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ETHICAL CREDENTIALS OF POETRY: TED HUGHES'S *BIRTHDAY LETTERS*

Abstract

Ted Hughes's collection of verses entitled *Birthday Letters* allows for a revision of Sylvia Plath's and his own poetic and personal histories. Hughes resorts to an inward rectification of varied extraliterary and subjective interpretations of the poets' turbulent artistic and private rapport. Hughes shifts his impersonal poetic prism to encapsulate the entangled poetic courses revolving around separate and oftentimes infringing metaphors. Hughes's ultimate book of verses unravels as a trajectory of the two poetic selves carving a dual topography. By agency of Hughes's poetry, we partake in the genuine poetic legacies of the adjacent anglophone cultures and attend to the generation of a unique transcontinental dream. Enlivening his "goblins" as to counter Plath's "demons," Hughes exerts an inalienable poetic integrity in which "myth" and "magic" will extenuate the pressure of the two poet-partners' reality. The paper employs Ted Hughes's endeavour to defy social and critical bias in response to poetic work through none but poetic parameters. It showcases the ethical valence of poetry and specificity of poetic domain.

Keywords: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, poetry, poetic covenant, revision, poetic legacy

Introduction

Ted Hughes's poetic motivation, initially sustained by hefty voices of his animal subjects, bespoke the mythopoetic aspect of his nature poetry. Voracious and voluble hawks, crows, wolves, the masterly agents of Hughes's poetic imaginary display grandeur and zest, passion and forthrightness inexorable and inexhaustible as nature itself. The tenors of Hughes's imaginary from the formative stage of his poetics have been taken for the emblems of his own masculine prowess and daring. Audacity displayed by the protagonists of his poetic bestiary would also bespeak no hesitation or grievance over failure.

Naturalism evolved into the pagan lore constituent to Hughes's poetics as to impart a sense of vitality defying death, destiny (OE *wyrd*), and temporality, through which concepts Hughes evinced his resonance with the poetic patrimony of Coleridge and Hardy, and aligned with the poetry of D. H. Lawrence (Sagar 99–109).

1. Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*

In *Birthday Letters*¹ (1998) Ted Hughes's poetic vein is delineated in convergence with Sylvia Plath's insight and craft of meaning-making in poetry. Hughes's and Plath's imaginaries counterpointed here involve the merger of the innermost private aspects void of extrapoetic blare, and the mutual quest for *poiesis* as a channel of communication. Hughes repatriates the meanings of Plath's poetic ploys which individualize Plath's haunted *I*; he also determinedly declines every attempt at appropriating the respective authorial identities during their "cardiac days" when they were "like the halves of a broken magnet" (*BL*, "The Rag Rug" 135–36) and weaving the web of life and fantasy. Hughes unravels the notches of a changeable and morose poetic "life that outlived you" and the poetic death (*BL*, "Life after Death" 227).

Hughes's representations of the fear of death, engendered as goblins, would be juxtaposed with Plath's own demons: "Demons quested tribulation - and you gave it to them / (...) Your electrocution, with all of its swervings" (*BL*, "Blood and Innocence" 208). The passing dream of appeasing their spectres at one gathering place, Lyonesse in Devon (*BL*, "Stabbing Wharfe" 131) would be recollected. Hughes exerts his inalienable truth in which myth and magic will

extenuate the poet-partners the pressure of searing reality (BL, “The Hare Hunter” 180).

“We did only what poetry told us to do,” Hughes articulates a consummate apostrophe in verse to complement Plath’s journals (BL, “Flounders” 66). Feminist critics blamed Hughes for having restrained the publication of the journals after Plath’s tragic death. Linda Bundtzen reverts anon to the missing link of the crucial final volume of Plath’s journals while reflecting upon Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*. Bundtzen denies singularity to Hughes’s poetic output:

Hughes’s new poems were particularly interesting because they seem to mimic Plath’s style, because so many of them are direct responses to Plath’s own poetry, and because many events to which Hughes refers are described in Plath’s journals and letters (Bundtzen 455).

