letters show he had it clear: the 'monster' was not Sylvia's science course; it was indeed her depression that led her to lock

[32] Enid Epstein to Harriet Rosenstein, 14 Nov. 1971. 2.19, MSS 1489, Emory.

herself in a small dormitory kitchen that year of 1952 and turn on the gas oven. Aurelia later told Dr. Beuscher that Sylvia had told her 'she hadn't been able to sleep for a month and was thinking of suicide' – Aurelia phoned her immediately, which made Sylvia return to form. [33] Plath juxtaposes her 'resurrection' to that of Lazarus in her journal, laying the foundations for 'Lady Lazarus' which would come a decade later (*J*, p. 154). Plath also wrote two stories about depression around this time, one of which Clark defines as 'very Dantean' – 'Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom' – and which was rejected by Mademoiselle but later inspired 'Tongues of Stone' (1955) about her stay at McLean and consequently *The Bell Jar*. Nevertheless, a proud woman such as Sylvia never went as far as to ask for help, for depression embarrassed her. She convinced herself what she needed was time and rest – 'as if less classwork (…) could cure her mental maladies' (Clark, 2020, p. 212).

'Dialogue', written in 1953 as a script, is deemed to be based on an actual conversation between Sylvia and Marcia, a friend of hers. It delineates Sylvia's attempts at the development of the new poetics and violent female language of her later works. Marcia, the character, says that polite language 'is all part of the machinery that makes life easy', but Alison, the protagonist, does not seem to care; she despises the 'distractions' common people use not to think about the dread of 'the agony of free will'. 'Why not use the vile words. Damn. Dung. Hell. God, they sound great. Scrawl them on the sideways and fences and shock the ladies and gentlemen'. [34] This resonates with Plath's *Ariel* poems in which the poetic voice becomes more cunning and sharp, as in 'Lady Lazarus': 'I do it so it feels like hell' (*SPCP*, p. 244) In 1954 she wrote a paper for Mrs. Koffka's European history class about Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941); yet, it was the philosophy of Nietzsche to which she was drawn. She wanted to "climb still higher, out of the womblike security of complacent collective values into the realm of the strong, individualistic winds: 'for rather I will have noise and thunders and tempest blasts, than this discreet, doubting cat-repose' (Zarathustra, p. 182)". [35] Her emphasis on suffering and toil would later be nurtured and encouraged by Ted Hughes, for whom there was an unconscious, primal 'positive violence' in regards to artistry and creation. [36] But first and foremost it was the influence of Nietzsche's philosophical writings that engendered a new epistemological

[33] Dr. Ruth Beuscher interview with AP, 15 Sept. 1953. 3.10, MSS 1489, Emory.
[34] SP, 'Dialogue', 19 Jan. 1953, for English 347a. 8.11, Lilly.
[35] SP, 'The Age of Anxiety and the Escape from Freedom'; May 1954, for history 38b. 10. 7, Lilly.
[36] LH, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, William Scammell, ed. (NY: Picador, 1995)

scope for her poetry and indeed, as seen in her uncollected poem, 'Notes on Zarathustra's Prologue,' the German thinker had made an impact on her artist practice:

> Look to the lightning for tongues of pain
> Steep are the stairs to the Superman
>
> Go flay the frail sheep in the flock
> And strip the shroud from the coward's back
>
> Till the womb of chaos sprouts with fire
> And hatches Nietzsche's dancing star. [37]

The subversive nature of Nietzsche's paradigm-shifting thought – the writings of which had a highly-stylized, almost poetic turn of phrase – appealed to Sylvia's own aesthetics, which itself sought out an individualistic expression that was not seeking to bend to the will of the conventions of the time. In an intriguing contrast to Ted Hughes who was delving into the Jungian, *female* aspect of the unconscious, Sylvia at the time – on the back of her enchantment with Nietzschean ideas of *will to power* – subscribed to the more 'powerful' masculine figure and 'his physical freedom to lead a double life – his career, and his sexual and family life' (*J*, p. 106). In light of this, Nietzsche's ideas provided Sylvia with an ideological apparatus that transcended the confines of gender and with which she could build a life of art and autonomy regardless of her womanhood; for subordination, in Nietzschean terms, would be symptomatic of a feeble capitulation to the Judeo-Christian status quo to which Sylvia had sworn against submitting. Sylvia, henceforth, sought a life defined by her own thoughts and actions – not other peoples'. Predating the arrival of feminism (within academia, at least) she shows a remarkable degree of life-affirmatory self-realization, disavowing the patriarchal principles of the time and thus the subservience of women:

> I will not submit to having my life fingered by my husband, enclosed in the larger circle of his activity, and nourished vicariously by tales of his actual exploits. I must have a legitimate field of my own, apart from his, which he must respect (*J*, p. 98-99).

But for all the liberations of mind that her readings had given her, it could be argued that they came at a cost; after all, despite the openings of her intellectual life her emotional state was still unstable. There was a natural appetite for male attention that ran parallel – vis-à-vis self-worth

[37] SP, 'Notes on Zarathustra's Prologue.' 8.1, Lilly

– to poetry publication and attaining top grades. When all three things aligned and were running smoothly it reinforced her idea of being a gifted, self-determining woman, although when one piece of the puzzle was missing quite the contrary became true; nevertheless, such doubts and despairs were the fuel of her poetry, as is the case with 'Mad Girl's Love Song,' which is typical of her style at the time: 'I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; / I lift my lids and all is born again. / (I think I made you up inside my head.)' The narrator dreams her lover beguiles her 'into bed,' kisses her 'quite insane,' and never comes back. The poem of unrequited love ends thus: 'I should have loved a thunder-bird instead: / At least when spring comes they roar back again. / I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead. / (I think I've made you up inside my head.)'[38] Here there is an obvious indebtedness to Yeats' 'The Song of Wandering Aengus', but perhaps more generally to romantic relationships and the passing of time itself, which she analyzed in depth in her poetry, prose and journals.

In 'Doomsday', a villanelle later collected by Hughes in *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems* (1981) in the section 'Juvenilia', Sylvia again deals with time in an apocalyptic setting playing with the hard *k* consonants to create a looming, ticking effect: 'The idiot bird leaps out and drunken leans / Atop the broken universal clock: / The hour is crowded in lunatic thirteens' (*SPCP*, p. 316). *The New Yorker* rejected the poem, but at the same time enthusiastically pushed Sylvia to do better – an acceptance from the magazine, she wrote in a letter to her brother, 'would crown [her] life' (*L1*, p. 591). So she sent them another villanelle. *Seventeen* had already accepted 'Sonnet to a Dissembling Spring' and 'The Suitcases Are Packed Again' – she was now twenty, and wanted to publish fiction periodically in *Seventeen*. W. H. Auden was teaching at Smith the springtime semester of 1953 – her creative sensibilities were revived. She thought him the 'conception of the perfect poet: tall, with a big leonine head and a sandy mane of hair, and a lyrically gigantic stride. Needless to say he ha[d] a wonderfully textured British accent, and [she] adore[d] him with a big Hero Worship' (*L1*, p. 589). Elizabeth Drew's Modern Poetry seminar enlightened her with more to read from Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens and Yeats. Yeats' symbolic constructs – the gyre, the mask, blood and the moon – inspired her; Eliot's ideas on time present and time future in *Four Quartets* resounded with her own anxieties concerning time and the ways in which being is ineluctably bound to it. In due course, her relationship with Hughes grew stronger as the passion they both

[38] SP 'Mad Girl's Love Song,' 21 Feb. 1953. 7.13, Lilly; *Mademoiselle* (Aug. 1953), p. 358

shared for Yeats – whose iconoclasm, interest in the occult and poetics they were fascinated by – shaped their own poetics.

Harper accepted 'Doomsday' that same year and, eventually, Plath won one of the twenty longed-for guest editorships at *Mademoiselle* in New York. She was to be there for a month that year and was assigned, right in the middle of her exam period, with a research project and interviews with five of her male teacher-poets: Alastair Reid, George Steiner, William Burford, Anthony Hecht and Richard Wilbur. She was earning quite good sums of money with her publishing and later won two Smith poetry prizes. She should have been pleased and excited by all these successes, however her journals reveal she felt 'harassed', 'very banal, very confused'. She mentioned the idea of suicide twice (*J*, p. 184-185). Plath moved to Manhattan only to learn that 'everyone was selling something, and everything had a price' (Clark, 2020, p. p. 238). She was made guest managing editor at *Mademoiselle*, but inevitably the application for Frank O'Connor's creative writing class at Harvard Summer School that summer became more important to her. She submitted 'Sunday at the Mintons' and wished to be able to get on the course because she 'want[ed] to write', she was 'determin[ed] to have time to really work at writing daily, which [she had] never done' (*L1*, p. 636). Despite appearing in the 1953 issue of *Mademoiselle* as a 'young woman in the prime, the toast of New York, living the high life', Plath would be repulsed by the 'phoniness' of her picture, which was to reemerge in *The Bell Jar* (Clark, 2020, p. 248). It was only three weeks after the publication of that picture that Plath would try to kill herself.

Several years later Plath wrote about the month she spent working in New York with disbelieving, satiated eyes. Many of the people she met and the experiences she had were later reproduced in her novel, often portraying feelings of betrayal in those who were the source of inspiration for her fictional characters who felt criticized and misjudged by Plath. Food poisoning at an event at a renowned advertising agency provided Plath with raw material for the writing of the famous food-poisoning scene in *The Bell Jar* – a metaphor for consumerism in 1950s America:

> I had a vision of the celestially white kitchens of Ladies' Day stretching into infinity. I saw avocado pear after avocado pear being stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise and photographed under brilliant lights. I saw the delicate, pink-mottled claw meat poking seductively through its blanket of mayonnaise and the bland yellow pear cup with its rim of alligator-green cradling the whole mess.
>
> Poison (*BJ*, p. 48).

Plath's philosophy of life was threatened by New York's worldview. 'How to justify myself, my bold, brave humanitarian faith?' (*J*, p. 149). She believed in hard work, compassion and merit, but art seemed to consist in a 'celestially white' front sold by the ad men: the whole material world of money and sex for which she had little sympathy. Quoting Yeats, she writes in her diary: "My world falls apart, crumbles, 'The center does not hold'" (ibid). The execution of the Rosenbergs, who were pronounced guilty of passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union in 1951, shocked Sylvia; she knew they were Jewish and that they had been part of communist organizations and thought that, although there was not enough evidence to convict them, in Eisenhower's America blameless subjects were to suffer the consequences for their 'un-Americanism' (*J*, p. 541). All of this would resurface in *The Bell Jar*, the 'overarching theme' of which is that 'in 1950s America dissidence would be punished by electric shock' (Clark, 2020, p. 255).

Sylvia wanted to go home and wrote an incredibly dark letter to her brother Warren, in which she confessed her depressive thoughts: 'I will let you know what train my coffin will come in on. (…) All I have needs washing, bleaching, airing (…) oh God, it is unbelievable to think of all this at once (…) My mind will split open' (*L1*, p. 641-43). When Sylvia returned home she was in a bad state and to make things worse news had made its way to Aurelia that her daughter had not been given a place on Frank O'Connor's creative writing class at Harvard Summer School; indeed, to protect her daughter she claimed that the course was full and she, Sylvia, would have to register the following year, which, she later wrote, reduced Sylvia to a state of shock and despair (*LH*, p. 123). Sylvia was thus riddled with self-reproach, criticizing herself, calling herself 'an Over-grown, Over-protected, Scared, Spoiled Baby' (*J*, p. 543). Later she wrote in her journals that she felt 'sick in the head' and had suicidal thoughts; visions of 'razors and self-wounds & going out and ending it all'. In a very disturbing passage, she thought of 'murdering [her] mother' (*J*, p. 187).

In the midst of this crisis, Sylvia had to write her senior thesis – not an easy task; she picked Joyce's *Ulysses* and in doing so wanted to prove herself and others at Smith she could master Modernism and its major themes, motifs and symbols. She could indeed 'stripsearch Ulysses and make all the mythological connections without batting an eye' (Johnson, 2004, p. 157). Despite this, working on this task was not the best thing for Plath to do in her psychological state; Sylvia was clearly struggling with depression and in *The Bell Jar* Esther writes of her weariness when reading Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*: 'I squinted at the page. (…) I decided to junk my thesis' (*BJ*, p. 124). As Clark writes, she would 'transform her personal tragedy into

turbulent, parge-turning drama in *The Bell Jar* – her subversive take on Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*' (2020, p. 263). Like Stephen Dedalus, Esther too is 'a traitor of those forces that have shaped her', yet 'Plath suggests that Esther's sick society – warmongering, anti-Semitic, racist, sexist, classist and homophobic – has driven her to the brink of insanity. If her mind was maladjusted so was the world in which she lived' (ibid).

Aurelia noticed the self-inflicted marks of razors on Sylvia's legs that summer of 1953. Worried, she called the family doctor, Francesca Raccioppi, who referred Plath to Dr. J. Peter Thornton whom Sylvia 'disliked immediately' (ibid, p. 266). Dr Thornton recommended shock treatment, toward which Sylvia felt anxious and which aggravated her insomnia. 'Sylvia was depressed, but had not experienced a psychotic break', states Clark. Valley Head Hospital's electroshock union 'would remain etched in [Plath's] memory as a chamber of horrors (2020, p. 266-268). Recalling these experiences in *The Bell Jar* Sylvia would later write that 'something bent down and took hold of [her] and shook [her] like the end of the world. (…) [She] wondered what terrible thing [she] had done' (*BJ*, 143). This ties in with society's expectations of women in the 50s, who had to stick to the roles of good daughters, housewives and mothers; 'Those who refuse to function' were considered ill and often hospitalized in the sexist psychiatrist institutions of the time which saw high ambition and determination in women as pathological (Ferreter, 2008, p. 136-58). Four months after Plath tried to end her life that year, she wrote Eddie she had anticipated the inevitable 'eternity of hell for the rest of [her] life in a mental hospital' and that she wanted a 'clean ending' (*L1*, 655). In 'The Hanging Man' poem, seven years later, Plath explains how electroshock treatment drove her to suicide:

> 'By the roots of my hair some god took hold of me.
> I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.
>
> The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
> A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.
>
> A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.
> If he were I, he would do what I did.

Sylvia swallowed forty pills on 24th of August 1953, in a hidden spot in the basement of the family house in Wellesley. It was thought she had disappeared; the search was a huge scandal, in the Boston paper and more, the 'Beautiful Smith Girl Missing at Wellesley' became a media sensation (Clark, 2020, p. 275). Sylvia would later 'be amused' by the "'peanut-crunching

crowd' thrilled by her suicide in 'Lady Lazarus'" (ibid). Plath was found and later told Eddie about the 'nightmare of flashing lights, strange voices, large needles, an overpowering conviction that [she] was blind [as she had a cut under her eye] and a hatred toward the people who would not let [her] die, but insisted rather in dragging [her] back into the hell of sordid and meaningless existence' (*LH*, 125).

In an attempt to resolve Sylvia's poor health, the decision was made to admit her into McLean Hospital in Belmont, which was an organization that was on the wane, proffering treatments that, although were not of the best quality, aligned with biological rather than psychanalytical ones. [39] The therapist to whom Sylvia was assigned was Dr. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse Beuscher, to whom Sylvia could relate; Dr. Beuscher was of the opinion that Sylvia's depression was symptomatic of the irreconcilability of her literary aspiration with marriage, claiming that New York had been traumatic in that her expectations of female professional accomplishment were disproved and undermined by the stereotype to which she had already grown accustomed (Alexander, 1999, p. 130). Thanks to Dr. Beuscher Sylvia could learn about reconciling the conflict between her ambition to write and to marry – that is to say, Dr. Beuscher would come to exert a large influence; for it was Beuscher who persuaded her to divorce Hughes in 1962, and it was she to whom Sylvia wrote in February 1963 detailing her wish to 'pull up the psychotic shroud' and die.[40] Sylvia's health came back in fits and starts and in the end she would leave McLean; however, her experiences of the institution – and of the diagnoses pitted against her mother, Aurelia – would remain with her, the experiences of which were dramatized in *The Bell Jar* whereby, deploying a typical Freudian trope, the mother is blamed for Esther's madness. Moreover, through her experience the gap between her conflicting ambitions had perhaps been lessened to a degree, since it is at the end of *The Bell Jar* that Esther fulfils societal expectations when she becomes a wife and mother, while the novel itself suggests she has also become a writer.

When Sylvia finally returned to Smith, reinvigorated, she immersed herself in modern literature again. In her Russian Literature class she absorbed Dostoevsky's *The Idiot, Crime and Punishment,* and *Notes from Underground*, all of which – containing many philosophical themes pertaining to existential angst – profoundly resonated with her, and the Russian began to supplant Joyce as her personal favorite: 'I'll never get over the experience of reading *The*

[39] HC interview with Terry Bragg, Aug. 2014, McLean Hospital, Belmont, Mass.
[40] SP to D. Ruth Beuscher, 4 Feb. 1963. L2, 968.

Idiot and *Brothers Karamazov*.'[41] Another important event was that of I.A. Richard's lecture, 'The Dimensions of Reading Poetry', which introduced Sylvia to the analytical methods found in New Criticism, the ideas of which not only influenced her reading but her poetry too; indeed, her poetry in college was marked by a formal and lexical complexity, although she was aware of the stilted, artificial mannerism that made her feel she was incarcerated within a 'glass caul' (*J*, p. 470). Her willingness to escape this over-cooked structure and style, to escape 'alone to that authentic island / where cabbages are cabbages; kings: kings', is conveyed in the college poem, 'A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem':

> I'm through with this grand looking-glass hotel
> where adjectives play croquet with flamingo nouns;
> methinks I shall absent me for a while
> from rhetoric of these rococo queens (*SPCP*, p. 324).

