

# **TED HUGHES'S ROLE IN EDITING SYLVIA PLATH'S WORK**

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Besides the writing of *Birthday Letters* that abounds in frequent allusions to Plath's poetry, another arena in which the literary relations between Plath and Hughes are most famously in evidence is the editing of Plath's work. The paper underlines the role played by Ted Hughes in actively promoting Sylvia Plath's artistic reputation

At the time of her death Hughes was already a very well-known and much admired poet in Britain, Plath less so. Her first volume of poetry, "The Colossus", had been moderately well received in 1960; her autobiographical novel, "The Bell Jar" (a thinly disguised account of her breakdown and suicide of 1953) – published under a pseudonym shortly before her death – hardly noticed at all.

Plath's fame, which finally eclipsed her husband's, came only after her death. Plath left behind a carbon typescript containing about forty poems. Since she had died intestate and was still married to him, Hughes inherited the copyright of all her manuscripts and the responsibility of deciding what happened to them.

Hughes's circumstances were not easy. On the one hand, he was faced with an artistic duty to the work of his late wife; on the other hand, with his wish to protect himself and his family from the intrusions and accusations of the press and the reading public. He felt a binding duty towards her poems. They held Plath's essential spirit which had to be given to the world, even though the image of himself they purveyed was of a jailor, a torturer, or a Nazi, none of which was in the least apposite. Readers of these ferocious, glittering poems wanted to know more about the woman who had written them.

Her work, as it continued to appear in the years that followed, seemed to satisfy some of that longing. "The Bell Jar" was published in the United States, under her own name, in 1971; two further volumes of poetry "Crossing the Water" and "Winter Trees", appeared that same year, their editor Ted Hughes. Also published that year was part of a memoir by poet and critic Al Alvarez, who had known Hughes and Plath in London and remained friendly with both after the couple had separated. Hughes's powerful account, later incorporated into his book on suicide, "The Savage God", revealed the despair of her final days and the manner of her death,

little known at the time and completely unknown to her children. Hughes wrote angrily to Alvarez that the account would be, for him and the couple's children, 'permanent dynamite'<sup>1</sup>. For Hughes, at the time, the mere existence of the facts of Plath's death in the public mind was devastating.

The gradual publication of her work coincided with the rise of the feminist movement on both sides of the Atlantic, which alerted women to their foolishness in allowing themselves to be exploited by their husbands and urged them to higher self-esteem. None of this had much relevance to Plath and Hughes, but her suicide gave the movement an incontestable female genius who had suffered and died. As Plath's poetic stature grew, so did her stature as a feminist icon, as the silenced voice of a generation. From this time on, Hughes was to become the target of feminist hatred.

In spite of this, it was Hughes who was responsible for the publication of *Ariel*<sup>2</sup>, the volume that made her name. Much has been written about it. It is well known that before she died, Plath gathered a collection entitled *Ariel*. When it appeared in 1965, the poems were not in the order in which Plath had left the manuscript at the time of her death. Plath's *Ariel* began – as does the published volume with 'Morning Star', but it ended with 'Wintering'; its note was of triumph sounded by the magnificent cycle of bee poems, whose subject is the reclaiming of her autonomous womanly self after her separation from Hughes. The first word of the book was 'love' and the last one was 'spring':

*'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**.'*

This gives the volume a positive, upward movement that the published collection does not have. The selection is organised around a narrative of sexual betrayal, and it includes a number of poems such as "Mystic", "Brasilia", "A Secret", "The Jailer" and "Purdah", that Hughes omitted because they were 'personally aggressive'<sup>3</sup> (*WP.*, p. 172), mostly towards himself. In the published *Ariel*, Hughes included several of the poems

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from a letter sent to the critic Al. Alvarez in 1971, meant prevent him from publishing the second half of a memoir, and partly reproduced in "The Sunday Times" under the headline "After Sylvia, Ted's war with the sisters", october, 21, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia, Plath, *Collected Poems*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992, p. 223

<sup>3</sup> Ted Highes, *Winter Pollen*, London, Faber, 1995, p. 172

written in the two weeks before Plath's death, which she considered to be the beginning of a new book, and which Hughes himself has said represent 'a sinister change of inspiration'<sup>4</sup> (*WP.*, p.192). These poems are grouped at the end of the volume ('Kindness', "Contusion", "Edge"), and the last one is 'Words', which ends, 'From the bottom of the pool, Fixed stars/ Govern a life.' However, the *Collected Poems* reveal that 'Words' was not the last poem Plath wrote. This volume, which is arranged chronologically, ends with 'Edge', one of two poems that Plath wrote on 5 February, four days after she wrote "Words".