Bundtzen argues that those events did give rise to many a question because Hughes later destroyed the crucial final volume of Plath’s journal saying that he wanted to protect the couple’s two children.

Birthday Letters features as an address to Ariel, the fleeting sprite, an enigmatic mystical intermediary between the two poetic worlds: “Ariel/Entertained us night and day. / The voices and sounds and sweet airs / Were our aura. Ariel was our aura.” (BL, “Setebos” 132). The last book of Plath’s verses under the title of *Ariel*, selected and edited by Hughes in 1965, would incite the hubbub over his adulterating the poetess’s authentic material for private reasons—leaving out the incriminatory content of adultery and abandonment.

Assembling the ultimate poetic corpora of Plath’s in the 1965 *Ariel* collection, Hughes seemed to have initiated his building of a representative edifice of poetic understanding which led to his *Birthday Letters*. The poet would evoke Plath’s encouragement for his inceptive poetic undertakings, and the important role she played in issuing the 1957 *Hawk in the Rain* poems that brought him acclaim. Plath was recurrently recalled as the close and toward reader of Hughes’s poetry who launched him into publicizing his work.

Cognizant of Plath’s astuteness heightened by poetic aspiration, Hughes tenaciously identified himself as a perceptive interpreter of Plath’s verse: in his *Birthday Letters* the poetess’s creative stamina against the vagaries of artistic process, “goblins of that horror” would be addressed in an evocation of Artemis

committed solely to her poetic work (*BL*, "Apprehensions" 175). In contrast to this tenet of Plath's poetics, through the images "of a sea clogged with corpses, atrocities, concentration camps, limbs amputated" (*BL*, "Dream Life" 141) historical and private anxieties central to her poetry are resounded.

Birthday Letters, published decades after Plath's death in 1963, took on the form of the poet's own retributory act by means of which he emanated the anodyne and genuine truth of poetry against Plath's fantasy. Hughes had been withholding the publication of the poetess's journal and the publication rights for her oeuvre until he engendered a full-bodied poetic deposition of the two poet-partners' relationship in *Birthday Letters*, the book of verses which unfolds poetry as a process of personal growth, and a conduit meant to intertwine the authorial and the private.

In his *Birthday Letters*, Hughes assumes the position of a quester for the interplay of poetic images as if they were the knots of the compound texture of poetic meanings. For that matter, *Birthday Letters* weaves poetic pieces of evidence to harmonies and continuities but also to unnerving discords that burdened the poets' respective private and artistic courses. Hughes's poeticisms in sequence gradually disclose the layers of Plath's poetic meaning to their best advantage. And only through the contingencies of poetry should Hughes be possibly relieved from the vilification of having deliberately adulterated Plath's poetic work. In order to deepen the reader's perspective of the trauma that had largely sustained Plath's poetic world (confirmed by Robert Lowell's Preface to the 1965 *Ariel* collection as its intertext), in *Birthday Letters* Hughes juxtaposes the poetess's pervasive concept of trauma with her ebullience in the realms of light, devotion, freedom, gratitude, and life zest, also employed in the *Ariel* poems: "The Night Dance," "Ariel," "Poppies in October," "Nick and the Candlestick," "Berck-plage," and "A Letter in November." Thus, the poet avows his intent of reclaiming Plath's poetic genius from the contingencies of sole anguish, torment, and death instilled in the sequence of *Ariel* compositions ("Daddy"; "Getting there").