Plath felt she was 'resurrecting' herself when faced with all cultural opportunities at Smith. In her letters she wrote her 'bookcases [were] overflowing – shelves of novels, poetry, plays [including Shawn O'Neill, Whitman, Delmore Schwarz, Fry's Venus Observed and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*]' but also 'philosophy, sociology & psych.' She describes herself as a 'bibliomaniac (with a slight touch of nympho thrown in!) (*L1*, p. 726-27). Her sexuality was indeed awakened by this 'resurrection' period; Sylvia felt inspired by academia and that she was ready for great work, but also for great love. That is when she met Richard Sassoon; their relationship would end when Hughes and Plath met at Cambridge. Sylvia started her senior year at Smith with great ambition; she was thinking about applying for a Fulbright Fellowship to England, among other options. Her suicide attempt and her stay at McLean were not mentioned in her references (Clark, 2020, p. 339). Her Dostoevsky thesis made her feel 'in command', 'energized rather than crushed by her workload' (ibid, p. 340). She was reading 'all fascinating stuff about the ego as symbolized in reflections (mirror and water), shadows, twins … or a warning concerning science' (*L1*, 823-24). In 1954 her confidence heightened as her publications grew in number – 'Go Get the Goodly Squab' and 'To Eva Descending the Stairs' were published in *Harper*'s September and November issues; some of her short stories also appeared in *Smith Review* and later she would be surprised by the many prizes and opportunities she was given.

[41] SP to Gordon Lameyer, 21 Feb. 1954 L1, 705

By the end of her year, she had almost completed her final thesis – her discussion on the literary and anthropological figure of the Double drew on James Frazer and Freud's psychoanalytical readings through which Sylvia was not only able to write literary criticism but also to analyze her own struggle with mental illness (Clark, 2020, p. 352). After graduating, Sylvia was resolute: England was 'the best and only way for me' (*L1*, p. 944). She wrote to her mother that she would be 'refined in the fires of pain and love' (*L1*, p. 1134).

2.2 At Cambridge

While at Pembroke, Hughes made his lifetime friends. Terence McCaughey, his best friend in college, later became a clergyman and although there are no claims to orthodox faith in Ted's life, on his last trip to Dublin, when Terence took him to the University Church, he said quietly: 'This fairly closely persuades me to become a Catholic or a Christian.' [42] This religious dimension sheds an important light on the way Ted later viewed poetry, insofar as poetry – as opposed to religion – became the medium from which a modern, disenchanted life could derive meaning and purpose (Boland, 1982, p. 743-750). Ted gave his friend Terence an anthology of *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, a book he already had and which was on the list of the set texts for their first weeks as freshmen. Terence recalls their friendship in a later recording made at a conference at Pembroke:

> We were fortunate to share so many interests – music, nature, poetry, language… In the evenings, for example, after Hall, we would often retire to either Ted's or my room and spend the evening reading poetry or listening to Beethoven on 78 rpm records. We would go to the cinema fairly regularly – Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton. I can remember many and varied things we did but just now I recall particularly vividly sitting in the dusk or darkness while Ted made owl noises to attract them to us… It was also during that first term that Ted introduced me to brown bread, cheese, and treacle sandwiches – proper north of England fare – and utterly delicious! [43]

When Olwyn came to visit, Terence was 'amazed at the seriousness with which she and Ted discussed their friends in terms of horoscopic compatibility' (Bate, 2015, p. 70). Ted's and

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[42] Terence McCaughey, 'Conversations with Hughes' Contemporaries'. Transcript of a recording made at the International Ted Hughes Conference, Pembroke College, Cambridge University, 17 Sept 2010. Viewed 5th Jan. 2022 <http://ann.skea.com/CambridgeRecording.htm.>

[43] (ibid).

Terence's Yorkshire and Irish accents contrasted with the overconfident voices of the public schoolboys at Pembroke. Music was one of their greatest passions; while Olwyn was in Paris for work, Ted wrote her letters about the many concerts he went to. Undoubtedly, Hughes seemed more impressed by the excitement and passion of his new academic supervisor, Eric Mottram, a poet who fervently read and praised avant-garde poetry. He told Olwyn he had 'never [known] anyone so forceful in his flow'. The supervisions with Eric were heated, stimulating, way longer than they should have been. [44]

As his 'Preliminary' examination Ted took a medieval paper in which he was carried away by the alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a chivalric romance in Middle English rich in northern English landscapes and fantastic figures. *Richard III*, *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* were the set texts for the Shakespeare paper, texts he basically knew by heart, being the avid reader he was. There was also a compulsory language paper which offered essay topics on 17th and 18th century authors – Hughes thought 'Swift is the only stylist' who embodies 'clarity, precision, conciseness and power' (*LTH*, p. 20). Through the Irish satirist, Hughes learned to enter the worlds within words, evoked by their imaginative power, which is indelible and attainable, though wild. His literary criticism paper enlightened him – the dating of passages, the close reading typical of Cambridge practical criticism, the distinction between good and bad writing. Bate suggests the 'high standards' imparted early on by John Fischer grew stronger at Cambridge, where Hughes' letters to Olwyn became as literary as prose poems: 'Sometimes I think Cambridge is wonderful, at others, a ditch full of clear cold water where all the frogs have died. It is a bird without feathers, a purse without money; an old dry apple, or the gutters run pure claret' (ibid, p. 12).

Unlike Sylvia's, Hughes' poetic ambition was still unrevealed in his first year at Pembroke. He was known and remembered for his long coat and, as he believed a person's walk is telling of their biography, his self-assured stride (*Poetry in the Making*, 1967, p. 121). He reorganised the Archery Club during the day and practiced with his arrow for hours. In the evening, there were films, plays, concerts, and the pub. It was after a poetry reading by Dylan Thomas that Ted met Daniel Huws, a freshman with whom he would be reunited at the Anchor pub with both parties' friends; Terrence, beer-inebriated, led them all to singing with his endless collection of Irish ballads. At the Anchor, 'when Ted spoke, everyone listened' (Bate, 2015, p.

[44] Olwyn Hughes Papers (Emory 980/1).

74). The group mocked their professor Dr Leavis' lectures; Ted particularly disliked the one 'on his beloved Yeats' (ibid). There were examinations on the Victorians and essay papers on Wordsworth and Coleridge, which Ted enjoyed greatly. The flexibility of the Cambridge degree allowed Hughes to change course after Part I of the Tripos – Hughes chose Archeology and Anthropology, distancing himself from the English department and missing a course which he would have most likely reveled in: Tragedy from the ancient Greeks via Shakespeare and Racine to Ibsen, Chekhov and Yeats (Plath would later venture into this same course) (Bate, 2015). Ted explained his change of subject many times during his literary career, often in reference to his own personal mythology surrounding 'The Thought-Fox' poem. Nevertheless, that poem was written only after he graduated and Hughes does not seem to be consistent in the details of the story, reminding us of his inclination toward an element of invention, if not embellishment, in the telling of his life experiences (ibid).

Many Cambridge students go through an 'essay crisis', as Bate defines it – each term was short and replete with readings and thus the essay would often be left to the last minute, at which Hughes often excelled – having enjoyed many other extra-curricular amusements cum academic interferences; nevertheless, if the essay was comprised of a topic about which Hughes was passionate, such as William Blake, then he would write with great resource and capability; however, if the subject failed to appeal to his own interests he would sometimes fail to get going (ibid, p. 75-76). Whence the idea of 'The Thought Fox' was derived: in a dream he found himself sat the desk in a state of agitation, 'trying to get one word to follow another' when from the door the figure of a fox came toward him in the mid-light: 'He had escaped from the fire – the smell of burning hair was strong, and his skin was charred and in places cracking, bleeding freshly from the splits.' The figure then placed a human hand on the paper and spoke thus: 'Stop this – you are destroying us.' After this lucid dream, which felt more like a shamanic vision of metaphysical proportions, Hughes resolved to quit his Literature course for he had come to object to the 'pseudo-critical terminology and social rancour on creative spirit' prominent around college, later explaining that he found the critical 'dismantling of texts' overtly objective and exacting, almost scientific – that is to say, the inverse of what he thought the process of assimilating literature should be, for the course at Cambridge from which he departed, fraught with the surgical jargon of criticism, seemed an anathema to the creative spirit (ibid).

Thus, Hughes went on to read Anthropology, reading ethnological classics such as Margaret Mead's *Growing up in Guinea* (1930) and Bronislaw Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and their*

Magic (1935). One could venture to suggest that Anthropology as a discipline and discourse is almost analogical to Literature insofar as the ethnographer – observing the rituals and rites, customs and behaviours of a tribe – has to write and sum up that which he or she observes; disentangling from the swirling mass of human activity, an essence which in and of itself runs parallel to that of the writer's task, to transcribe the world into something meaningful. In addition, Anthropology gave him new insights on the culturally relativistic nature of peoples' perception of topics such as sex and marriage, not to mention the supernatural: magic. In lieu of viewing the practise of magic as primitive and non-civilised, the writings of people like Malinowski shed light on the way in which such practises have a practical function within a society, like language; they were an act of communication. Albeit Hughes in actuality found the factual learning lacking in inspiration, but, as Bates claims that he derived great pleasure from physical anthropology which looked at humankind's relation to the animal world – exploring how they have, since the industrial revolution, become alienated from nature. Moreover, the exploration of subjects such as mythology would have appealed to him on the back of his enthused readings of *The White Goddess*. Above all, beyond the courses at Cambridge that tended to leave Hughes wanting, the most important aspect of his time there was the library, which 'was perfect for browsing, for following one's nose, for the gathering of intellectual inquiry' (Bates, p. 77). This illustrates the modus operandi of the writer – that is to say, the autodidact.

Hughes was finding his voice as a poet; he published some poems in *Granta* under the pseudonym Daniel Hearing, as well as some other pieces in smaller, marginal literary magazines – one of which was *delta*, whose assistant editor, Phillip Hobsbaum, was approached by Hughes in a pub one evening:

> The wad of manuscript he had thrust at us was greasy and typed in grey characters, as though the ribbon in the typewriter had been used a great many times over a period of years, and never been changed. Redgrove looked at this dubiously, and uttered these memorable words: 'Ted's a nice chap, but I don't think we ought to publish his poems'.[45]

There were others in Hughes social circle that were also seeking out publication; Ted's reputation was growing in proportion to his own confidence. After graduation Hughes did a few odd jobs but eventually found himself back in Cambridge, from which he would travel to London when he needed some money. He befriended some undergraduates and even helped

[45] Hobsbaum, 'Ted Hughes at Cambridge', p. 7.

them with their exams – he was mingling with the young Harold Bloom, the critic, and helped him with his studies (Bates, p. 85). Ted was recalled as having delivered some beautiful readings of Yeats and Hopkins alongside his own poetry in that period, with Yorkshire vowel sounds in a lilt reminiscent of Dylan Thomas from whom he had learned the musical possibilities of poetry reading (Bates, p. 88). One of the first poems he published in *St Botolph's Review* was 'Secretary,' which is about a reserved, rather touchy young woman who would reel if felt by a man, rushing back home to the duties of domesticity in a revolt against bodily lust (*THCP*, p. 25). The poem, although ostensibly conflating the speaker with the poet himself, does not simply retell a biographical anecdote but rather – in line with T.S. Eliot's idea that all poems inevitably reiterate the rhythms of past poems, rereading and remixing, synthesizing and reappropriating the past in the present to 'make it new' again – may rework the scene in 'The Fire Sermon', the third poem of *The Waste Land*, in which 'the typist home at teatime' submissively acquiesces 'exploring hands' that 'make a welcome of indifference' (*Selected Poems*, 1961, p. 58).

A Dancer to God (1992), Hughes' collection of tributes to T. S. Eliot later written in the 80s, sheds light on how Hughes revered Eliot and on how Eliot's verse made him reflect on the nature of poetry itself – a matter of great importance to him. Its theme, 'the voice of Poetry as the voice of Eros', is exactly the essence of Hughes' own poetry; Eros, the Greek god of desire, symbolises madness and erotic love and is set against Thanatos, the Greek mythological figure who personifies death, which, in Freudian terminology, came to be termed the 'death drive', that which conflicts with Eros (Bate, p. 92). It could be argued that these ideas sprang out of what the sociologist Max Weber called the 'disenchantment' of the world – that is, a world devoid of God, magic, and the supernatural (Jenkins, 2000, p. 11-32). This brave new world presented poets with a new task – that of creating meaning in the world. This meaning was to be built from the remnants and rubble of modernity, a modernity that reached its apotheosis in the corpse-strewn no-man's land of the World Wars. The seismic and ultimately traumatic events of World War I arguably sent shockwaves through the arts as evidenced in the form of Eliot's desolate renderings in *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday*. As Bates points out, Hughes, in following the trajectory of Eliot's career, extrapolates from it an eschatology – whereby the despair and destitution found in *The Waste Land* finds redemption in *The Four Quartets*, in which grace is embodied in the Farrar commune at Little Gidding, 'the rose-windowed, many-petalled choreography of the dance before God in an English chapel' (*A Dancer to God*, 1992, p. 36). Hughes, furthermore, argues that Eliot's poetry illustrates the

dialectic between divine love and Eros/Dionysus; fleshing out the way in which the images of desolation are indicative of a failure to satisfy unconscious desires, thus thwarting sexual gratification and thereby reducing being to a state of barrenness (ibid).

The psychoanalytic writings of Freud and Jung – who both drew upon Greek mythology in their studies of human subjectivity and its relation to symbolic structures – had a tremendous effect on the way in which Hughes perceived poetry, and how the 'ego' could potentially interfere with the unconscious mind, the 'id', thereby hindering – in a rational and self-conscious manner – the free and associative expression of dreams and fantasies; and, in entertaining this belief, Hughes went so far as to suggest the 'complex index of everything to follow' a writer's career could be found in the early poems whereby the 'ego' is less prominent and thus less dictatorial, equating to a more creative expression insofar as it is more closely interlaced with the world of dreams (ibid, p. 30-33). Eros assumes a central place in Hughes' early work, such as – although often deemed excessively playful – the poem 'Bawdry Embraced':

> Great farmy whores, breasts bouncy more
> Like buttock, and with buttocks like
> Two white sows jammed in a sty door,
> Are no dunghills for Bawdry's cock. (*THCP*, 13-15). [46]

More in line with Hughes' coupling of the poetic self and the world of dreams is the already-mentioned poem 'The Thought-Fox' which Hughes went on to famously mythologise over the years – continually changing, in a very mythological way, the content of the story about its creation. Most importantly was the fact that this story – and poem – originated in a dream and therefore negated the rulings of the self-conscious self, the first-person singular 'I', the 'ego'. In conjunction, his poem 'The Jaguar' seems to convey the unconscious forces that lie behind this conscious and controlling 'ego', again portraying subject matter along the psychoanalytic lines of desire and violence:

> But who runs like the rest past these arrives
> At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,
> As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged

[46] Published in Poetry 88, Aug 1956, p. 295-297. Sent to the editor by Sylvia and described by Daniel Huws as the product of a challenge concocted by Luke Myers and Ted to write a poem with this title and as 'Ted's first professional piece of work … his existential celebration of his relationship with Sylvia, but written for his friends'. (D. Huws, *Memories of Ted Hughes 1952-1963* (Nottingham: Richard Hollis, 2010), p. 36).

> Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
> On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom –
> The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
> By the bang of blood in the brain deaf to the ear –
> He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him
>
> More than visionary his cell:
> His stride is wilderness of freedom:
> The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
> Over the cage floor the horizons come (*The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957, p. 4).

This extract, full of violent imagery and sounds, explores the way in which the jaguar stands for a natural state of being-in-the-world, uninhibited by the calculated procedures of consciousness – the jaguar symbolises the raw energies of the unconscious, of nature, caged and hemmed in by modern civilisation. As Bate suggests, it depicts 'the fate of the human spirit confined in dreary Fifties Britain' (2015, p. 94). Images of 'cage' and 'prison' juxtaposed to lexes such as 'enraged', 'darkness', 'fierce', 'fire', 'blood' and 'bang' illuminate the confinement of ones' own unconscious desires within a society predicated on law and order. For Hughes it is the poet's duty to transcend these societally imposed iron bars and, in so doing, liberate the soul of the jaguar, re-establishing a primal harmony with nature. It is indeed, as Michael Silk points out,

> [in Hawk in the Rain] and the other early collections [that a certain] sensuousness (…) [starts to] predominate [in] Hughes' work. And it is a distinctive sensuousness, which correlates with, and helps to embody, a distinctive set of related allegiances: to the animal and the realm of the animal (…) to the raw, physical, primal nature of Being (…). [47]

Ted was able to render these primordial conditions in images of occasional self-parody, as in the later poem 'Karma': 'That cry for milk / From the breast / Of the mother / Of the God / Of the word / Made of Blood' (*THCP*, p. 167-168). He was 'reaching towards an idiom truly independent, as well as distinctive: sensuous, expressionist' (Silk, 2007).

'The Jaguar' recalls an incident in a zoo – an incident of extreme identification – which Hughes would later relate to Jung's idea of 'synchronicity', whereby apparently different worlds become so porous they effectively disappear and therefore offer a chance to the beholder to see

[47] M. Silk, 'Hughes, Plath and Aeschylus: Allusion and Poetic Language', 2007. In *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 2007, Vol. 14, No 3, p. 1-34.

alternative realities without arbitrary, socially-constructed distinctions. For Jung, a 'synchronicity' was the index of an 'archetypal' configuration of the 'collective unconscious' whereby individual consciousness gains insight into a deeper reality and thus coalesces with a universal truth that goes beyond – and potentially transfigures – conceptions of space and time. [48] This coincides with Hughes' own idea about what the act of poetic composition is: a moment of creation, of transcendence (Bates, 2015, p. 94). Considering this, the discourse of psychoanalysis clearly had a huge impact on the way in which Hughes came to perceive the poetic Self, an influence that spread throughout the arts and beyond. Indeed, the influence of psychoanalysis – in the 20th century – could be seen as a symptom of modernity, a world in which God was – as Nietzsche proclaimed – dead, and thus the individual was in theory left alone, responsible for everything he or she did or did not do. As such, modernity – coupled with the horrors of the Great War – announced a traumatic rupture that arguably formed a neurosis, a symptom for which poetry could be said to have become the cure for many artists. The movement of modernism, which greatly influenced both Hughes and Plath, could be seen as a reaction to this world-changing rupture.