The *Collected Poems* Hughes published in 1981 ends on a note of absolute despair, and virtually invites the reader to luxuriate in the uneasy anticipation of knowing that a week after writing 'Edge', Plath would herself be dead. The poem "Edge", with its image of the dead, 'perfected' woman and her two babies, can be interpreted as the most direct poetic foreshadowing of her suicide:

*'The woman is perfected.*

*Her dead*

*Body wears the smile of accomplishment,*

*The illusion of a Greek necessity*

*Flows in the scrolls of her toga,*

*Her bare*

*Feet seem to be saying:*

*We have come so far, it is over.*

*Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,*

*One at each little*

*Pitcher of milk, now empty.'*

Many critics have claimed that this arrangement implies that Plath's suicide was inevitable, that it was brought on, not by her actual circumstances, but by her essential and seemingly incurable depression. In spite of the fact that Plath seemed to be fully recovered after her first attempt at suicide and the psychiatric treatment she had received by the time she met Ted Hughes, some critics have suggested that there is evidence in her letters, journals and poetry, particularly in the period just before her death, of the sort of personality which is associated with manic-depressive conditions.

Hughes may have chosen not to conclude *Ariel* with "Edge" because he wanted to avoid unnecessarily sensationalising the relationship between

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192

Plath's poetry and her suicide. Nevertheless, his choice of "Words"<sup>5</sup> as the final poem seems more significant since the publication of *Birthday Letters*, where he appears to claim that the conclusion of that poem is a quotation of himself: 'Not dreams, I had said, but fixed stars/ Govern a life' ("A Dream")<sup>6</sup>. As we have shown before, *Birthday Letters* is a volume which generally presents a highly deterministic account of Hughes and Plath's relationship, and of her fate. This determinism is also evident in his prose accounts of her poetic career:

*'The root system of her talent was a deep and inclusive inner crisis which seems to have been quite distinctly formulated in its chief symbols (presumably going back at least as far as the death of her father, when she was eight) by the time of her first attempted suicide, in 1953, when she was twenty-one.*

*After 1953, it became a much more serious business, a continuous hermetically sealed process that changed only very slowly, so that for years it looked like deadlock. Though its preoccupation dominated her life, it remained largely outside her ordinary consciousness, but in her poems we see the inner working of it....*

*One would like to emphasize even more strongly the weird autonomy of what was going on in there. It gave the impression of being a secret crucible, or rather a womb, an almost biological process – and just as much beyond her manipulative interference....*

*Unless we take account of this ... We shall probably find ourselves looking into her poems for things and qualities which could only be there if that process had been less fiercely concentrated on its own purposeful chemistry'*<sup>7</sup>

We will almost certainly never know if Hughes literally uttered the words 'fixed stars govern a life' and Plath was consciously quoting him in her poem; or if there is some biographical basis for the claim he makes in "A Dream". In this game of quotation and re-quotation, we will never know whose words 'fixed stars/ Govern a life' are; they can not have a secure point of origin, shuttling backwards and forwards between the two poets. We may never know the complete significance of his placing the poem 'Words' at the end of *Ariel* or we may never understand his motives in claiming the words in 'A Dream'. What is certain is that they are a

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<sup>5</sup> Sylvia Plath, *cit.ed.*, p. 270

<sup>6</sup> Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, London, Faber, 1998, p. 118

<sup>7</sup> *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough), New York, Ballantine Books, 1991, p. 3

powerful reminder of the artistic interfusion of their writing in the last work of both of them.

The uneasy balance Hughes had to strike between his role as a father and husband and his role as literary executor is revealed in the way he handled Plath's journals published in the United States in 1982. The journals' appearance followed that of her *Letters Home*: letters written, mostly to her mother, throughout the course of her life, which Aurelia Plath had sought permission from Hughes to publish after the publication in America of *The Bell Jar*. That novel, read autobiographically, was extremely wounding to Plath's mother; the bright, breezy tone of the high-achieving "Sivvy" found in *Letters Home* seemed a corrective to that. The much darker journals, in which Plath reveals all the doubts and fears she kept from her mother, offer a further correction. So, the pendulum of 'truth' swung back and forth.

Her journals did not appear unedited. As Hughes wrote, making an awkward distinction between himself as impartial editor and partial husband, he destroyed one or two journals which covered maybe two or three months, the last months of his late wife's life. The explanation that he didn't want her children to see them pertains to Hughes the husband, not to Hughes the editor.

The book that appeared in 1982 was marked by many editorial expurgations and omissions as many people mentioned in the journals, particularly Aurelia Plath, were still around to be hurt, not least Hughes himself and the couple's children.

It seems worth remarking that Hughes need never have mentioned the destroyed journal's existence in the first place. It only led to harsh criticism and unsatisfactory comments as to the role he played in editing this part of her work, somehow bringing under a shadow the crucial contribution he made to the publication of Plath's whole work. We may also ascertain that Hughes eventually achieved his goal of fiercely protecting his children from the cult of their dead mother, no matter how grossly he paid, in the public eye, for his own behaviour.

## **Bibliography**

1. Plath, Sylvia, *Collected Poems*, London, Faber, 1981, p. 223
2. Hughes, Ted, *Birthday Letters*, Faber, 1998