In his resonating with Plath's poetry, Hughes recognizes the poetess's constant urge to engender the contrapuntal circle of life which would unravel as a life-and-death struggle of poetic opposites, or the principles of *eros* and *thanatos*. Life-affirming sensuality assumes the pivotal position within Plath's *ars dicendi and sentiendi*, but the lyrical subject's raptures would be continually renounced by the strings of disjunctive poetic images:

Do not worry about the eyes ...
 They may be white and shy, they are no stool pigeons,
 Their death rays folded like flags
 Of a country no longer heard of,
 An obstinate independency
 Insolvent among the mountains

(“The Courage of Shutting-Up,” omitted in the 1965 edition 22)

Plath’s elated moments in *Ariel* would be reached in the perfect symmetry of composition and adherence to nature’s dialectic (addressed through the catalogues of poetic symbols of flowers—tulips, camelias, callas, lilies, cornflower (“The Night Dance”), daffodils, fuchsia (“Medusa 2”), poppies, laburnum, hawthorn, elm and yew trees: “I know the bottom // I am terrified by this dark thing/ That sleeps in me; / All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.” (“Elm” 15). Dichotomous poetic images constitute the counterpoint of life-and-death semantic lines in *Ariel*. The desire for poetry and poetry voicing desire underlying the given concept of Plath’s would be therefore foregrounded in Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*.

A thriving poetic life set against creative barrenness could only be represented by vibrant and excessive imaginary of fluctuating desire that imbues the *Ariel* book of verses, by the agency of lioness, Selena moon goddess, Medusa:

You house your unnerving head – God-ball,
 Lens of mercies, ...

Did I escape, I wonder?
 My mind winds to you,
 Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
 Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous
 Repair. ...

I did not call you.
 I did not call you at all.
 Nevertheless, nevertheless
 You steamed to me over the sea,

Fat and red, a placenta

Paralyzing the kicking lovers.

(“Medusa” 29)

Hughes's editorial omissions in the 1965 *Ariel* collection would have been aimed at asserting Plath's wholesome poetic genius; those ellipses had been directed by an incisive editorial recollection of the proper seats, or junctures of Plath's poetic universe to which Hughes himself had quintessentially pertained.

The adulterated 1965 edition of *Ariel* Hughes omitted twelve poems, “The Rabbit Catcher,” “Thalidomide,” “Barren Woman,” “A Secret,” “The Jailor,” “The Detective,” “Death & Co.,” “Magi,” “The Other,” “Stopped Dead,” “The Courage of Shutting-Up”/ “Quietness” and “Amnesiac.” Hughes then resorted to the complementation of the given *Ariel* renditions by adding twelve other poems: “The Swarm,” “The Hanging Man,” “Little Fugue,” “Years,” “The Munich Mannequin,” “Totem,” “Paralytic,” “Balloon,” “Poppies in July,” “Kindness,” “Contusion,” and “Words.” Hughes's editorial manoeuvre Hughes's editorial manoeuvre in the 1965 edition of *Ariel* acquires a new significance in *Birthday Letters*: he articulates a wealth of convergences with Plath's imaginary cast in *Ariel*. The continuities draw upon the onerous theme of history, violence, deprivation, death and guilt, but also on ardour, or “not dying” (“Ariel,” “Lady Lazarus”) as an art. Death and silence smother Plath's *elan vitale*, the sprightly aspect of the poetess's creative identity hankering for the approval of the public, and resonant with the voice of Christina Georgina Rossetti's, as conveyed in the *Ariel* poem “Wintering”: “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. . .” (*Ariel*, Restored edition 41).

Plath's confessional poetry would find its deferred complement in Hughes's *Birthday Letters* poetic confessional outlined as an inward, emotionally charged response to the literary and non-literary subjects who had been defaming the poet for the demise and denigration of Plath, as well as for the deliberate destruction of the bulk of her journals. Once reputed to have adumbrated Plath's journals, Hughes in *Birthday Letters* ultimately attempted to demarcate Plath's poetry from the quirks and premises of the non-poetic public domain.

In *Birthday Letters* Hughes generated a non-plus-ultra poetic tribute to his life-in-poetry companion and muse, given the vestige of Eve and Lilith, Moon Goddess, Sorceress Sycorax, Isis, Lioness, Arrow, and Medusa, a winged queen. Metaphorically, the *Birthday Letters* collection adopts the form of a palimpsest of the two infringing poetic ploys. The seed of *Birthday Letters* had been strewn through the retrieval of Plath's constituent poetics alongside Hughes's own vital poetic concepts. Erica Wagner says that the *Birthday Letters* "poems conjure Plath to converse with her, and in so doing make the reader turn again to what she wrote and what she achieved. . . ." (Wagner 5).