As a student, Hughes was already developing what would later become his 'unified field theory': that a real poet must acknowledge and be responsive to 'the poetic Self – that other voice which in the earliest times came to the poet as a god, took possession of him, delivered the poem, then left him' (*A Dancer to God*, 1992, p. 20). He was obsessed by the necessity of 'answering' that 'call' (ibid). Ted and his Cambridge colleagues, who gathered and created *St Botolph's Review* in the 50s, held *The White Goddess* as a Bible and considered W.B Yeats and T.S. Eliot the greatest English-language poets of modern times as each of them was able to give voice to that which only a true poet could – Yeats, with his belief in the supernatural wrote in a spirit-force that absorbed the histories of Irish myth and folklore to become the poet of the land, who articulated 'the complex of autochthonous traditions of these islands' (ibid, p. 24); Eliot, with his 'unique position in the history of poetry' saw the 'desacralized landscape' of what was left after the Great War and gave voice to 'a new terror: meaningless' (ibid, p. 21, 44). In 'The Truly Great', the first tribute in *A Dancer to God*, Hughes describes the modern era as a 'new, unprecedented psychic simultaneity of all cultures' formed by a 'sudden, inner confederation of all peoples' (ibid, p. 6). He distinguishes between the 'great' and the 'truly

[48] C. G. Jung, 'Synchronicity: An Acasual Connecting Principle' in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Princeton University Press (1966).

great' poet – Yeats and Eliot – the first, a poet of 'national culture', the second, a poet who speaks in 'all tongues' (ibid).

In 1956 Hobsbaum of *delta* reappeared on the Cambridge scene having set up 'The Group' with his friends, which was comprised of other aspiring poets and artists and for which Hughes would read poems that would later appear in *St Botolph's Review.* [49] In an article about his university career at Cambridge, Luca Myers, to whom in later years Hughes would open his heart the most among his friends about his marriage, remembers how the Review was founded:

> Who would the contributors be? Look about you, they were all there except Ted and George Weissbort (…). What would the publication be called? *St. Botolph's Review*, everyone agreed; the garden was our spiritual home. (…) We planned a party to signalize the appearance of the Review and hired a good-sized hall on the second floor of the Cambridge Women's Union. (…) I learned that Bert had sold Sylvia a copy of the Review that afternoon, she had read it, seen him again and asked how one might get an invitation to the party, and that he had told her it would be very informal and she could just drop by. [50]

That was the party where Hughes and Plath famously met. Ted's girlfriend at the time, a young woman called Shirley who was reading English at Newham, was very much in love with him and would later in life wonder how different things would have been had she accepted his marriage proposal that Michaelmas term of 1956. She didn't agree – she wasn't enough of a 'bohemian' to 'leave everything else behind her' and move to Spain with Ted (Bate, 2015, p. 91). Ted wrote poems inspired by Shirley, such as 'Fallgrief's Girlfriend' published in the *Review* and many others later in his long process of putting in writing his life experiences. He was obsessed with the road not taken; fascinated by the different possible futures he might have lived had things happened another way. He had made plans to go to Australia with his previous girlfriend Liz; he was even commanded to stay away from the *St. Botolph's Review* launch party (ibid). However, as Plath wrote in her diary the next morning from that 25th February, 1956, 'the worst happened': 'That big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women, and whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room, but no one told me, came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes' (*J*, p. 2011-2012). That was not the first time that Hughes had seen Sylvia; Daniel Huws, who wrote a rather scathing review of some poems Sylvia had published in the

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[49] See Neil Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer: The Life of Robert Redgrove* (Jonathan Cape, 2012), p. 89.
[50] 'Ah, Youth...: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath at Cambridge and After', L. Myers (1989), in *Grand Street*, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 86-103.

student magazine *Broadsheet*, recalled some young American women at Cambridge who were 'very glamorous', 'public figures (…) a bit like film stars (…) you knew some of them by sight'. [51]

Plath immediately caught Ted's attention at the party; she recited his poems and they 'shouted as if in a high wind' above the music (ibid). In an unpublished draft of his 'St Botolph's' poem, Ted wrote that Sylvia and he moved to the quieter 'stove-room' that night:

> Behind the door, I poured more brandy. We drank.
> I kissed you. Whether you were drunk
> Or concentrated for a masterpiece, suddenly
> You fastened to me, your limbs steely,
> Like a trap. Our kiss developed
> Till my left check was in your teeth
> And your screwed-up ball-face of joy
> Bit & held with all your strength. I broke free,
> I was laughing & you were laughing (…).[52]

Plath refers to his impressions of him in her journal – a 'colossal' figure, with a 'voice that should have come from a Pole' (*J*, 211-12). She wrote:

> he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off (…) And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek (…) blood was running down his face. His poem 'I did it, I'. Such violence, I see how women lie down for artists. The only man 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, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting for you (ibid).

Ted and Sylvia's relationship was, from the very beginning, theatrical and literary, with its roots in their readings of D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, Emily Brontë and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Reciting his poem that night, Plath presented herself to him as a fellow reader and writer; indeed, what other woman would have drawn blood from him in such a manner at a first encounter? Ted was enthralled. He could not forget her ever afterwards and both 'embarked on their courtship with a mutual sense of aesthetic purpose' (Clark, 2020, p. 421).

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[51] Daniel Huws, 'Conversations with Hughes' Contemporaries'. Transcript of a recording made at the International Ted Hughes Conference, Pembroke College, Cambridge University, 17 Sept 2010, http://ann.skea.com/CambridgeRecording.htm.
[52] TH draft of 'St Botolph's'. See in H. Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020, p. 420.

Critics have often found that Sylvia's philosophy of violence was adopted within the context of her relationship with Hughes, who at the time was already fascinated by what he later called 'positive violence' – a contempt for gentility, which much characterized the 'Botolphians' and their venture against the dominating poetry at the time as seen in the likes of Elizabeth Jennings, John Wain, Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis among others. That year, Hughes wrote to Olwyn about the 'meanness and deadness of almost all modern English verse – with which [he felt] not the slightest affinity' (*LTH*, p. 34). However, when they first met both Plath and Hughes were deeply fascinated by the vital, elemental, liberating forces they revered in their readings of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung; the modernist writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, the already mentioned W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot and, especially, D. H. Lawrence; and the war poetry of Keith Douglas and Wilfred Owen. Plath wrote she would give herself 'crashing', fighting' to Hughes, foreshadowing the central role of the theme of violence in their poetic discourse and textual conversation. Christopher Levenson, a colleague, remembers 'wondering out loud as to which of them would influence the other the most'. Would Sylvia 'domesticate' and 'tame' Hughes with her 'neat, witty mannerisms', or would Ted rather 'liberate Sylvia's previously repressed passions?'[53]

When she met Ted, Sylvia was still in a complicated relationship with Richard Sassoon, about whom she had mixed feelings; however, '[Ted was] in Cambridge', she wanted to 'have him for [that] British spring', her 'black marauder'; she was 'hungry for a big, smashing, creative burgeoning love' and wrote 'Pursuit', her most sexually charged poem (*J*, p. 233-235). It was 'dedicated to Ted Hughes' (ibid, p. 214):

> There is a panther stalks me down:
> One day I'll have my death of him;
> ……
> The hunt is on, and sprung the trap.
> Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks,
> Haggard through the hot white noon.
> Along red network of his veins
> What fire run, what craving wakes?
>
> Insatiate, he ransacks the land

[53] C. Levenson, *Not One of the Boys*, unpublished memoir provided to Heather Clark by Levenson. See in Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020, p. 424.

Condemned by our ancestral fault,
Crying, let blood be spilt;
Meat must glut his raw wound (*SPCP*, p. 22).

Sylvia was now 'making a shift', she felt 'scornful of the small preciousness of much of her past work' (*L1*, p. 1133-1134). Plath re-created the night of their meeting multiple times, even three years later in the 'Stone Boy with Dolphin' short story– the title refers to a copy of Andrea del Verrocchio's putto given to Newnham College, where Sylvia was studying. Ted, too, wrote his own version of what happened that night in 'St Botolph's':

Girl-friend like a loaded crossbow. The sound-waves
Jammed and torn by Jo Lyde's jazz. The hall
Like the tilting of the Titanic:
A silent film, with that blare over it – suddenly you.
First sight. First snapshot isolated
Unalterable, stilled in the camera's glare.
……
You meant to knock me out
With your vivacity. I remember
Little from the rest of that evening.
I slid away with my girl-friend. Nothing
Except her hissing rage in a doorway
And my stupefied interrogation
Of the blue headscarf from my pocket
And the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks
That was to brand my face for the next month.
The me beneath it for good (*THCP*, p. 1051-1052).

Ted returned to Shirley after the party and Hamish, Sylvia's friend, persuaded her to stay at his lodges for the night. Sylvia was way too drunk to refuse, and later felt guilty about how the night developed at Hamish's. However, Hughes and Plath would not soon forget each other, though Sylvia supposed he would do. Hughes, in that same draft of 'St Botolph', wondered:

Was it quietening to remember
Is the speed of your express
And the speed of mine and your meeting
Not knowing if we were one express, two become one,
Or one following the other, or one
Overtaking & somehow all in the one line

And maybe none of these, maybe collision (…). [54]

2.3 'Marriage is My Medium'

When Sylvia was due to fly to Paris, she went via London to pay Ted a visit the night before her departure. They met at Ted's rather destitute dwellings on 18 Rugby Street where a small congregation of artists were gathered and spent the night imbibing instant coffee and bottles of Bulls Blood beer, tuning into a Richard Burton reading of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* on the radio (Clark, 2020). After the obligatory consumption of more booze and poetry, Ted and Sylvia spent the night together in her hotel, about which Sylvia would write the next day: 'Wild wandering night (…) wounded and shaken from ruthlessness of Ted who called me wrong name at 5 am.' [55] Friends with whom Ted was staying recall how, the following morning, he was 'agitated' and 'restless,' as if in an altered state of consciousness (Clark, 2020, p. 430). Ted would recollect the evening in his *Birthday Letters* poem '18 Rugby Street':

> I can hear you
> Climbing the bare stairs, alive and close,
> Babbling to be overheard, breathless.
> … A great bird, you
> Surged in the plumage of your excitement,
> Raving exhilaration. A blueish voltage –
> Fluorescent cobalt, a flare of aura
> That I later learned was yours uniquely (*THCP*, p. 1058).

Yet, writing these poems years after having spent so long coming to terms with his relationship with Sylvia and her tragic end, Ted invoked a sense of preordained tragedy, of fate: 'In the roar of your soul your scar told me – / Like its secret name or password – / How you had tried to kill yourself. And I heard / As if a sober star had whispered it / Above the revolving, rumbling city: stay clear' (ibid). Their intensely passionate night together was not a confirmation of something serious since Sylvia was still in the process of reinvigorating her relationship with Sassoon; however, upon her visit to him in Paris, Sassoon had already left and Sylvia, utterly devastated, went for a drink and read *Antigone*: 'Never before had a man gone off to leave me

[54] TH draft of 'St Botolph's'. See in H. Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020, p. 424.
[55] SP, 23-24, Mar. 1956, 1955-6 calendar. 7.6, Lilly. See in Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020 (p.430).

to cry after' (*J*, p. 553). In the meantime, Ted wrote to her and expressed the way in which he felt – contrary to Sylvia's feeling of regret – a longing and lust for her (Clark, 2020, p. 432). Having missed the chance to see Sassoon, Sylvia went travelling with some friends around Europe when in Italy she received another letter from Ted, which included a poem:

> Ridiculous to call it love.
> Even so, fearfully did I sound
> Your absence, as the shot down feels to the wound,
> Knowing himself alive
>
> Only by what most frightens, the suddenly
> Anxious and kneeling sky, clouds, trees,
> The headlong instant that halts, stares, comes close
> With an incredulous ghastly eye.
>
> Wherever you haunt earth, you are shaped and bright
> As the true ghost of my loss. [56]

Upon her return to London Sylvia met up with Ted at his place, where, she writes, they had a 'Bloody exhausting night of love-making'. [57] No doubt the two of them were pursuing their own ideals that sought to break away from the conventional conservatism of the 1950s, fulfilling the promise of Eros and the violence of eroticism that found voice in some of their favourite writers, such as D.H Lawrence, and about which Sylvia would write in her lost novel *Falcon Yard*, which conjures some of the violent language found in Lawrence's *Women in Love*, whereby the protagonist, Jess, describes her impressions of Hughes' character: 'She could swim in him: that incredible violent presence of his: leashed. Too much man for this island. The only man on it. He didn't think: he was.' Later in the story they divulge their memories in respects to the violent eroticism that possessed them during their first night together; and, in response to one of Jess's poems, 'Conversation Among the Ruins', the title of a famous poem by Sylvia, the Hughes character in the book says, 'You like one-syllable words, don't you? Squab, patch, crack. Violent.' (Clark, 2020, p, 435). Such passages reveal the degree to which Plath and Hughes were using the force of language to represent the intensity of emotions, of love, Eros. Inevitably Hughes came to see her in Cambridge on what Sylvia would

[56] TH to SP, c. 9 Apr. 1956. Lilly. See in Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020 (p. 433-434).
[57] SP, 13-14 Apr. 1956, 1955-56 calendar. 7.6, Lilly. See in Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020, (p. 434).

call the 'Best day in the World.' [58] However, these exalted feelings were undercut with doubt; after their reunion they didn't see each other for a few days, days in which Sylvia oscillated between the extreme poles of elation and dread, for she had not spent enough time with Ted to really know him, and in that time spent together both were presenting a side of themselves they thought the other wanted to see – Ted showing off his cold and cynical side and she her Dionysian side (Clark, 2020, p. 435). Sylvia conveyed her uncontrollable emotions to her mother:

> The times I am with him are a horror because I am then so strong & creative & happy, and his very power & brilliance & endless health & iron will to beat the world across is why I love him and will never be able to do more, for he'll blast off to Spain & then Australia & never stop conquering people & saying poems. It is very hard to have him here in Cambridge this week & I am terrified even to have known him, he makes all others mere puny fragments. Such a torment & pain to love him. [59]

During this time Sylvia was writing prolifically on the back of a burst of creative energy; indeed, on the day on which she sent the above letter to her mother she sent off seven poems to *Poetry* and wrote another seven poems which included 'Faun', 'Ode for Ted', 'Song for a Summer's Day', 'The Queen's Complaint' – all about Hughes (Clark, 2020, p. 437). She wrote several other poems, most of which were inspired by Ted; she was finding her voice, a voice that moved beyond the delicate, genteelism of her earlier poetry – immediately criticized by the Botolphians on her arrival at Cambridge – moving instead towards a stronger and bolder language that was more muscular and masculine, a language and voice she felt was necessary in order to make her mark on the predominately male literary world in which the odds were stacked against women. Due to her infatuation with Ted, she was writing – as she said – 'working sweating heaving' poems (*L1*, p. 1181). Both Ted and Sylvia were ecstatically and inextricably falling in love with each other and by the beginning of May 1956, at a rather early stage in their relationship, they began to talk about marriage.

Despite the doubts of the family and social circle, Ted and Sylvia thought they were a match made in heaven, united by a shared literary ambition devoid of any conventional expectations in regard with money and materialism – as Clark points out, Sylvia would not expect him to become a breadwinner, nor would he expect her to become a housewife. This shared proclivity toward literature embellished their perceptions to the extent to which they formed their

[58] SP, 15 Apr. 1956, 1955-56, calendar 7.6, Lilly. See in Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020 (p. 435).
[59] SP to AP, 17 Apr. 1956, 1955-56 calendar. 7.6, Lilly. See in Clark, Clark, *Red Comet*, 2020 (p. 435).

relationship out of fictional tropes, such as Ursula Brangwen and Rupert Birkin in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, in which artistic creativity is nourished and enhanced in marital communion and cooperation, opening up artistic potentialities – not to mention Heathcliff and Cathy in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* in which the raging storms of passionate love encapsulate the tragedy. In adhering to literariness, Sylvia and Ted got married on June 16, Bloomsday – the day in which Joyce's magnus opus, *Ulysses*, takes place. Ted portrays the event of the day in yet another *Birthday Letters* poem, having given Sylvia a pink ribbon and a pink rose – believing she looked 'transfigured' in the 'echo-gaunt, weekday chancel'. 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress':

> So slender and new and naked,
> A nodding spray of wet lilac.
> You shook, you sobbed with joy, you were ocean depth
> Brimming with God.
> You said you saw the heavens open
> And show riches, ready to drop upon us.
> Levitated beside you, I stood subjected
> To a strange sense: the spellbound future (*THCP*, p. 1065).

The two newly-weds spent their honeymoon firstly in Paris with Aurelia – with whom Ted grew slowly and tentatively acquainted – and then in Benidorm, Spain. Their honeymoon consisted of 'writing, writing, writing' and therefore 'keeping themselves to themselves' (*L1*, p. 1210-11). Thus, their romance was comprised of creative discipline, whereby Sylvia would describe their coexistence as less than living with another person than living with their perfect male or female counterparts of their own selves (ibid, p. 1216). However, the trip was blighted by humble living conditions and financial insecurity, and Plath struggled; as Hughes later wrote in his *Birthday Letter* poem 'You Hated Spain', Sylvia was 'frightened' by Spain, with its 'blood-raw light' and 'Goya funeral grin' and 'recoiled' (*THCP*, p. 1068). Hughes, on the other hand, took in the powerful energies, indicative of Lorca's 'duende', of light and lust blended with grief and rage, which stood against the dreary, vapid nature of English poetry that both he and Sylvia sought to set free from submission.

Plath sold several sketches to *The Christian Scientist Monitor* in which she thought she was developing an original, 'primitive' style' (*L1*, p. 1239). Hughes was working on his fables, 'How the Animals Became' and 'O'Kelly's Angel'. Sylvia also started writing 'The Hypnotizing Husband', the darker version of which, 'The Wishing Box', she published later

that year in *Granta*. While she cooked, Ted read her Shakespeare and set her concentration and observation exercises, which she at first appreciated but later would come to resent. Every morning, he told her about his animal dreams and night visions of William Blake, details of which she would include in 'The Wishing Box'. As recurrent in Plath's writing career, the imagined ideal conditions for writing she thought she would find in Spain did not materialise – signifying the inherent split between her romantic idealisations and the actualities of artistic creation – and, contrary to her preconception, suffered from writer's block. In a sharp and sarcastic vignette, 'Mr. and Mrs. Ted Hughes' Writing Table', Sylvia portrayed Hughes as the 'better' writer:

> At the head of the table, Ted sat in a squarely built grandfather chair with wicker back and seat, his realm was a welter of sheets of typing paper and ragged cardboard-covered notebooks (…) A bottle of blue ink, perpetually open, rested on a stack of paper. Crumpled balls of used paper lay here and there, to be thrown into the large wooden crate placed for that purpose in the doorway. All papers and notebooks on this half of the table were tossed at angles, kitty-corner and impromptu.

Her description of her side of the table, by contrast, 'was piled with tediously neat stacks of books and papers, all laid prim and four-squared to the table corners (…) a ragged brown covered Thesaurus (…) a bottle of jet black ink, scrupulously screwed shut' (*J*, p. 259). The fact that in her depiction of them writing she needed a Thesaurus while he did not, already implies Plath's awareness of their writing enterprise's creative hurdles – Sylvia returned to the image of the couple writing in the later 1958 poem 'The Other Two', set in the earlier period they spent in Benidorm. At night, they studied languages and translated books such as *Le Rouge et le Noir*; they went for long walks together.

They were dreaming about a future in Spain teaching Spanish at an American university, or teaching English as a foreign language, which had been Ted's plan for a long time. Nevertheless, Sylvia's diary gives away her feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration throughout the summer; in one of their quarrels, Sylvia's journal entry is quite ambiguous: 'No sleep, smothering. (…) Perhaps he is asleep. Or dead. How to know how long there is before death. The fish may be poisoned, and the poison working. And two sit apart in wrongness. (…) Two silent strangers (ibid, p. 250-251). A letter in which Ted tried to smother his family's reservations toward Sylvia troubled her; Ted wrote they needed not 'be frightened of her being a drag' and that she was 'very very bright' and 'a much more certain money-earner' than himself (*LTH*, p. 45). Sylvia was unsettled by his family's supposed apprehension concerning

their marriage and Hughes later wrote a *Birthday Letters* poem about their argument over it, titled ‘Moonwalk’:

> Alarming
> And angering moon-devil – here somewhere.
> The Ancient Mariner’s Death-in-Life woman
> Straight of the sea’s fevered incandescence
> Throwing black-and-white dice.
> A sea saracen and cruel-looking.
> And your words
> Like bits of beetles and spiders
> Retched out by owls. Fluorescent,
> Blue-black, splintered. Bat-skulls. One day, I thought,
> I shall understand this tomb-Egyptian,
> This talking in tongues to a moon-mushroom.
> ……
> I could no more join you
> Than on the sacrificial slab
> That you were looking for. I could not
> Even imagine the priest. I walked beside you
> As if seeing you for the first time (*Birthday Letters*, 1998, p. 41).

That same year, Hughes seems to have underestimated what he describes as a ‘bug’ in his *Birthday Letters* poem ‘Fever’ about a food poisoning which Plath, however, experienced as one of the worst illnesses of her life. He wrote:

> You had a fever. You had a real ailment.
> You had eaten a baddie.
> You lay helpless and a little bit crazy
> With the fever. You cried for America
> And its medicine cupboard.
> …….
> As into a tomb. ‘Help me’, you whispered, ‘help me.’
> …….
> I bustled about.
> I was nursemaid. I fancied myself as that.
> I liked the crisis of the vital role.
> I felt things had become real. Suddenly mother,
> As a familiar voice, woke in me.

……..

Your cry jammed so hard
Over into the red of catastrophe
Left no space for worse. And I thought
How sick is she? Is she exaggerating?
……..

"Stop crying wolf,
Or else I shall not know, I shall not hear
When things get really bad.' (ibid, p. 46-47)

Hughes may have 'sensed a more lethal depression to come' (Clark, 2020, p. 457). Sylvia was struggling with the 'blank blazing sun (…)'; she thought there was 'a lack of intellectual stimulus in countries as hot as Spain' (*L1*, p. 1240). She wanted to 'convince Ted to love [America] as much as [she] did; their money was running out and she missed the comforts of her old life in her home country. Soon, they were in Yorkshire at the Beacon, Hughes' family house, where Aurelia would join them. Sylvia set the scene for her mother before her arrival: 'a wicked north wind is whipping a blowing rain against the little house and coal fires are glowing' – she wrote she had become a 'veritable convert to the Brontë clan' (ibid, p. 1241). The atmospheric moors and church grounds of Haworth would inspire an excellent poem, 'November Graveyard', all the more powerful retroactively since at the time of composition she did not know she was reflecting on her own burial ground:

At the essential landscape stare, stare
Till your eyes foist a vision dazzling on the wind:
Whatever lost ghost flare,
Damned, howling in their shrouds across the moor
Rave on the leash of the starving mind
Which peoples the bare room, the blank untenanted air (*SPCP*, p. 56).

Hughes' uncle Walt Farrar took the couple to Top Withens, a ruined cottage supposed to be the locus of the events in *Wuthering Height*s. There, Sylvia read the novel again and in a letter to her mother she describes herself and her husband as 'a happy Heathcliffe [sic] and Cathy! Striding about in the woods and over the moors' (*L1*, p. 1243). Once, they got lost when trying to get there again without Uncle Walt's directions; they made love in the heather and took a bus home. Nevertheless, Sylvia felt depressed and 'weary' the entire time at the Beacon. She started to fear she was not in touch with herself and riddled with the 'sick, sterile fear in the

face of [Ted's] great creativeness'. [60] Plath started to challenge Hughes' Neoromantic, shamanistic view of the creative processes of artmaking thanks to her own, less 'otherworldly' style. She was writing 'secret', 'subversive' stories and poems in this period, such as 'On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad', in which Plath conveys her feelings of artistic inefficacy through the metaphor of psychotherapy:

> "My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,
> And that damn scrupulous tree won't practice wiles
> To beguile sight:
> E.g., by cant of light
> Concoct a Daphne;
> My tree stays tree." (*SPCP*, p. 65)

'The Wishing Box' story already suggested Sylvia's anxieties about the sublimation of her creativity and talent to her husband; nevertheless, Sylvia insisted on the fact that there was 'no question of rivalry' and that she felt 'very feminine and admiring' in his presence (*L2*, p. 72; *L1*, p. 1245). In addition, Plath's moor poems written in the late 50s and early 60s reveal a certain ambivalence towards Hughes' birthplace; in 'Wuthering Heights', the sky is 'pale', the wind 'trying to funnel' the speaker's 'heat' away. The horizons 'ring' the poetic voice, then 'dissolve and dissolve / Like a series of promises.' These promises and the doomed love story in the poem might suggest Plath, at a very early stage in her marriage, already felt more insecure about her relationship with her husband than she was able to admit. (*SPCP*, p. 147).

Meanwhile, *The Atlantic* bought 'Pursuit' and when back at Cambridge Sylvia learned *Poetry* had accepted six of her poems, among which were 'Metamorphosis' and 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower' – Plath was pleased as she considered *Poetry* to be 'a magazine of poets (…) and not commercial!' (*L1*, p. 1249). She thought this acceptance to be "the consecration of [her] new writing, which, properly, began with [Ted] and 'Pursuit'" (ibid, p. 1257). Plath and Hughes had to part; after Ted was offered a spot on the BBC Third Programme reading Yeats he had to move back to Yorkshire. Sylvia was finishing her final year at Cambridge and their marriage was still a secret – Plath did not want to lose her Fulbright. Away from her, Ted felt helpless: 'I love you Sylvia, all day, all night when I can't sleep. Thinking about you and just blankly missing you has brought me to a standstill. I love you I love you I love you' (*LTH*, p. 70). Sylvia worked hard on her writing and resolved to live a 'queer ascetic way of life', finding

[60] SP, 4-6 Sept. 1956, 1955-56 calendar. 7.6, Lilly.

‘such a sense of peace to draw’; concentrating on the ‘inscape, as Hopkins says, of leaf and plant and animal’ (*L1*, p. 1267; p. 1286). Each night before sleeping, she would kneel by the window and send all her ‘force and love’ to Ted’s bed in Yorkshire in a ritual which helped her connect to her husband. She felt her whole ‘life, being, breathing, thinking, sleeping and eating, ha[d] somehow (…) become indissolubly welded to [him] (ibid, p. 1265). She was writing a poetry of the body and called herself ‘a female lyricist who sings the glory of love (…) [She thought she and Ted were] the living proof that great writing comes from a pure, faithful, joyous creative bed (…) [and she loved him] like fury’ (ibid, p. 1268). Her readings of Augustine and Saint Paul revealed ‘intolerable’ stances against the flesh – ‘the blind leap of Christianity’ repulsed her and she referred to God as a ‘rat’ (ibid, p. 1273). In defense of her ‘strong blood-faith’ she quoted ‘blessed Yeats’ and, recalling Chaucer’s Wife of Bat as her model, she blessed ‘the strong loving body’ (ibid, p. 1274; p. 1280). She was studying Sartre’s concept of existentialism; meanwhile, Hughes warned her about academia and Christian authors in general. She should read Blake as an ‘antidote’ to ‘Christian philosopher[s] trash, and it is trash, all completely crooked’. Ted felt the entire church was ‘the perch of avarice, greed, cruelty and tyranny’ (*LTH*, p. 63-64).

Ted predicted Sylvia would become famous; he suggested she read her poetry aloud walking around the room timed to the meter of her steps – later, Plath would tell her readers the *Ariel* poems should be read aloud (ibid, p. 51). Ted felt ‘amputated’, ‘without a vital organ’ away from Plath (ibid, p. 55). He encouraged her and had ambitions for them; he promised he would keep working on plots for television and suggested she should get three straight hours thinking in a day – one for ‘remembering’, another for ‘discovering plots and themes’, and the last concentrating on ‘some part of a theme’; then to ‘think straight to the thing’ undisturbed by any ‘mental intervention’ when writing. She needed to listen to ‘the demon, the poem dictator’ – the ‘duende’ itself (ibid, p. 52-53). In Yorkshire, Ted felt ‘unrecognizable’, ‘like a strange beast unless [Sylvia was] with [him] (ibid, p.58). Sylvia told him he was [the wildest loveliest piece of flesh walking’ (*L1*, 1280). When she was not studying, she was reading on the tarot and thought *The London Magazine* and *The New Yorker* were close to accepting their works. Although she considered the kind of poetry published in *The New Yorker* ridiculous – ‘no blood and guts, just goldenrod and wistful crayfish’ – she submitted her works often and yearned to be published there (ibid, p. 1276). Plath thought they were on the brink of fame and that Ted needed not be discouraged about his poems not having been published in a British magazine

yet – 'THEY WILL' (ibid, p. 1279). She thought they were 'new, green yet, in their tremulous eyes', and that Ted should 'forget about the money' (ibid, p. 1316).

Hughes and Plath were each other's insightful, confident critics: "How about another word for 'hideous'? I'd like better something that showed the eyes hideous, as in the fine 'Snake's twisted eye'" (ibid, p. 1280). She sounded like a professor, at times: "I don't think 'horrible void' is the best you can do; I'm eternally suspicious of editorializing with horribles, terribles, awfuls and hideuses; make the void horrible; let your reader have the sweet joy of exclaiming 'ah! Horrible!' (…) Try like you showed me in Shakespeare, some monosyllabic concrete word to wed one or the other of those four-syllabled colossi" (ibid, p. 1281). Hughes praised her poems with 'firm, discreet, passionate' lines and those 'not tortoised in imagery'. The elaborate syntax and rhyme Plath had learned at Smith is what Ted was trying to do away with. He knew she was going to find her own voice: 'If you write whatever attracts you, and you write it as hard as you can, and as rich, then you can't miss'. He encouraged her to set aside the unnecessary adjectives and to move beyond 'smooth manners'; most importantly, their lines should be 'clear and vivid' (*LTH*, p. 65-70). Her verses he defined as 'masterly'; they 'never [went] 'soft' like other women's' (ibid, p. 82). In a letter to his brother, Ted celebrates her talent: 'As a result of her influence I have written continuously and every day better since I met her. She is a very fine critic of my work, and abuses just those parts of it that I daren't confess myself are unworthy' (ibid, p. 46-47).

Sylvia was preoccupied with the 'death of an inner life', which Ted thought 'obsesse[d her]'. [61] Fascinated by those 'manic-depressive geniuses' such as Dickens, Tolstoy and Beethoven, Sylvia was reading more and more about psychology and asked Ted what he thought about these 'mental cases' (*L1*, p. 1288). Ted wrote Keats, Chaucer and Shakespeare were all 'delicately mad', and that 'going nuts' suggested 'your thoughts have an autonomous life, whereas sane people have them in harness, under their will, in slavery, depersonalized with convict number and slaved head, not themselves. [62] He had a controversial view of madness, a kind of 'positive madness' related to creative vision, shamanic realizations; Plath defines her concept of 'divine madness' after having heard J. D. Salinger was recovered in a mental asylum: 'insanity is the most necessary state for a fine artist (…) where the terror & piercing insights he has daily are not locked in retreat or raving but made into works of art' (*L1*, p.

[61] TH to SP, 9 Oct. 1956. Lilly.
[62] TH to SP, 22 Oct. 1956. Lilly.

1314). These positive views on mental illness might have reassured Plath, who was still 'scarred' from her experience at McLean and feared the lasting effects the shock treatments she had received under the care of Dr. Thornton and Dr. Tillotson might have on her. In 'The Wishing Box' story, a woman kills herself after losing her dreaming abilities because of her husband's vivid imagination and the effects it had on her. In *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001), Tracy Brain relates this story to Virginia Woolf's 'The Legacy'; Hughes, untroubled by the contents in the story, thought it outstanding: 'This is the kind of poetic theme you could make exclusively your own ground' (*L1*, p. 1288). Many have argued Agnes, the protagonist in the story, is Sylvia; but Clark suggests rather that Agnes is 'the woman Sylvia vowed not to become' (Clark, 2020, p. 470).

In October, The BBC announced the Yeats program that was offered Ted had been accepted – Sylvia rejoiced: 'MY HUSBAND IS A GENIUS AND WILL READ YEATS ON THE BBC!' (*L1*, p. 1288). The couple were reunited in Rugby Street and Ted's BBC work gathered public attention – the editor of *Nimbus*, an influential magazine that published Auden, wrote to ask Hughes to send them his poems; the *Atlantic Press* encouraged him to submit his fables. When his poem 'Wind' was accepted by *The Nation*, Sylvia wrote Aurelia that they were 'different from most couples (…) [their] writing [was] founded in the inspiration of the other, and [grew] by the proper, inimitable criticism of the other, and publications [were] made with joy of the other; what wife shares her husband's dearest career as [she did]? Expect maybe Marie Curie?' She continued: 'my poems and stories I want to be the strongest female paean yet for the creative forces of nature, the joy of being a loved and loving woman, that is my song; I believe it is destructive to try to be an abstractionist man-imitator, or a bitter sarcastic Dorothy Parker or Teasdale' (ibid, p. 1289). Sylvia wrote more poems, 'Spinster' and 'On the Plethora of Dryads' among others; 'The Day Mr. Prescott Died' appeared in *Granta* while her marriage was still a secret. She wrote about Schopenhauer's 'ridiculous' essay 'On Women': 'what poverty of experience he must have had to deny us minds & souls – & make us mere procreating animal machines!' (ibid, p. 1317). Subservience, for Sylvia, meant being a housewife and a mother in order to write – she wanted it all. She wrote Hughes she was 'amazed he live[d], that [she] didn't just make up [his] being warm and talking and being [her] husband' (ibid, p.1320). When Sylvia turned twenty-four they were living in 'an orgy of optimism and self-encouragement', which [would] carry [them] for months'. [63] Hughes wrote in a letter to his

[63] TH to AP and WP, 31 Oct. 1956. Lilly.

brother Gerald that 'marriage [was his] medium'. [64] *Poetry* accepted Hughes' 'The Drowned Woman'; *The Atlantic* accepted 'The Hawk in the Storm' which later became Ted's famous 'The Hawk in the Rain'. In the hope that Sylvia was 'on the road to becoming a seeress', he gave her a tarot pack (*L2*, p. 4). They were reading horoscopes and practicing astrology together; their sessions with Pan, the name they gave their guiding spirit which they tried to summon nightly with their Ouija board, disquieted Sylvia - in the *Birthday Letters* poem 'Ouija', Ted recalls how Sylvia was unsettled when he asked Pan about their future and whether they would become famous:

> I was stunned. I thought I had joined
> Your association of ambition
> To please you and your mother,
> To fulfil your mother's ambition
> That we be ambitious.
> ……..
> You wouldn't go on with Ouija. Nothing
> I could think of could explain
> Your shock and crying. Only
> Maybe you'd picked up a whisper I could not hear,
> Before our glass could stir, some still small voice:
> "Fame will come. Fame especially for you.
> Fame cannot be avoided. And when it comes
> You will have paid for it with your happiness,
> Your husband and your life (*Birthday Letters*, 1998, p. 53).