Hughes's representations of man and woman at strife evince the poet couple's jagged relationship contained in the bouts of temper and instances of creative compliance. The poliphony of Hughes's agonistic poetic vein (*BL*, "The Rabbit Catcher" 144), and Plath's defiant poetic stance communicated by means of the metered-out poetic instruments bespeak poetry as more genuinely revealing than reality. *Birthday Letters* book of verses discloses the twin-track poetry in the making, by the two authors conjoined through life experience, poetic craft and interdependent legacies.

Hughes composes a never-ceasing dirge in verse, a poetic derivative of a pagan (Gaelic) *keening*²² for Plath. Delving deep into the nature of Plath's trauma-afflicted and history-laden poetic universe, the poet Hughes delineates the contingencies of familial histories of European exiles to the United States which potentially originated a fickle sense of belonging in Plath: "The waters off beautiful Nauset / Were the ocean sun, the sea-poured crystal / Behind your efforts. They were your self's cradle." (*BL*, "The Prism" 186).

Hughes's lyrical subject is hopeful that swimming on the beach of Woolacombe Sands would help the interlocutor recuperate and sense:

Now I wanted to show you such a beach
 Would set inside your head another jewel,
 And lift you like the gentlest electric shock
 Into an altogether different England—

²² *Keening*—OE, wail in lament, especially for the dead, performed by women (from Irish Gaelic *caoineadh*, from *caonim*, "I lament," from Old Irish *cainim*, *soinim*, perhaps of Brittonic origin); *keener*, n., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th ed., HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.

An Avalon for which I had the wavelength,
Deep inside my head a little crystal ...

Your crisis came late in the day. ...
You refused to get out.
You sat behind your mask, inaccessible—
Staring towards the ocean that had failed you. ...

So this was the reverse of dazzling Nauset.
The flip of a coin—the flip of an ocean fallen
Dream-face down. And here, at my feet, in the suds,
The other face, the real, staring upwards

(*BL*, “The Beach” 155–56)

Verging on the prose poem form, *Birthday Letters* conveys the shifty rhythms of Hughes-Plath relationship that impacted the generation of their respective bodies of work. It is illustrative of the transient reality of the rapport, with its day-to-day lurches into timelessness of the poetic universe, all the while experiencing an intense exchange of poetic symbols and harkening the silences of the marred communication. Hughes's stamp on Plath's poetic design entails the long-standing quest of Plath's and his own artistic mutations and quandaries converging in the image of “. . . the phases of your dismal-headed / Fairy god-mother moon. . .” (*BL*, “Night-Ride on Ariel” 174).

Hughes's “poetised letter” (Kuzmanović and Mihanović 251–57), or the poetic epistle composition employed here, maintains a long-standing creative cohesion unfolded and interpreted by sheer poetic evidence, with ample references to the two authors' respective poetic paragons (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Emily Brontë, Tennyson, Conrad, Yeats) which reflect Hughes's “sense of continuity of great writing from the past” (Bassnett 82).

In his *Birthday Letters* the confessional poet Hughes immerses himself into Plath's poetic universe, unveiling the myth to which Plath had conceded her poetry. The two poets' formative grounds are being juxtaposed and gradingly displayed as interdependent (Bassnett 63, 95–97). The central metaphors pertaining to the two poetic paths are brought forth, with their valences mutually

attuned and appraised: the transformative power of poetry as the sole realm of authenticity prompts a sublimation of individual infirmities.

The collection discloses death as a concomitant of Plath's poetry, made manifest as inundating horror, fear, obsession with ghastly images, "underworld, her heart's home," and probes a double exposure of a male persona, or man divined through the figure of her dead father (*BL*, "Black Coat" 102; "Dream Life" 141–42; "The Table" 138); Having sacrificed her daddy, the lyrical subject lets out a scream of deliverance through which she finds her voice "In the bronze of immortal poesy" (*BL*, "Cast" 179):

When you wanted the bees, I never dreamed
It meant your Daddy had come up out of the well. ...

But you bowed over your bees
As you bowed over your Daddy. ...

I saw I had given you something
That had carried you off in a cloud of gutturals –
The thunderhead of your new selves
Tending your golden mane. (*BL*, "The Bee God" 150–51)

You did not want to be Christlike, Though your father
Was your God and there was no other, you did not
Want to be Christlike. Though you walked
In the love of your father. Though you stared
As the stranger your mother. (*BL*, "Being Christlike" 153)

The lyrical subject of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, the impulsive and volatile antagonist, loyal to pagan gods and myths is addressed as the target of her bees. Hughes resorts to the oral tale as to relate the familial tragedy to his children: the pagan myth of the dismembered body, and the consecration of the spirit are evoked:

You had better imagine her
On the consecrated rack prepared with holy care for

the vultures

Who would take her back to the sun. (*BL*, "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother" 195)

Hughes's poetic endeavour in *Birthday Letters* draws upon Adorno's dilemma on poetic motivation ensuing the atrocities of totalitarianism:

It is crucial to acknowledge that Adorno hints at potential unbarbaric modes of responses to the fundamentally barbaric general condition mentioned, and if these that we ought to concentrate on as well as respond to the New Categorical Imperative which so emphatically calls not solely on our thoughts but also, and particularly, on our actions that goes along with the demand to restore an unbarbaric condition (...) Practically, this must, of course, remain utopian in light of the whole being inevitably barbaric; however, there is a sense in which we could at least work toward a threshold pointing toward this impossible utopian restoration. (Nosthoff 4)

2. The Poetic Associates Plath and Hughes

The tragic aftermath of the First World War in which Hughes's families partook, and the poetic plight of overcoming the horrors of the concentration camps align Hughes and Plath with the continental poetry of despondence and renouncement countering the ideologically driven regimes on the Western and Eastern fronts, as displayed in the works of Anna Akhmatova, Nikolai Gumilev, Osip Mandelstam and Paul Celan. Fractioned into different selves, and manacled by the ghosts of her family and the burden of history, Plath feels responsible for the suffering; giving birth to her children and starting a family constitutes her new reality.

Hughes's poetics abounds in the concepts of vigour, genuinity, resilience and survival employed in the traditional oral tale and pagan myth. Irony is sensed in his lyrical responses to the ravages of contemporary history. For Plath, the promise of immortality by dint of poetry, and allegiance to the God of art, in a word, poetry's *aestheitos* could only start a reverie on the continuities between the past and the present, as it is elicited in the following metapoetical passage of *Birthday Letters*:

You were like a religious fanatic
 Without a god—unable to pray.
 You wanted to be a writer.
 Wanted to write? What was it within you
 Had to tell its tale?
 The story that has to be told
 Is the writer's God, who calls
 Out of sleep, inaudibly: "Write" ...

You were like those desert ascetics
 Who fascinated you,
 Parching in such a torturing
 Vacuum of God
 It sucked goblins out of their finger-ends,
 Out of the soft motes of the sun-shaft.
 Out of the blank rock face.
 The gagged prayer of their sterility
 Was a God.
 So was your panic of emptiness—a God. (*BL*, "The God" 188)

Plath's oniric discourse that enduringly permeates reality makes Hughes her poetic associate:

The Fate she carried
 Sniffed us out
 And assembled us, inert ingredients
 For its experiment. The Fable she carried
 Requisitioned you and me and her
 Puppets for her performance. ...

The dreamer in her
 Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it.
 That moment the dreamer in me
 Fell in love with her, and I knew it. (*BL*, "Dreamers" 157–58)

Both of the dreamers remain adherent to the goblin of poetry once the dream of congenuity had dwindled.