Fame would indeed prove to come for Sylvia after her death; a 'bitter fame', as Anne Stevenson defines it in the title of her 1989 study of Sylvia Plath's life. As Hughes explained in one of the letters he sent to Al Alvarez to express his resentment when the latter published his memoir, after her death Sylvia went 'through the detailed, point-by-point death of a public sacrifice. Her poems provided the vocal part for that kind of show' (Malcom, 1993, p. 127).

At the time Sylvia was working under Dr. Krook, a professor who influenced her deeply during her Cambridge years; nevertheless, although she was intrigued by university work and the writings of Hume, Hobbes, Mill and Bentham, she was 'back in obsessive state of writing poems under pressure to put off work'. [65] Sylvia wrote the astounding 'Black Rook in Rainy

[64] TH to Gerald and Joan Hughes, May 1957 (Emory 854/1)
[65] SP, 19 Nov. 1956, Oct. 1956 – July 1957 calendar. 7.6, Lilly.

Weather' poem likely under the influence of Hughes' 'The Hawk in the Rain', where the hawk becomes a symbol for humanity's impossibility to escape the master force of nature, determined to extinguish life:

> I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up
> Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,
> From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle
> With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk
>
> Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.
> His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,
> Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.

There is no breaking free – the hawk, as the poetic voice, will in turn 'mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land' (*The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957, p. 3). However influenced by Ted's hawk, we find hope for compassion in Sylvia's 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather', as in many other instances in her poetry:

> I only know that a rook
> Ordering its black feathers can so shine
> As to seize my sense, haul
> My eyelids up, and grant
>
> A brief respite from fear
> Of total neutrality. With luck,
> Trekking stubborn through this season
> Of fatigue, I shall
> Patch together a content
>
> Of sorts. Miracles occur,
> If you care to call these spasmodic
> Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
> The long wait for the angel,
> For that rare, random descent (*SPCP*, p. 57).

It could be argued that, despite incorporating some of his imagery, Plath is seen to be subverting Hughes' vision – a vision wedded to the British Romantic sublime found in the likes of Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' – pitting it against her own quintessentially Emersonian vision of nature, thus aligning itself with Thoreau's 'Walden'. In *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (2001),

Kendall compares the two poems, indicating the way in which Plath doubled her vision on the natural world with Hughes', seemingly corroding his artistic premises and in doing so declaring her own. Therefore, Sylvia was already using Hughes' poetry as a form against which she could build her own voice. Ambitions to publish were high; Sylvia was putting together a manuscript – *Two Lovers and a Beachcomber* – which she aimed to enter into a Yale Younger Poets contest while at the same time she was looking for windows of opportunity for Hughes; indeed, at a Fulbright reception, she met John Press with whom she discussed the various possibilities of publishing Hughes and was thereby informed about a contest sponsored by Harper's – about which she would write to Hughes 'I'm sure you'll win this; I feel very queer about it' (*L1*, p. 1313). This highlights the way in which Sylvia supported and promoted Ted and, having typed his work up, she entered the manuscript into the contest, revealing the reverence and respect she paid Hughes, who she thought wrote with 'raging power & violence' (*L2*, p. 34; p. 38). Yet life in England was proving financially difficult and, in turn, the conditions in which they lived were proving unsustainable – the only thing sustaining them was the prospect of change, a change that was to be found by moving to America, since it was not only the living conditions that they found constricting but also the literary culture itself: 'I gather, from reading Blake and D.H. Lawrence, the deadness has been growing for a long time. Everything is stiffened, stratified… I can't wait to get Ted out, & he can't wait to go' (*L2*, p 91).

On February 23rd 1957 the life-changing news came that Hughes's manuscript 'The Hawk in the Rain' had won the Harper's competition, a book that was swiftly published by Faber soon after, and thus Hughes's reputation was solidified. His poems had come a long way from the Wordsworthian pastoral depictions of his early work, shifting their lenses away from a harmonious nature towards a violent and disruptive one, the aesthetic of which can be seen in 'Wind':

> This house has been far out at sea all night,
> The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
> Winds stampeding the fields under the window
> Floundering black astride and blinding wet
>
> Till day rose; then under an orange sky
> The hills had new places, and wind wielded
> Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,
> Flexing like the lens of a mad eye. (*THCP*, 36)

Hughes's collection, having been published on both sides of the pond, received a baptism of praise – being compared to the likes of Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and Rilke. Most of the reviews noted the violence and dynamism of his poetry, the vigor and ferocity, heralding an exciting new, anti-poetic voice in the world of English poetry. This brought Hughes's moral position on violence into the public eye, which he defended as the primordial force of life, arguing that 'positive violence' is 'a life-bring assertion of sacred law which demolishes, in some abrupt way, a force that oppressed and violated it'. [66] He would claim that his poems were not a celebration of violence, but rather sought to bear witness to violence, in the same vein as Blake and Yeats, who, he argued, used animalistic, primal violence to portray the 'terrible beauty' of what they saw (ibid). Marianne Moore, who was an important friend to Plath and Hughes, objected to the publication of three poems in *The Hawk in the Rain* which she considered 'bawdy' – she proposed that 'The Little Boys and the Seasons', 'The Drowned Woman' and 'Bawdry Embraced' should be eliminated altogether, a choice which Hughes had not agreed with at first but which in turn he decided to make (Pollak, 2005, p. 100). However, when the couple later sent Moore some of their poems such as 'Sow' by Sylvia and only 'Pike' by Hughes, together with a pledge for a Saxton reference for Sylvia, the American Lady of Letters was not impressed by Plath's style, describing it as 'grisly' and 'unrelenting'; she was rather struck by the 'accurate', although ominous, voice in Hughes's poem (ibid). Even if there was an element of rivalry between Sylvia and Ted, both were riding a wave of literary achievement. Even if Plath had yet to publish a collection, she was enjoying a certain degree of literary fame by fact of her own publications and by association with Hughes; indeed, when their poems both appeared in *Granta*, they became 'the talk of literary Cambridge' (Clark, 2020, p. 491). They were positioning themselves against the trends of the day and when *The Hawk in the Rain* was chosen by the *Poetry Book Society* – founded in 1953 by T. S. Eliot and friends – as a top choice for 1957, he famously wrote 'What excites my imagination is the war between vitality and death, and my poems may be said to celebrate the exploits of the warriors of either side'. [67] Sylvia meanwhile was finishing her final examinations for which she would eventually receive a 2:1; after which she was a spent force, as was Ted; after a visit to Yorkshire, they left for America.

[66] TH, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, William Scammel, ed. (New York, Picador, 1995), p. 266.
[67] TH, 'Ted Hughes Writes,' *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* (15 Sept. 1957), I.

3.1 ‘Poem for a Birthday’

Upon arriving, Plath and Hughes had a small wedding reception with Aurelia in Wellesley – where Ted was taken aback by the bourgeois exuberance of Sylvia’s family and friends – after which they both went off together in search for a place to rent and, before long, decided upon an apartment near Smith. Here they met Sylvia’s university colleagues and, meanwhile, Hughes was relishing the new-found success of his debut poetry collection which had by this stage been praised by a myriad of media outlets, with even the coveted *New Yorker* publishing ‘The Thought-Fox’ having rejected it only a year before. Indeed, Hughes had risen to literary recognition in only a couple of years, whereas Sylvia, who had been publishing for many years, had not yet found the same degree of notoriety. However, without the instrumental role of Sylvia’s support and editorship, it could be argued that Hughes would not have been able to disseminate his work through the world of letters so quickly. While Hughes began work on his second collection, *Lupercal*, Sylvia was toiling over fiction, trying to find a balance between the demands of the publishing market and her own aesthetic standards. In addition to this tension, the split between artistic practice and that of housewifery was growing and found its voice in the poem ‘Dialogue Over a Ouija Board,’ which utilizes seven-line stanzas with a *ababcbc* rhyming schemata and reveals Sylvia’s ambivalence towards Hughes’s affinity with the occult, whereby the wife of the poem, Sybil, is incredulous towards her husband Leroy’s apparent capacity to commune with Pan: ‘Pan’s a mere puppet / Of our two intuitions,’ Sylvia writes, a ‘psychic bastard / Sprung to being on our wedding night.’ Al Alvarez later doubted Sylvia’s belief in the practices of the occult; in the poem the marital couple contest the bearing of the ‘messages’ from Pan:

> How can we help but battle
> If our nerves are the sole nourishers
>
> Of Pan’s pronouncements, and our nerves are strung
> To such cross-purposes?

In contrast with the Lawrentian promise of marital creativity and creation, Sylvia seems to be illuminating a conflict of interest within a marriage, nodding towards a potential rivalry. The difference between her poetry at this time and her journal entries suggest a divergence between her love for Ted – who flooded her life ‘with the deep rich color of his mind and his love and

constant amaze at his perfect being' (*J*, p. 287) – and the situation exposed by Sybil: 'I glimpse no light at all as long / As we two glower from our separate camps, / This board our battlefield.' [68] This self-exteriorization testifies to the strain of her creative partnership with Hughes whom was also seemingly dealing with his own anxieties in relation to a female rival – which can be inferred by poems such as 'The Hag' and 'Cleopatra to the Ass' among others – and, in addition, was harboring a concern about Sylvia's desire for financial stability, a concern that would have been exacerbated in light of his knowledge of Robert Graves's maxim that an individual cannot devote themselves to Goddess and wife simultaneously (Graves, 1948, p. 456). The drudgeries of monotony began to be felt in Eastham and, in conjunction with this, Sylvia was dealing with a pregnancy scare, realizing how a baby could potentially squash and squander her job at Smith, her writing, her travels: 'clang, clang, one door after another banged shut with the overhanging terror which, I know now, would end me, probably Ted, and our writing' (*J*, p. 294). Although they would find that she was not pregnant, Sylvia received bad news in the form of her failure to win the Yale Younger Poets contest, about which she had been fantasizing; dreaming up an ideal situation whereby she had caught up with Ted's own success, yet it was not to be. Sylvia was deflated, dejected:

> Worst: it gets me feeling so sorry for myself, that I can get concerned about Ted: Ted's success, which I must cope with this fall with my job (…) feeling so wishfully that I could make both of us feel better by having it with him. I'd rather have it this way, if either of us was successful: that's why I could marry him, knowing he was a better poet than I and that I would never have to restrain my little gift, but could push it and work it to the utmost, and still feel him ahead (*J*, p. 295).

Despite Sylvia's doubts in relation to her progress, experiencing a bout of creative-block and indolence, she was still carving out creative avenues along which she would draw up a plot line for *The Bell Jar* and realize the fine poem 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor' that would later be published in *The New Yorker* in June 1958. Indeed, the images of coastal habitation in Sylvia's poem reveal the degree to which the sea was influencing the semantic field of her poetry, which was also the case with Hughes, as conveyed in his *Birthday Letters* poem 'Flounders', in which life-by-the-sea signifies a life of unbounded freedom and adventure, a life that Ted seems to suggest would have been the case had they not devoted themselves to their sullen art and craft:

> It was a visit from the goddess, the beauty
> Who was poetry's sister – she had come

[68] In her copy of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Plath wrote, 'cf: Sybil in Dialogue Over a Ouija Board' on p. 37. SPC, Smith.

To tell poetry she was spoiling us.
Poetry listened, maybe, but we heard nothing
And poetry did not tell us. And we
Only did what poetry told us to do (*CPTH*, 1084 – 1085).

Sylvia began teaching at Smith, creating a highly personal syllabus which included writers to whom she had developed a life-long devotion, such as Joyce, Dostoevsky, Hopkins, Yeats, and Eliot, which would have given her a deeper insight into aesthetics and the tools thereby required to produce high art. Yet, her appointment at Smith did not work out and by the end of the year she would leave; Ted meanwhile took a job teaching at Amherst University. Although there were many highs there were also lows, one of which consisted in Sylvia being suspicious of Ted having an affair with one of his students, thus driving her into a negative spirit of distrust and fury, as noted in her journals, delineating all the traits that got on her nerves, describing him as 'a liar and vain smiler', 'great inert heavy flesh', a 'Fake. Sham ham' (*J*, p. 391). Suspicions of Ted's infidelity could be linked, psychoanalytically, to the sudden death and disappearance of her father, and therefore any act of betrayal or withdrawal from Ted could reactivate the traumatic event of her own father's death. This reaction to Hughes' supposed infidelity could be read as an instance of 'negation', in Freudian terms, the revealing of 'unconscious and repressed materials (Freud, 'Negation', 1925, p. 181-82). She would repudiate suicide, 'to slit my wrists and lie in the bath' (*J*, p. 233); Plath would instead immerse herself in work: 'I (…) will write and write well' (ibid). Plath resolved to follow these same lines five years later, when Hughes did break the oaths of marriage and cheated on her. This episode – an incident in which Sylvia happened to see Ted with another girl after receiving certain signals from him that were out of character – may have sown the seeds that started to cast their relationship in shades of doubt. Axelrod postulates that Hughes was insensitive and did not attend to Sylvia's needs and even goes so far as to suggest he unconsciously wanted to keep her weak and vulnerable, concluding that this state of affairs was a symptom of their inability to be open, to communicate, therefore perpetuating the conditions for misunderstanding one another, and, consequently, the other became – as Hughes would later say – mere 'chapters in the other's mythology' (1990, p. 183).

Indeed, reservations in regard to their marriage were creeping up and Sylvia made the decision to return to her old psychoanalyst, Dr Ruth Beuscher, who, as a Freudian, diagnosed an 'Electra complex,' exploring the rage against her mother in the wake of her father's death and the ways in which Aurelia could have been undermining the marriage with her constant presence and

qualms about Ted's lack of financial stability and support. However, not all was doom and gloom: on the contrary, Ted was still receiving much praise – including a cherished letter from T.S Eliot praising his work – and, while in Boston, Sylvia began attending Robert Lowell's creative writing classes at Boston University – and with whom both she and Ted would have dinner-parties, discuss poetry; and having read Hughes's 'Pike' poem, Lowell called it a masterpiece, a poem that would then be reproduced as a broadside (Bate, 2015, p. 145). No doubt too that Lowell's autobiographical style – alongside that of Anne Sexton whom Plath had come to frequent in Lowell's seminar – was having an influence on Sylvia's own poetry; she was now even giving implicit nods to her depression and suicide attempts in poems such as 'The Disquieting Muses,' 'Lorelei,' and 'Full Fathom Five,' highlighting a poetic turn in her work – a turn that had shifted to a more direct and impersonal style. 'Lorelei', like 'Full Fathom Five' is written in *aba* tercets and introduces us to the more mature voice of 'Elm' and 'Edge', which would come after. Plath starts the poem with hope: 'It is no night to drown in: / A full moon, river lapsing / Black beneath bland mirror-sheen,' however, the poem ends obscurely:

> O river, I see drifting
> Deep in your flux of silver
> Those great goddesses of peace.
> Stone, stone, ferry me down there (*SPCP*, p. 94).

Ted had already driven her towards an 'unsentimental' direction; he encouraged 'the unbroken practice (…) necessary – her style and self [were] changing so rapidly', noting the poem, 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor,' an incredibly stylized poem which, in its seven lines of seven syllables, gives broad space to imagination (*LTH*, 127-28). The speaker in the poem contemplates whether the crab 'Died recluse or suicide', coming to a striking, catching conclusion:

> The crab-face, etched and set there,
>
> Grimaced as skulls grimace: it
> Had an Oriental look,
> A samurai death mask done
> On a tiger tooth, less for
> Art's sake than God's. Far from sea –
> Where red-freckled crab-backs, claws
> And whole crabs, dead, their soggy

Bellies pallid and upturned,
Perform their shambling waltzes
On the waves' dissolving turn
And return, losing themselves
Bit by bit to their friendly
Element – this relic saved
Face, to face the bald-faced sun (*SPCP*, p. 95).

Admirably, the artist's 'relic' stays intact and is 'saved', regardless of death. The highly structured meter of the poem finds its predecessor in Marianne Moore's syllabic verse and Hughes' 'Relic' – 'I found this jawbone at the sea's edge: / There, crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers or tossed' (*THCP*, p. 78). There is no wistful meeting between self and nature in Hughes' poem: 'The deeps are cold: / In that darkness camaraderie does not hold: / Nothing touches but, clutching, devours' (ibid) – as in 'Wind', nature in Hughes' poems is immoral and unscrupulous.

Plath inaugurated a new creative phrase – 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor' and 'Nocturne' were accepted by *The New Yorker* after years of coldness and silence on their part; poetry editor Howard Moss considered them 'marvelous' and 'extremely fine' poems (*L2*, p. 252). Money was not such a distressful issue anymore; Hughes had already written twenty-eight poems for his new collection *Lupercal* and was making a name for himself; Sylvia was beginning to disavow the decorum and tasteful tact of juvenilia and, although she received criticism from Marianne Moore and struggled with her mental health, she was convinced one should 'worship one's own god of vocation & [should not] slight it for grubbing under the illusion of duty to Everybody's-Way-Of-Life!' (*L2*, p. 249). The transformative effect of Sexton's poetry cannot be understated; indeed, Sylvia would blatantly appropriate Sexton's rhythms and themes of Jewish victimhood, mental struggle and vengeance. Moreover, in conjunction with his seminars, Lowell's *Life Studies* ushered in a deeply personal and informal poetics with a confessional style, a style that, as noted, had an influence on Sylvia but nonetheless did not sit well with Hughes who argued that poetry in America was too focused on the self: 'Never a locality, or a community, or an organization of ideas' (*LTH*, p. 140).

Hughes reflected on American poetry in a letter to Luke Myers in which he discussed, among other literary matters, William Carlos William's concerns with 'sexy girls, noble whores, the flower of poverty, tough straight talk' and described E. E. Cummings as 'one of the first symptoms and general encouragements of the modern literary syphilis – verseless, styleless,

characterless all-inclusive undifferentiated yelling assertion of the Great simplifying burden-lifting God orgasm – whether by drug, negro, masked nympho or strange woman in the dark' (ibid, p. 145). In his poetry, Ted was trying to combine the solid, ferocious eye of the *Hawk* with a tough, down-to-earth American voice without the free mode of the confessional style. He told Luke that rather than the 'electronic noise' he heard coming from the suicidal Hart Crane, in John Crowe Ramson's writings he found 'a whole human being, alert, sensitive, reacting precisely and finely to his observations' (ibid). He wanted British poetry to return to its wholeness, to weave 'the thick rope of human nature' he found in the works of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Blake and Burns. The 'stereotype English voice' of the gentleman needed reform; what Hughes thought was needed in literature was a voice of rural, working-class roots, ungentlemanly in tone – Lawrentian, a name Ted curiously did not mention in his letter, maybe by way of 'anxiety of influence' (ibid, p. 146). D. H. Lawrence, who wrote immediately before Ted, was able to compare a woman's genitals to the 'wonderful moist conductivity' of a fig, displaying an admirable sensitivity to the forces of nature – an attribute which, combined with his unapologetic, northern working-class voice and his interests in myth and archetype, frame him as one of Hughes' most formative predecessors. Before spending some months at Yaddo, a rural hideaway for writers in upstate New York, Leonard Baskin, who was a close friend to Plath and Hughes, was considering a design for Hughes' next cover. Ted gave him clues, hinting at the 'general drift' of the poems: 'Man as an elaborately perfected intestine, or upright weasel' (ibid, p. 147). Faber also accepted 'a book of 8 poems' for kids – *Meet my Folks!*, each poem about relatives – a sister who is actually a crow, an aunt eaten by a thistle, and so forth. Ted told his editor, Charles Monteith, that this was his version of Lowell's *Life Studies*, a collection published in the same period and which included poems with titles such as 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow' about family memories and married life. It would take a long time for Ted to write in the same kind of 'confessional' voice about his family and life experiences, let alone his marriage.

Before returning to England after the Yaddo retreat that autumn of 1959, Hughes and Sylvia decided they should travel across America, and so they went. In Aurelia's car, they first visited the Great Lakes, crossing the border with Canada and taking beautiful pictures. The 10-week road-trip took them through mountain, prairie and desert, to California and back. When camping at Yellowstone National Park, a bear hunting their food inspired Plath's later short story 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear', considered one of her most successful – a couple, Sadie and Norton, try to scare a bear away, but Norton ends up being killed. Rather more disturbing than

his death is the way in which Sadie's thoughts are troubled by Norton's arrogance; she wants him dead, and he too daydreams about being a widower:

> A hollow-cheeked, Hamletesque figure in somber suits, given to standing, abstracted, ravaged by casual winds on lonely promontories and at the end of rail of ships, Sadie's slander, elegant white body embalmed, in a kind as if bas relief, on the central tablet of his mind. It never occurred to Norton that his wife might outlive him. Her sensuousness, her pagan enthusiasms, her inability to argue in terms of anything but her immediate emotions – this too was flimsy, too gossamer a stuff to survive out from under the wings of his guardianship (*JP*, 1977, p. 98).

In the longest poem in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes gives his own memories of the experience with the bear:

> Wrenched out – a star of shatter splayed
> From a single talon's leverage hold
> A single claw forced into the hair-breadth odour
> Had ripped the whole sheet out. He'd leaned in
> And on claw hooks lifted out our larder.
> He'd left matted hairs. I glued them in my Shakespeare (*THCP*, p. 1103).

Ted ends the poem reflecting on Sylvia's short story – the bear as an image of death looming on the husband is in reality a projection of what she felt was awaiting her, expressed as a desire to exorcise it. When they arrived in California, Ted did not share with Sylvia the sense of climax: 'What was so symbolic about the Pacific?' Yet, they 'kept to the programme of romance / Slept in [their] sleeping bags under the stars / Tried to live up to the setting'. [69]

Faber and Faber accepted Hughes' second volume of poetry, *Lupercal*. Meanwhile, Sylvia had become pregnant in the summer. Although concerned about setting her dreams aside for motherhood, in the shadow of her prior fear of barrenness – after having had her tubes flushed (an ordinary gynecological practice to increase fertility) – she now felt like 'an Earth Mother in the deepest richest of sense' (*J*, 501). She also feared Ted might leave her; the title of his new poetry collection described a Roman fertility ceremony. At 'America's Delphi', Ted and Sylvia blessed the baby in Sylvia's womb as a reward for their journey. In of the greatest places in the world, Navajo dancers were beating a drum, creating in music an echo which Ted could thirty years afterwards hear in his daughter's voice (*THCP*, 1104-1106). Road tripping was

[69] Draft in red exercise book (BL Add. MS 88918/1).

hard in many ways, especially now that Sylvia was pregnant. In 1960's 'Sleep in the Mojave Desert', Sylvia recollected the disordering surrealism of the desert's landscape:

> The desert is white as a blind man's eye
> Comfortless as salt. Snake and bird
> Doze behind the old masks of fury.
> We swelter like firedogs in the wind (*SPCP*, p. 143).

Hughes, too, in 'Grand Canyon' gives us a picture of what they went through:

> We were rumbled by the shock-waves
> Coming off the sky vistas at us –
> The thunder-beings that swept against us and through us
> Out of the road's jackrabbits and the beer-can constellations
> We drove into the dark (*THCP*, p. 1105).

After a stay in Yaddo, where Hughes wrote a now-lost play and revised his upcoming collection, *Lupercal*. Sylvia had seemingly broken free from the straight-jacket of her previous thesaurus-orientated turn of phrase, an exemplar of which is 'Poem for a Birthday,' in which her voice synchronizes with her own selfhood. There was no longer a rift between the words and her sense of self – drawing on ideas such as nature, madness, identity; indeed, for the first time she was writing, in an overt and unsentimental way, about her suicide attempt, mental breakdowns, shock therapy – all of which was shone through a thematic prism of death and rebirth (Bate, 2015, p. 156). 'Man in Black', a poem inspired by the sight of Hughes walking on white stones in Boston's North Shore, was accepted by *The New Yorker* soon after. They went to Winthrop to visit Otto Plath's grave; Sylvia was ready to 'prove [her dad] existed and really was dead' (*J*, p. 473). 'And you', in other words, Ted, 'in your dead / Black coat, black shoes, and your / Black hair' – stood, in a 'Fixed vortex', merging it all together: her father's death, Sylvia's life, the stones, the ocean. (*SPCP*, p. 119). According to Bate, 'Sylvia's black imagination (…) dug Otto out of his grave – and reincarnated him in her husband' (2015, p. 158).

Sylvia and Ted returned to England; and, after having spent Christmas and New Year in Yorkshire, they moved to a flat in Chalcot Square. Soon after they had moved into their new abode, Sylvia signed a contract for her first collection, *The Colossus*, which would be first published in 1960 and which she dedicated to Ted: 'that paragon who encouraged me through all my glooms about it' (*LH*, p. 424). It included many poems written at Yaddo, where Sylvia

found herself at peace and therefore could 'confront, rather than sidestep, her psychic pain in her poems' (Clark, 2020, p. 574). 'The Manor Garden' deepens our insight into Plath's anxiety towards motherhood from the Jungian perspective of devil children growing in a loving mother's womb; 'The Colossus', a proto-feminist requiem for her father, establishes itself as a less worshipful revision of the former 'Electra on Azalea Path'. There is no demureness in 'The Colossus':

> I shall never get you put together entirely,
> Pieced, glued or properly jointed.
> Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
> Proceed from your great lips.
> It's worse than a barnyard.
>
> Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
> Mouthpiece of the dead, or some god or other.
> Thirty years now I have labored
> To dredge the silt from your throat. I am none the wiser.

In a symbolical denunciation of all father figures, together with the authority they represent, Sylvia incorporated elements of *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Gulliver's Travels* – 'Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol / I crawl like an ant in mourning / Over the weedy acres of your brow' – getting rid of patriarchal culture, in her own private sense; Plath does not seem to be looking for approval from her actual and literary fathers: 'No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel / On the blank stones of the landing' (*SPCP*, p. 129). Reiterating this Swiftian imagery, 'The Stones' – the stoutest section in 'Poem for a Birthday' – reflects Sylvia's life experiences more implicitly: 'A workman walks by carrying a pink torso. / The storerooms are full of hearts. / This is the city of spare parts.' In any case, Sylvia mused: she 'shall be good as new' (*SPCP*, p. 137). Hughes later wrote: 'Bowed over your desk at Yaddo / Moored in some psychic umbilicus / Writing your Poem for a Birthday. / You thought it was your birthday, / Your rebirth. You wanted to be reborn.' [70]

In light of this publishing success – publishing with a house that boasted names such as Maugham, Evelyn Waugh and D.H. Lawrence – Sylvia had achieved all that she had ever wanted: marriage with a brilliant poet, imminent motherhood, and publication. *Lupercal* was published on 18th March, two weeks before the birth of their first child, Frieda. Reviews of his

[70] TH, draft of 'Delivering Frieda', eventually published as 'Remission'. Add MS 88918/1/2-8, BL.

collection praised his technical skill and originality, marking him out as one of the most important and exciting voices of his generation, a voice that revolted against the genteel niceties of the 'Movement' (Clark, 2020, p. 595). *Lupercal* contains some of Hughes's best-known poems, such as 'Hawk Roosting,' 'View of a Pig,' 'Thrushes,' and 'Living' among others. It is a collection that embodies the violence of place: 'Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn, / More coiled steel than living – a poised / Dark deadly eye' (*Lupercal*, 1960, p. 50). Indeed, Hughes seems to be incorporating Dr Johnson's edict whereby 'the most heterogenous ideas are yoked by violence together'. [71] This violence yokes together various trademark elements in Hughes' poetry: totemic animals, his love of water, landscape, people – all of which collide to connote a central theme, one that depicts the way in which humankind is subject to the power of nature, is at the mercy of the elements of the earth; moreover, humankind is at the mercy of its own nature – that is to say, *Lupercal* is aware of the rise and fall of civilization, of humankind's capacity to annihilate itself through total war; the poems, as a whole, illuminate violence along civic and elemental lines, often manifested randomly, chaotically, jokingly. One of the ways in which these ideas find form is through inhabiting the animal's subjectivity, as is the case with 'Hawk Roosting,' which assumes the point of view of the hawk, speaking in the first person:

> I sit at the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
> Inaction, no falsifying dream
> Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
> Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.
>
> ……..
>
> It took the whole of Creation
> To produce my foot, my each feather:
> Now I hold Creation in my foot
>
> Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –
> I kill where I please because it is all mine.
> There is no sophistry in my body:
> My manners are tearing off heads –
>
> The allotment of death.

[71] Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Cowley', in *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-1781).

For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this (*Lupercal*, 1960, p. 24).

The poem is devoid of sentimentalism and romanticism – on the contrary, Hughes portrays an animal at the top of the food chain who lives by the death of others; yet, this instinctive behavior constitutes its nature, a nature that has not changed since the beginning, suggesting how nature has no history but rather continues as it ever was and as it always will be. Many years later when interviewed, Hughes accepted and denied the interpretation of the hawk as a fascist: 'The truth kills everybody'; the poem was ultimately 'about Peace' – 'the symbol of some horrible genocidal dictator' conjoins with what he had in mind: 'this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature'. In line with the development of his poetry through *Wodwo* and *Crow*, to *River*, Hughes' birds of prey and other creatures – ascribed with the human capacity to reflect upon its being-in-the-world – often reveal a tension between the romantic view of nature as fundamentally harmonious and innocent with one that sees itself as instinct, raw and uninhibited, compelled to kill without remorse. 'Hawk Roosting' is written in free verse and made up of six stanzas, all quatrains; it is not bound to any rhyme pattern or meter; all of which, in terms of form, indicates an uncontrollable freedom that may represent the ruthlessness and immorality of nature; this is juxtaposed to the typography of the poem that – on paper, at least – looks neat and controlled, formal and well-balanced, which might mirror the romantic perceptions and ideals that had dominated the popular imagination of nature. This romantic position may find its counterpart when faced with words such as 'hooked,' 'locked,' and 'kill' – that is to say, the physical, 'rough' materiality of nature – subverting its stereotypically sublime, ideal form. Such a powerful, brave poetics heralded a new voice in English poetry. 'Isis, mother of the gods' translated into 'Hitler's familiar spirit' – 'Nature is no longer so simple'. [72] Such reflections on Nature and Creation – themes that would become the ideological and aesthetic scaffolding of much of his oeuvre – echo *Graves's White Goddess*, which Ted would further develop in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, giving special

[72] Interview with Ekbert Faas, in *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 199.

attention to the attack on the cult of Mary, the banishment of the Goddess, the renunciation of nature.

Sylvia gave birth to Frieda Rebecca Hughes on 1st April 1960, succeeding *Lupercal* by exactly two weeks, 'white as flour with the cream that covers new babies, little funny dark squiggles of hair plastered over her head, with big dark blue eyes' – which she told Aurelia were Otto's (*L2*, p. 446). Sylvia wrote jokingly in a letter to Ted's brother Gerald, that 'both productions', Frieda and *Lupercal*, were 'well received by the world at large & are, [they] hope[d], destined to brilliant futures' (*L2*, p. 457). Ted had been living under 'great excitement' – Sylvia 'expecting her baby (…), [his] writing, [his] euphoria,' (…) and 'The hangover of exhaustion from the [previous] nine months, which, for the first time in [his] life, showed [him his] health crack via nerves'. [73] Ted suffered what seemed to be a panic attack at the BBC a few days before his baby was born, in part because of Frieda's due date having passed, in part because of his 'own dread of recognition' – for he had won the Summerset Maugham Award for *Lupercal*, and "believe[d] the most violent hidden reactions in [him were] connected with 'literary public life' as it threaten[ed him] (…) [he had] no doubt that involvement in all that would eventually kill [him]' and deemed his crisis 'was punishment' from 'her' – the White Goddess. He trusted he had received 'a genuine lesson' (ibid). Ted took care of the house and Sylvia admired the attention and care he reserved for Frieda: 'You should see him rocking her & singing to her!'; Ted thought Sylvia a wonderful mother, too (*L2*, p. 453). Only two weeks after her birth, Frieda took part in the CND anti-bomb protest in Trafalgar Square – 'an immensely moving experience' (ibid, 461). Sylvia was 'proud that the baby's first real adventure should be as a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation – already a certain percentage of unborn children are doomed by fallout and noone [*sic*] knows the culminative effects of what is already poisoning the air & sea' (ibid, p. 462).

Sylvia's first published collection, *The Colossus*, was published on 31st October. The work is an abstract representation of the ambiguous dance of thought and emotion, but – according to some – they were still formed within the confines of convention; poems such as 'The Colossus' and 'The Disquieting Muses' articulate the thoughts of an aggrieved daughter in a powerfully stylistic manner yet do not offer subversion or experimentation – on the contrary, they remain compliant, controlled; it was as if, as Clark points out, the pressure was building up but still had not found release – a release that would find its form in *Ariel* (2020, p. 615). Indeed,

[73] TH, notebook entry, 29 Mar. 1960. Add MS 88948/1/2, BL.

Sylvia's debut collection would not earn her the same recognition as Hughes, who was struggling to deal with the limelight – being invited to a various readings and screenings which detracted from the real business of writing (ibid, p. 617). Although, like Hughes, Sylvia was reviewed by Al Alvarez who claimed Plath avoided 'feminine charm, deliciousness, gentility, supersensitivity and the act of being a poetess. She simply writes good poetry. And she does so with a seriousness that demands only that she be judged equally seriously…' [74] On the following page of Alvarez's review of Sylvia – to which he gave the greatest prominence out of the three books he had reviewed that day – was his very own pick of the year for the best poetry collection: *Lupercal*. Therefore, their reputation was made concrete; their partnership 'had never been so strong' (Clark, 2020, p. 621). Sylvia and Ted met Al Alvarez, a young Poetry critic at *The Observer*, in the spring of 1960. He married Frieda Lawrence's granddaughter, Ursula Barr, and defined himself as a 'London Jew' who engaged in freelance criticism afore scholarship. Al Alvarez became an important figure in Sylvia's life at the time of *Ariel*'s publication and before that; after Sylvia's death, in publishing his memoir which Ted defined as 'the ultimate sensational desired event', Al Alvarez seemingly betrayed Hughes' trust, doing something 'unethical in every way, a wrong thing to do in the confidences of a friendship, a wrong thing to do with a keyhole view of an event that went out of everybody's grasp' – that is, Sylvia's death. (Malcolm, 1993, p. 127-128).

3.2 'Nobody can tell what I lack'

By the end of the year, with a newborn baby and after many reviews and publications of their works, both Plath and Hughes were exhausted; Ted would decide to refuse any kind of public speaking and 'cumbersome commissions' as 'public life appall[ed] him' (*L2*, p. 555). In a letter to Aurelia and Warren, Ted describes 'the busiest, most preoccupied year [he had] ever spent': 'To enter 'literary life' is in fact to enter a small windowless cell, empty, under a stunning spotlight, and left to your own devices in the knowledge that millions of invisible eyes are watching through the walls. It's not 'life' at all, you see. And it cuts you off from life' (*LTH*, p. 171). Even so, Plath was still looking for recognition and *The Colossus* received many good reviews from renowned critics such as John Wain in *The Spectator*, Austin Clarke in *The Irish*

[74] A. Alvarez, 'The Poet and The Poetess', *Observer* (18 Dec. 1960), p. 21.