Plath's contingent vitality underscoring her imaginary would be related through the image of the framed innocence, of the mother and her newborn:

There you are, in all your innocence
Sitting among your daffodils, as in a picture
Posed as for the title: "Innocence"
Perfect light in your face lights it up
Like a daffodil. Like any one of those daffodils
It was to be your only April on earth
Among your daffodils. In your arms,
Like a teddy bear, your new son.
Only a few weeks into his innocence. Mother and infant, as in the Holy portrait.
And beside you, laughing up at you,
Your daughter, barely two. Like a daffodil
You turn your face down to her, saying something
Your words were lost in the camera. (*BL*, "Perfect Light" 143)
Giving birth also signifies a temporary escape from death;
You took root, you flourished only
In becoming fruitful – in getting pregnant,
In the oceanic submissions
Of giving birth. That was the you
You loved and wanted to live with. ...
The inmost, smiling, solid one, the joy-being,
Venus of Willendorf or the Wyf of Bath. ...
That was the you you shared with the wild earth. (*BL*, "Remission" 109)

The memory of the artist's nimble, "winged fingers" revives them as the vessels of her contrarities:

But as you talked, as your eyes signalled
The strobes of your elation.

They flared, flicked balletic acrobatics. I thought of birds in some tropical sexual
 Play of display, leaping and somersaulting.
 Doing strange things in the air, and dropping to the dust. Those dancers of
 your excess!
 With such deft, practical touches – so accurate.
 Thinking their own thoughts caressed like lightning
 The lipstick into your mouth corners (*BL*, “Fingers” 194)

The symbolism of the protagonist’s colours contrasted only foregrounds her polarized identities:

Red was your colour
 If not red, then white. But red
 Was what you wrapped around you.
 Blood-red. Was it blood? ...
 Our room was red. A judgement chamber. ...
 A throbbing cell. Aztec altar-temple, ...
 Blue was better for you. Blue was wings ...
 Blue was your kindly spirit—not a ghoul
 But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful.
 In the pit of red
 You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.
 But the jewel you lost was blue. (*BL*, “Red” 197–98)

The exploration of the underlying patterns of Shakespeare’s plays in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992) aligns with Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* as a transposition of his own and Plath’s creative ploys. Hughes elicited a grand concept of Shakespeare’s dramatic art revolving round the avowal and denial of love embodied in a woman, initially captured in the early works, *Venus and Adonis*, and *The Rape of Lucrece*. The rhetoric of Hughes’s study sublimates the story of the kindred artistic acuity, and the history of the relationship fraught with advents of sensuality and renouncement, notably creative anxiety and anguish over self-expression. The Goddess of Love and Wisdom stands out as one of the facets of Sylvia Plath’s poetic proper.

The worship of the Great Goddess as a figure of omnipotence from Celtic mythology, and the White Goddess from Robert Graves's imaginary existing in the waxing, full and waning moon stages reverberates in Hughes's poetic evocations. The continuity of the idea of the goddess proves constituent to Plath's poetics:

Plath incorporated this triple dimension into her poetic vision as does Hughes, though differently. For Graves's vision is essentially male-centered, a woman is a muse not a poet in her own right. Plath took the idea of the goddess and transformed it into a woman-centered myth. Hughes struggles with female sexuality as demonstrated in poetry from what has been termed his middle period, including works such as *Crow* and most especially *Gaudete* show him endeavouring, in Graves's terms, to accommodate the goddess into his life. (Bassnett 66)

Still, Hughes's interpretive key to Shakespeare does not seem to be fully relatable to the two artists-partners' drama of conflicting poetic dreams and reality. Harold Bloom's epitome of Shakespeare's creative motivation in the Prospero/Ariel/Caliban triad of his ultimate play *The Tempest* could add to our comprehension of the two poet-partners' complex relationship. Shakespeare's universal poet envisioned here as a threefold figure of a denizen torn between his poetic ideals and mundanity could be put on a par with Hughes's reverence for the poetic authorship, imagination and genuinity which he so ardously delineates in his *Birthday Letters*. The carnal and the spiritual planes intertwined are multiply referential to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; Ariel, a mediary between the world's triumphs in a projection of Plath on her sixtieth birthday: "Ariel sits on your knuckle. / You feed it grapes, a black one, then a green one, . . . Ariel is happy to be here. / Only you and I are not smiling. . ." (*BL*, "Freedom of Speech" 192)