Times and Roy Fuller in *The London Magazine,* in addition to the already mentioned Al Alvarez in *The Observer*. Still, the collection won no prizes and could not be found in any London bookshop. Plath was anxious about not being able to find her readers; nevertheless, she sent a copy to Mr. Crockett with a fond letter in which she mentioned dinners with Stephen Spender and T. S. Eliot. Ted could not stand Spender, whom he found 'poisonous' and 'slimy' and could hardly endure the talk about politics and literature of the 1930s; [75] Sylvia enjoyed the 'fascinating' literary gossip and was given a ticket by Spender for *Lady Chatterley's Lover* obscenity trial – a triumph for literature and the couple's vision of relationships (*L2*, p. 531) Plath saw infidelity in the novel as 'sacred', 'highly moral' and 'spiritual' and shared the ideas at the core of the book; nevertheless, when infidelity occurred in her marriage, it might have been harder to see things in the same way (ibid, p. 539; *J*, p. 596-599).

While Hughes worked on the *Bardo Thodol* and his poetry, Sylvia tried to work on stories she could sell to American women's magazines, but life was proving difficult – Frieda started teething and Sylvia could hardly get any sleep – she felt 'haggard' and dreamed of selling enough works to be able to afford a full-time babysitter (*L2*, p. 554). *The Poet's Voice* broadcasted 'Candles' and 'Leaving Early'; still, that would not sustain a mortgage. Sylvia was even considering finding a 'queer parttime' job (ibid, p. 551). Plath did not want to be an overindulgent mother and tried to balance the time she spent with Frieda with that which she dedicated to writing. By the end of the year, only a few months after giving birth, Sylvia was pregnant again. Meanwhile, the couple's social life was more and more eventful; in early 1961 they beca,e acquainted with M. L. Rosenthal, the poetry editor of *The Nation* who coined the term 'confessional' – Plath's works would be forever accompanied by that definition. Eleonor Ross Taylor and Peter, her husband, invited them to dinner; Thom Gunn visited them, and Plath was excited about meeting her 'Influence' at a party, Theodore Roethke (ibid, p. 572). Uniformity of achievement in the couple seemed to have been reached when both recorded *Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership* [76] on the BBC. Hughes' Yorkshire inflections and Plath's mid-Atlantic impressed listeners; Leeming, who interviewed them, seems enthralled by their marriage – how did they write, together or separately? What was the influence the two had on each other? Questions which are still interesting and fascinating and which the couple answered in an 'united aesthetic front'; they 'campaigned for a new direction in British poetry' (Clark, 2020, p. 627). Leeming asked them if their characters were 'parallel or in conflict'? To which

[75] TH to Olwyn Hughes, late Oct. 1960. Add MS 88948/1/2, BL.
[76] *The Spoken Word: Sylvia Plath*. British Library / National Sound Archives / BBC Audio Compilation (2010).

Hughes, who seems a great deal more composed than Sylvia, replied: 'I think superficially we're very alike (…) we live at the same tempo, have the same sort of rhythm in every sort of way, but obviously this is a very fortunate covering for temperaments that are extremely different but that lead secret lives, you see. They content themselves in an imaginary world so they never really come into open conflict'. Plath considered herself 'much more distractable' than her husband, who could write on any occasion, while she needed her space. Hughes went on:

> Apart from the (…) experiences of my life, I also have in a way Sylvia's experiences of hers, and all the experiences she's had in the past (…) and in this way, two people who are sympathetic to each other (…) who are compatible in this sort of spiritual way, they in fact make up one person, they make up one source of power which you both use and you can draw out material in incredible detail from this single shared mind.

Plath seems more 'pragmatic' in her reading of their mutual influence in the Leeming interview – Ted's fascination with the animal world resulted in her own interest in it, thus, the image of beekeeping became 'part of [her] poems', which she thought was a 'direct result of knowing Ted'. She thought she knew 'more about [her] own past through [him] than she would otherwise'. Although Hughes believed 'she was a genius', [77] and in the interview with Leeming Plath said she would 'never be writing as [she was] and as much as [she was] without [Ted's] cooperation', *Poets in Partnership* discloses some unease on her part; she laughed apprehensively when Hughes proposed the view that his *Lupercal* poem, 'View of a Pig', 'was the complete reversal' of her theme in 'Sow'. Deep down, as Clark suggests, Sylvia was afraid her "literary ambitions could have easily 'collapsed' under the weight of Hughes' fame" (2020, p. 628). Still, she was 'determined to keep writing in the face of society's expectations' and to break 'new grounds in her marriage' (ibid).

Sylvia miscarried in February, she 'lost the little baby (…) & [felt] really terrible about it'. She suffered from a bad appendix, which might have been the cause; yet, in 1962 Sylvia put forward a different cause to Dr. Beuscher:

> Ted beat me up physically a couple of days before my miscarriage: the baby I lost was due to be born on his birthday. I thought this an aberration & felt I had given him some cause, I had torn some of his papers in half, so they could be taped together, not lost, in a fury that he made me a couple of hours late to work at one of the several jobs I've had to eke out our income when things got tight –

[77] TH interview with Drue Heinz, 'The Art of Poetry, LXXI', *Paris Review* 134 (1995), in *Paris Review Interviews*, vol. 3 (London: Picador, 2008), p. 76.

> he was to mind Frieda. But now I feel the whole role of father terrifies him. He tells me now that it was weakness that made him unable to tell me he did not want children, and that his joyous planning with me of the names of our next two was out of cowardice as well. Well bloody hell, I've got twenty years to take the responsibility of this cowardice (*L2*, p. 830).

According to Hughes, he had only returned a little late from a lunch he had with Maria Doolan, who worked at the BBC as head of Schools Broadcasting, where he proposed a new radio series for schoolchildren (Bate, 2015, p. 37). In 1974, he told Francis McCullough, the editor of Plath's unabridged journals, that when he got back home, he saw one of Sylvia's 'rages', her 'demonic side, destructive', a 'black electricity'. (Clark, 2020, p. 630) Out of jealousy, Plath 'had torn up all his writing into strips, his writing and his notes' (ibid). The events of the evening remain a point of debate and conjecture, yet it represents the supposed fractures and fissures in their marriage; seemingly, Hughes was already distancing himself from the duties of domesticity while Sylvia was doubting her role as a housewife, which she apparently evokes in the poem 'Zoo Keeper's wife', written two weeks after their fight: 'I can stay awake all night, if need be – / Cold as an eel, without eyelids. / Like a dead lake the dark envelops me.' The narrator, supposedly refers to a miscarriage: 'But what do you know about that / My fat pork, my marrowy sweetheart, face-to-the-wall?' (*SPCP*, p. 154). The poem sheds light on an aggrieved and avenging woman, deploying a semantic field that would occupy *Ariel* poems such as 'The Jailer' and 'The Courage of Shutting-Up', the reading of which suggests that a caustic voice attacks the inadequacies of an insensitive husband.

Sylvia would turn to poetry to make sense of the chaos and uncertainty of her existence; a poem became the safe place in which she could transfigure disorder and thereby establish order, control, peace. This can be seen in the elegiac poem she wrote about her miscarriage, 'Parliament Hill Fields', in which she divulges the sorrow of losing a child: 'Your absence is inconspicuous; / Nobody can tell what I lack'; 'I suppose it's pointless to think of you at all. / Already your doll grip lets go', she writes, finding a form in which she could express her feelings of loss and grief, thus finding catharsis, a way to heal. Moreover, her experiences in hospital when she had her appendectomy would inspire many other writings, highlighting the way in which her worst experiences, her sufferings and doubts, would become the material with which she could create. Perhaps one of her most famous poems, 'Tulips,' was written ten days after leaving the hospital, a poem that merges ideas of death with that of life and love symbolized in the bloom of tulips:

> The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.

Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons (*SPCP*, p. 160).

The speaker of the poem details the inertia and vulnerability of being a patient, passive and immobile as a 'pebble,' and seems to have come to terms with ensuing death, yet the life and vibrancy of the tulips make her 'aware of my heart: it opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.' Tears pour from her eyes and the poem ends thus: 'The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea, / And comes from a country far away as health' (ibid). Hughes would write to others about 'Tulips,' expressing his praise: 'absolutely inspired… a real torrent' (*LTH*, p. 183). However, he was also perturbed by the poem's explicit, violent undercurrent: 'The red tulips – hearts terrifyingly vivid terrible. Organs pulsing something red and uncontrollable (…) Tulips the color of blooded yolks.' [78]

A difficult winter was met by the relief and promise of spring in which more publicity came their way – especially for Hughes who was reluctant in committing himself to the spotlight, much to the frustration of Sylvia who would sign a contract for her first collection to be published in America, by the prestigious *Knopf*. At the same time, Sylvia would begin writing *The Bell Jar* and continue to assimilate experience into her writing, recording a life in crisis – especially in respects to sanity and madness. Indeed, R.D. Laing's 1965 antipsychiatry book, *The Divided Self*, 'contained many images and ideas that resonate with the *Ariel* poems' and, alongside the collective fear surrounding the Cold War and nuclear annihilation, *The Bell Jar* (Clark, 2020, p. 651). While Hughes experienced the commercial flop of his play, *The Calm*, a modern appropriation of *The Tempest*, Sylvia recorded a reading of her poems for BBC's *The Living Poet* series, about which she was very enthralled and 'honored' as the same series had broadcasted the likes of Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke (Clark, 2020, p. 655). After a trip to France to meet their friends, the Merwins – a trip that would inspire Sylvia to write 'Stars Over the Dordogne' – the couple would go on the hunt for a house and they found one in a village called North Tawton in Devon, named Court Green, which they decided to buy outright.

[78] Hughes journal, 12 Apr 1961.

Ted and Sylvia had found their bucolic arcadia in which they quickly settled. Sylvia composed many poems that contained the morbid imagery of devastation and emptiness, such as 'Wuthering Heights,' 'Blackberrying,' 'Finisterre,' 'Last Words,' 'Mirror,' 'The Babysitter,' 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.' and one of her finest, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree,' which Hughes had encouraged her to write as a kind exercise to help tackle her insomnia (Clark, 2020, p. 665). Sylvia felt 'inspired by her new surroundings', and 'feeling strong in her [new] pregnancy' – she expected Nicholas to be born in January 1962 (Bate, 2015, p. 178). Only a few months after she wrote 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', Plath won a $2000 Eugene Saxton Grant to work on *The Bell Jar* – yet, 'there was a darkness in her poetry' (ibid). The opening of the poem declares itself as an uncompromising depiction of melancholia: 'This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary'; 'The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue'; I simply cannot see where there is to get to'; 'I have fallen a long way.' Such lines reveal intense feelings of dejection and despair for which there is no remedy; indeed, the power of the poem derives from the ineluctability and irresolution of the speakers' depression and even the church in the distance – which might offer shelter and salvation – offers her no sense of redemption, hope, or faith:

> The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
> Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
> How I would like to believe in tenderness –
> The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
> Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

The poem offers no solution to the speaker's predicament but ends with the message of the yew tree, which is 'blackness – blackness and silence' (*SPCP*, p. 172-173). Hughes was all too aware of Sylvia's dissatisfaction and despondency and in response wrote the poem, 'The Beach', which seems to look at the world through Sylvia's eyes, describing England as 'filthy,' whereby only the 'sea could scour it' and, changing the mode of address – utilizing the direct second person – says: 'You wanted to be washed, scoured, sunned'; 'You sat behind your mask, inaccessible – / Staring toward the ocean that had failed you' (*CPTH*, p.1143 – 44). 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' 'depressed' Hughes greatly, who read into the moon, Plath's mother, and into the yew, her father. He later wrote "it [was his] suspicion that no poem can be a poem that is not a statement from the powers in control of our life, the ultimate suffering and decision in

us. It seems to me that this is poetry's only real distinction from the literary forms that we call 'not poetry'" [79]

3.3 'Ariel'

Nicholas Farrar Hughes was born on 17th January 1962 – Ted, as he did with Frieda, drew Nicholas' horoscope but this time asked Olwyn for guidance – the conjunctions were strange: he could not make sense of them. [80] Childcare kept them busy, they took turns with domestic duties; housewifery and lack of sleep became the central topic of Sylvia's letters to her family. On February 1, they listened to *The Wound* by Hughes and other publications followed for Plath, such as 'In Plaster' and 'Context' in *The London Magazine*. In April, Al Alvarez wrote in *The New Poetry*, a Penguin Books anthology, about Ted's fresh and innovative writing by contrasting Philip Larkin's 'At Grass' and Hughes' 'A Dream of Horses'; the first, being 'elegant and unpretentious and rather beautiful in its gentle way', the second, 'unquestionably *about* something; it is a serious attempt to re-create and so clarify, unfalsified and in the strongest imaginative terms possible, a powerful complex of emotions and sensations' creating 'a brute world' which is 'part physical, part state of mind' (Bate, 2015, p. 180). Alvarez 'included more poems by Hughes than anyone else' and this 'thrilled' him; Plath was 'neither represented', 'nor mentioned' which Alvarez would later regret, especially in light of reading her new poems in 1962 – poems that exemplified a 'new depth poetry' and went even further than Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in her representation of the dark, inner-workings of the psyche – and quickly realised that he had, until then, regarded her poetry as genteel which, he conceded, was an error of judgement and interpretation, for she was a genius in her own right (ibid, p. 181).

As the Hugheses became part of North Tawton community they made friends with the local bank manager, his wife and their daughter Nicola Tyrer, a sixteen-year-old girl with a love for literature who wanted to study English at university and who would eventually become a writer and a journalist. Ted suggested she could make use of some of their books at the house, in order to save money. Sylvia considered Nicola's appreciation of *The Wound*, which she had heard on the radio, 'cutely theatrical' when she came and visited; Ted recommended Nicola read

[79] 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 1895-1897.
[80] Emory, 980/1.

Woolf's *Orlando* and they sent each other letters when she went back to school. Sylvia once said 'some sharp words' when she thought them to be speaking 'a little too intimately' under the laburnums outside Court Green (*J*, p. 630-643; Bate, 2015, p. 182). On one occasion, Sylvia 'seriously considered smashing up [their] ridiculous box victrola with an axe' when Nicola asked to visit Court Green again to listen to Hughes' 'German linguaphone records' (*J*, p. 641). These notes on Nicola became fuel for the 130 pages draft Sylvia was collecting for a lost novel, to be entitled 'Doubletake' or 'Double Exposure'; [81] the anger which grew from the suspicion of betrayal on Hughes' part is only a glimpse of what Plath would feel when faced with Hughes' infidelity later that year.

Plath's study, her sanctuary, was as important to her as the air she breathed; 'as peaceful as churchgoing (…) the feeling that nothing else but writing and thinking [was done] there, no sleeping, eating or mundane stuff' (*L2*, p. 739). Many more of her poems were published that spring, among others, 'Context' in *The London Magazine* where Sylvia put forth her political anxieties towards the Cold War – on October 30, 1961, Russia had tested a nuclear bomb which had 'deeply disturbed' her (Clark, 2020, p. 687). In 'Context', we find images of 'tortured Algerians' and 'mass extinction'; yet, although concerned with what happened around her, Plath did not consider poetry 'political propaganda' (*JP*, p. 92). Images of brutal annihilation and outrage would later appear in 'Fever 103°' and other poems in *Ariel* in which we find 'Greasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in. / The sin. The sin' (*SPCP*, p. 231). Still, *Three Women*, a proto-feminist play broadcasted on the BBC later that summer and inspired by Ingmar Bergman's 1958 film *So Close to Life* set in a maternity ward, is an example of the direction in which Plath was going – she wanted to draw material from her own experiences, distancing herself from Hughes. This was new territory – motherhood, miscarriage, postpartum depression, all of which she had experienced; Plath was at another turning point:

> Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life.
> The trees wither in the street. The air is corrosive.
> I taste it in my own tongue, and the workable horrors,
> The horrors that stand and idle, the slighted godmothers
> With their hearts that tick and tick, with their satchels of instruments.
> I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting.

[81] The novel was lost around 1970, according to Ted, maybe a victim of the 1971 fire at his Yorkshire home.

I shall be a sky and a hill of good: O let me be! (*SPCP*, p. 180).

Sylvia was laying the foundations for the poetic pathway which would lead her to 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', where super-women heroines are on battle ground to fight the patriarchal powers which control their lives. These figures would stand on their own, proud and unwavering, in lyrics devoid of sentimentality yet full of expression and strength derived from lived experience and literary insight. In 'Elm', Plath explores her mental illness, her experiences with shock treatment and her miscarriage in ways she had not been able to before:

Love is a shadow.
How you cry after it
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf
Echoing, echoing.
…….
I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.
……..
I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly, it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity (*SPCP*, p. 192-193).

'Elm' eventually came to be what Sylvia last wrote before Assia Wevill's visit at Court Green. David and Assia, to whom Ted and Sylvia had sublet their Chalcot square flat, arrived on the third weekend in May. On Sunday morning, after spending Saturday together conversing about poetry, Ted and Assia were in the kitchen, 'peeling potatoes,' while Sylvia was outside in the garden talking to David; suddenly, Sylvia removed herself from proceedings and, as Assia later recalled, stormed in on Assia and Ted in the kitchen, before then asking them to leave straight after lunch: 'Ted kissed me in the kitchen, and Sylvia saw it,' Assia told David later on the train back up to London (Clark, p. 711). Debate surrounding Ted's infidelity abound in speculation although it was known, according to Bates, that Ted had been struggling to write

since the publication of *Lupercal* and projected this failure onto Sylvia and family life (2015, p. 186). In the poem, 'The Lodger,' Hughes conveys the fear of writer's block:

> I was already a discard,
> My momentum merely the inertias
> Of what I had been, while I disintegrated.
> I was already posthumous (*CPTH*, p. 1124).

The day after the Wevills' visit Sylvia composed 'The Rabbit Catcher,' which portrays marriage as a trap, with 'Tight wires' and 'Pegs too deep' 'and a mind like a ring / Sliding shut on some quick thing, / The constriction is killing [her] also' (*SPCP*, p. 193-194). Thus, there was something awry was in their marriage and both were feeling the grip of marriage tighten to the point at which it became suffocating. On the same day on which Sylvia composed 'The Rabbit Catcher,' she also wrote 'Event,' in which, having described a rift between a couple, the speaker concludes: 'Love cannot come here' (*SPCP*, p. 194). The relationship came to a head after a fateful telephone call from Assia, after which Sylvia burnt Ted's manuscripts in a fit of rage, an episode Ted would later recount in 'Burning the Letters'. Ted went to London to visit Assia and, upon reflection, realised that he was liberating himself from the 'bondage and tyranny' of his marriage (Bate, 2015, p. 190).

Assia and Ted satisfied their lust, yet nothing was official by way of divorce to Sylvia until, in August, she wrote to Aurelia that she was filing for divorce (ibid, p. 195). Ted would later write his Olwyn that he and Sylvia had decided to separate, describing the way in which the marriage seemed 'like the dead-end of everything,' and how he needed to be free and independent again (bid.). It would be in *Birthday Letters* that Hughes really came to terms with his separation from Sylvia, a book that can be read as an elegiac meditation on the myriad ways in which it went wrong; as Bates suggests, the *Birthday Letters* collection is 'selection and retrospection, the rear-view-mirror perspective' written to 'highlight symbolic moments of foreboding – auguries and portents – from the start and all the way through' (2015, p. 197). Perhaps the most sincere declaration of the failure of their marriage can be found in the poem 'Error' which describes the beginning of the end; how he had brought her to Devon, to 'Never-never land,' the 'vicarage rotting like a coffin, / Foundering under its weeds', where she would sit at her typewriter in silence 'listening / To the leaking thatch drip, the murmur of rain, / And staring at that sunken church' (*CPTH*, p. 1121-3) The poem reimagines Coleridge's rural ideal in 'Frost at Midnight' and reframes it as a nightmare; indeed, what Hughes thought would happen

turned out to be quite the opposite. Unlike Ted, the separation propelled Sylvia into a creative frenzy, her imagination fuelled by rage at Ted; she was writing explosively emotional poems such as the famous 'Daddy' whereby the speaker rails against a paternal dictator figure, a 'vampire,' ending with a final stanza that, by refuting to make peace with the dead, transforms elegiac and feminine conventions:

> 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.
> Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through (*SPCP*, p. 222).

'Daddy' has become one of the most famous poems of the twentieth century that, one that, on the one hand, was denounced by the likes of Harold Bloom and Seamus Heaney who called into account the troubling way in which she appropriates the Holocaust to poetic ends, while on the other hand others – Maggie Nelson and George Steiner among them – proclaimed the poem to be a modern masterpiece; soon after its publication the poem would become a central artwork in the feminist movement (Clark, 2020, p. 774). The poem shows all the elements of the avant-garde insofar as it rejects convention and sentimentality and replaces it with a surreal logic all of its own, all of which is unapologetically exclaimed in the curse word 'Bastard', highlighting a confidence and irreverence that clears the space for a powerful and new female poetics.

Another poem written around the same period that reprises similar images and motifs is 'Lady Lazarus,' in which Sylvia reshapes the mythological figure into a female martyr who seeks revenge on her male counterpart; divulging the metaphor of death and resurrection with a barricade of obscene depictions accompanied by broken rhyming tercets. Sylvia is aiming to shock and provoke the reader, unsettle any preconceptions by subverting expectation. One way in which this is achieved is through apostrophe, a direct address at 'God' or 'Lucifer', all of whom seem to stand for the patriarchal society embodied in the German expression 'Herr' to which she is subjected and by which she suffers – and yet the speaker of the poem will not cower or submit, but has revenge:

> Ash, ash—
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air (*SPCP*, p. 244).

By incorporating the classical heroines of mythology and the victims of twentieth century atrocities Sylvia is able to express her own despair and distress, not only in respect to her own life but also in respect to the world around her; indeed, her own personal anxieties were manifested in the outside world as threats of nuclear annihilation loomed large; and thus the personal, subjective reality of her own personal malaise seemed to align itself seamlessly with the geopolitical reality of the Cold War situation (Clark, 2020, p. 788). Between April and October Sylvia had more or less compiled the poems that would make up *Ariel*, including the poem 'Ariel,' in which she invokes the personification of animals found in Hughes's work – in particular the thought-fox – using instead the figure of Ariel, a mare bursting with Shakespearean and Greek mythological possibility. The speed and power of the horse are conveyed artfully through techniques of consonance: 'Stasis in darkness / Then the substanceless blue', and assonance 'How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees! – The furrow' (*SPCP*, p. 239).The galloping rhythm derived from her use of enjambment, unites with the poem's structure to create an electric drama of velocity and renewal that could be – like Hughes's thought-fox – describing the vertiginous act of writing, whereby the writer becomes one with her art and craft:

And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning (ibid).

Despite the mesmerizing innovation and revelation of this sequence of poems – alongside other classics such as 'Purdah,' 'Fever 103°,' 'Poppies in October,' and 'Sheep in the Fog' – they were all rejected by *The New Yorker,* which supposedly found them too 'subversive' to publish. Plath having suspected that she was creating something genuinely new, was left dejected, wondering if these masterpieces would ever see the light of day. However, having been in touch with Alvarez who was only too happy to read her new poems – and other literary circles – Sylvia decided to move back to London. Upon listening to and reading Sylvia's new poems, Alvarez was greatly impressed and was most taken aback by 'Ariel', telling her it was 'the best thing she had done' (Clark, 2020, p. 799). Sylvia was bowled over by Alvarez's praise and, soon after, she gave a reading of her poems for *The Poet Speaks* and distanced herself from Hughes and the contemporary 'straightjacket' of 'gentility' of the English poetry scene, pooling herself with her American peers Sexton and Lowell instead. She would go on to defend her poetry – especially 'Daddy' – in the interview: 'I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured (…) I believe personal experience is very important (…) I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on' (Clark, 2020, p. 802).

At the end of fall, Sylvia moved to London having signed a lease for Yeats's old house. Both she and Ted had had a reunion one night, walking around Soho square before returning to Dido's flat with Sylvia in hysterics, a night about which Ted would later reminisce in the poem 'Soho Square':

> With my arm round you I tried to calm you.
> The support of my left arm let you collapse.
> I hung on, out of my depth:
> In your torrent of grief, I could not check it
> Or escape it, or see any way out of it.
>
> We went round & round, in your great grief,
> In your maelstrom, like debris.
> I just concentrated on lasting it out
> And keeping your head up. Till I cracked –
> And we got into Dido's flat. I thought you might sleep.
> But the flood would not stop.
> The mountain of pain went on melting…
> … Volcanic

Beyond your strength to control it. Futile
Neighbors below banged on their ceiling.

I rolled under it all.
A boulder, irrelevant
While that tidal wave, that eruption
From your childhood, swamped and buried our world.

I did not see my chance
To launch an arc. All it needed
Was a little vessel. That was the chance
I was too bewildered to take.
And the next day separated us, barely
Sharing a name, flood-victims, cold-mouthed. [82]

Sylvia and the children moved into the Yeats flat on December 9. Sylvia quickly settled and became reacquainted with some old friends; Ted said he visited her most days although Sylvia saw it differently, saying that he came 'once a week like a kind of apocalyptic Santa Claus'. [83] Nevertheless, Ted did his best to open up possibilities for her, making an effort to promote her new poems, yet they were deemed too charged and provocative (ibid). The winter proved to be tough; excessively cold and wet, the weather only exacerbated her already-deepening depression. Both Ted and Sylvia had pieces published – Ted's play for radio *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* and Sylvia's coming-of-age novel *The Bell Jar*. The success of her novel should have been a cause for elation, yet Sylvia's mental well-being did not improve; in fact, it deteriorated. Alongside the American rejection of her novel and the pressure and strain of being a single mum living in the brutal cold weather of that particular winter, her unstable income was insufficient to sustain the life she wanted for herself and her children, causing her mental health to continue to decline. The ambition to become an independent woman clashed with the stark reality of her loneliness and need for love; her relationship with Hughes and then Alvarez and then, finally, her close friends, slowly dissipated, in effect closing her off from the social world around her and thus leaving her life in isolation and sadness, captured in essence by the poem 'Sheep in Fog', especially the ending:

My bones hold a stillness, the far

[82] TH, 'Soho Square.' Add MS 88918/1/6, BL
[83] To Marty Brown, 4 Feb. 1963 (Smith College MS 45, 16/3/20).

Fields melt my heart.

They threaten
To let me through to heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water (*SPCP*, p. 262).

The poem illustrates the nearing abyss into which Sylvia's depression was casting her; there is a slowness and somberness; no longer does she use enjambment to create the illusory movement of charging forth valiantly, but rather alludes to a solitary state of stasis, of emptiness; the dynamism of her horse in 'Ariel' has faded, collapsed into inertia. This line of thought continues in another final poem, 'Words,' in which 'Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps'. On February 3, Sylvia invited Ted to Fitzroy Road about which Ted wrote in his diary, describing the affair as 'the pleasantest most friendly open time since last July' and how of late he had been 'calling everybody Sylvia'; going on to say how he wanted to 'turn back' but didn't want to fall into 'the old trap'. [84] Yet the meeting did not heal the wound; Sylvia was falling deeper and deeper into despair, a despair that finds its voice in a letter to Ruth Beuscher: 'I am only too aware that love and a husband are impossibles to me at this time, I am incapable of being myself & loving myself.' (*L2*, p. 967-969). Ted and Sylvia met again, which would be the last time they would see each other face-to-face. Ted would later write about the meeting in *Birthday Letters* as 'The Inscription,' in which he describes the tension and contradiction she exuded, ending as a powerful, painful memory: 'Yes, yes. Tell me / We shall sit together this summer / Under the old laburnum. Yes, he said, yes yes yes.' (*THCP*, p. 1154-1155). Sylvia would call Ted on two more occasions, on Saturday and Sunday. And on Monday morning, February 11, having taped up the edges of their children's room door and left a note to call the doctor, she shut herself into the kitchen and turned the gas pipes on (Clark, 2020, p. 894).

Ted received the life-changing news from Dr. Horder that Sylvia was dead. Sylvia was taken to University College Hospital where she was pronounced dead at 11.45 a.m. (ibid, p. 898). Hughes arrived at the hospital to identify the body. He would bid her body a final farewell in the funeral parlor with Alvarez and the painter Charles Blackman. The funeral was held in Yorkshire on February 18, after which Ted said: 'It was her or me' – something he would be heard repeating (ibid, p. 904). Hughes would return to Sylvia's last days, and last days in which

[84] TH, notebook entry, Feb 3. 1963

they both saw and spoke to each other – powerfully imagining her last fateful night alone – in the poem 'Last Letter':

> You walked it alone, over the packed snow,
> Between the barricades of snow
> Coarsened to dirty ice, with frozen slush,
> You walked it in your long black woolen coat –
> How many times?
>
> With your plait coiled up at the back of your head, you
> walked it
> Alone. That is the point. I see you
> In the dark,
> Walking it – alone. [85]

Ted, stricken with guilt and grief, would go through Sylvia's manuscripts and send them out to publishers and, with the help of Alvarez – who had published the poignant essay 'A Poet's Epitaph' in *The Observer* that outlined her 'genius' and proclaimed, 'The loss to literature is inestimable' (Clark, 2020, p. 930) – Plath's reputation was put in motion; indeed, through Alvarez's portrait of a tormented genius, Sylvia began to receive the plaudits which she had always sought. Towards the end of 1963, Hughes approached Faber and Faber and pushed for the publication of *Ariel*, which was eventually published in 1965. Hughes had edited the volume and omitted the poems aimed squarely at him, such as 'The Rabbit Catcher,' 'The Jailor,' and 'Purdah' among others, a decision that would damage his reputation in years to come – especially with the rise of feminism's critique of his role as editor, accusing him of disguise, denying Sylvia her final say: 'Feminist critics such as Marjorie Perloff took note, and the decision would come to haunt him' (Clark, 2020, p. 932). Nevertheless, the publication of *Ariel* in both England and America was a huge success and sealed Sylvia's reputation as a major 20th-century poet.

Ted, on the other hand, while Sylvia's name was catapulted into stardom, was becoming burdened by the haunting specter of Sylvia: 'instead of letting go of the past and living for the future, you find your past in front of you. A monument, sitting on your head' [86] As the feminist

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[85] 'Walking in the Snow Alone' in 'That Sunday Night' exercise book (BL Add. MS 88918/1).
[86] This quote is from Koren and Negev's interview with Hughes in 1996. Yehuda Koren and Eliat Negev, *Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes' Doomed Love* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006), p. 277.

movement began to pick up momentum in the 70's Ted's name was smeared and tainted; he was accused of not only meddling with Sylvia's papers but also of killing her; he was cast as the villain. It was only when Hughes published *Birthday Letters* in 1998 – a few months before his death – that he was able to rid himself of the guilt and spare his name from further remonstration. The poems in *Birthday Letters* and *Ariel* constitute some of the most powerful poetry written in English in the 20th century, poems that provide the crystallization of life and experience through language, with which, like Ariadne's thread, we are able to lead ourselves out of the labyrinth into light and knowledge.

Conclusion

After Sylvia's death, Hughes was hunted by her ghost; more than anything, he was anxious about the effects all the scandal would have had on their children. When Alvarez published his memoir and study on suicide *The Savage God*, Ted considered it an invasion of privacy and declared that 'it [was] humiliating to him and to her mother and brother to have her last days exhumed in this way, as you do in your memoir, for classroom discussion'. In a letter, Aurelia wrote that 'the entire contents of THE JOURNALS were a terrible shock' to her, that Plath "kept one part of her 'double' experience completely private". [87] One should add that it is exactly that what private journals are for – registering our most private inner thoughts, things we would not dare share with others. Hughes, in his letters to Alvarez, wrote some words which can serve better than any other to conclude this piece of work:

> You have supplied details and interpretations in a form that is now being taken as the official text. I thought you were sensitive to this sort of atmospheric persecution, because it is a sort of persecution. (…) I would like to know what purpose you think it's going to serve. (…) For you, she is a topic of intellectual discussion, a poetic, existential phenomenon (…) But for F. and N. [Frieda and Nicholas Hughes, then eleven and nine], she is the absolute centerpin – they have made her very important, the more so because of her obvious absence. Throughout the mess I've been making of replacing her these last years, their image of her – of what she did and was – is going to decide their lives. (…) Both of us regarded you as a friend, not a *Daily Mirror* TV keyhole, rat-hole journalist

[87] AP to Carol Hughes, 5 July 1982. 143. 1a, MSS 644, Emory.

> snoop, guaranteed to distort every observation and plaster us with these know-all pseudo-psychological theories, as if we were relics dug up from 10,000 BC (Malcolm, 1993, p. 124-125)

We readers can do nothing but empathise with Hughes, who saw Sylvia going 'through the detailed, point-by-point death of a public sacrifice' with her poems providing 'the vocal part for that sort of show' (ibid, p. 127). Alvarez's memoir did, in Janet Malcom's words, 'set the tone for the writing about Plath and Hughes that came after Sylvia's death; 'it erected the structure on which the narrative of Plath as an abandoned and mistreated woman and Hughes as a heartless betrayer was to be strung' (ibid, p. 23). Plath's life and literary career after Alvarez and Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* was from then on shut out from the reality of history and the passing of time, surrounded by a spell of 'what ifs'; what would have happened if Plath had stayed in America – where her fame would have been repatriated with the American 'confessionals'; what would have happened, had she not met Hughes in the first place. What would have happened, had they found her before she passed, as many thought was her intention – a 'cry for help'. Even Ted would 'blame' others for Plath's death in his poems; Assia, Otto, Ruth Beuscher, even the house they shared in Devon itself – all guilty.

Plath was with Ted ever afterwards: 'So here we sit in your mausoleum / While they swing their cameras across / So here we act you / Our lives displaced by your death'. [88] After Assia's death, Hughes would write that he too suffered from depression; indeed, he wrote Gerald that 'People who live[d] with [him] contract[ed] the gloom from [him], but they [did not have] the supports that [he had] to defend themselves from it' [89] After all, Hughes remarried and did incredible things – his commitment to the environment, along with his writings, is astonishing. Let us not forget time is ever passing; history cannot be rewritten. People come, people leave, we grow – experiences change us; it is we who need to find the means to overcome what appears as violence, as unfair, as unbearable and understand – it is life, and not everything is under our control. Sylvia's mental illness, apparently, did not allow her to do so – her death will remain forever fixed in history as a problem unsolved, as a crisis in act. The myth around her art does not leave room for re-thinking; time did not have the chance to heal Plath's wounds. Let us remember these two incredible writers for their crafts, and learn from their words what it means to transcribe feelings and emotions into fixed, immortal works of art. In Hughes' words 'between [his and Plath's] writing[s] and [the many] article[s] is a whole new world of

[88] Add MS 88918/1/2-8, BL.
[89] TH to Gerald and Joan Hughes, May 1969. 1.3, MSS 854, Emory.

hypothesis'; there is much difference 'between a subjective work that was trying to reach an artistic form using a real event at its basis, and a documentary work' (Malcolm, 1993, p. 129).

It is the way in which both writers transformed the anguish of their life and love into works of art that makes their work so appealing and relevant, for it is a literary corpus through which readers can come to terms with the malaise of their own life and times. It is the magic of their art that enables the reader to join them in their own personal travails, a connection that – this dissertation maintains – is predicated on the extent to which both Hughes and Plath opened themselves up in their work, turning themselves inside out in a confessional mode that offers the chance of redemption. Indeed, it is through their painstakingly honest declaration of primal feelings such as grief and guilt in the public domain – disseminated in the form of poetry – that the reader is enabled to relate to their world through words. Lastly, this dissertation has aimed to shed light on the way in which the socio-political and historical contexts – in which lives are inextricably incorporated and from which art springs – inform both the self and the art.

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