The sombre play of Shakespeare's is also revisited in the following lines, revealing the subjects engrossed in the perpetual game of changing aspect:

Who could play Miranda?
Only you. Ferdinand – only me.
And it was like that, yes, it was like that.
I never questioned. Your mother
Played Prospero, flying her magic in
To stage the Masque, and bless the marriage. . . .

Ariel was our aura.
 Both of us alternated
 Caliban our secret, who showed us
 The sweetest, the freshest, the wildest
 And loved us as we loved. (*BL*, “Setebo” 132)

3. The Reach of Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*

The *Birthday Letters* poetic mode entails a forthrightness which is indelibly marked by the poet’s Englishness and allegiance to the great alliterative tradition of English poetry. Seamus Heaney argues that [“freedom and naturalness and homeliness are positives in Hughes’s critical vocabulary, and they are linked with both the authenticity of individual poets and the genius of the language itself.”] (Heaney 77–96). Hughes’s holistic poetic representation encoded in *Birthday Letters* has been primarily read as a feat of authorial restitution (Blomvall 215–31, ch.25 from Part VII: “Gender Contexts”). The revisionary collection of *Birthday Letters* was under way simultaneously with *Tales from Ovid*, Hughes’s adaptation of twenty-four tales from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

In her review, Cora Kaplan argues that Hughes’s lyric memoir invites readers to look again at Plath’s own work, since it needs to be read alongside Plath’s poems. Kaplan points out that the complex processes of creative dialoguing are at play: she hails *Birthday Letters* as an unexpected gift that “plays endlessly on the reader’s familiarity with Plath’s mortal thoughts,” adding that nevertheless “it refuses to let the accreted scandal and tragedy of ‘spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history’ as Plath feared they might, trying instead for Ovid’s poetic act of metamorphosis” (96).

Kaplan’s understanding of Hughes’s translation of Plath in *Birthday Letters* allows for the likely interpoetic reading of the two authors through the composite of mutual resonances, which provides evidence for the growth and disintegration within the two poetic selves. The *Birthday Letters* speaker unravels the manifestations of the neuralgic points of Plath’s poetry with her persona pursuant of no-life/un-life, or non-freedom. In *Birthday Letters* Hughes also divulges a string of affirmatives pertaining to Plath’s imaginary; moreover, Hughes distinguishes the pivotal images of Plath’s, counterpointing them with the illuminative concepts of creation: stylistic perfection meant to ensure immortality and absolution through art. As Erica Wagner foregrounds: “*Birthday Letters* crosses

over the shadowy barrier between death and life conjuring their subject, Sylvia Plath, so vividly that she seems to stand before the reader, vibrant with life—and radiating death” (14).

Conclusion

The disclaiming reviews of Hughes's *Birthday Letters* that revolve around the irreparable, pre-given truths of the tragic bond tend to be overlooking the mythopoetic mutuality and the artistic imposition vital to Plath's and Hughes's respective poetic oeuvres.

The biographically reductive interpretations of the causes and effects of the burgeoning tragedy infringe on the poetic substance and its mode of creation. How did Plath generate her poems? She would repeatedly revise her poems herself. Hughes seems to be bound to do the reckoning for Plath's demise. Their poetic selves have been autonomous and transversal: Plath has been revived through a resounding poetic language. In *Birthday Letters* a non-defining point of convergence, or Hughes's and Plath's poetic point counterpoint, was being sought.

Hughes made a poetic statement that absolved him of the said tort of constricting biographical evidence, or of imitating Plath's style. In his pursuit he did not enjoy unanimous support on the part of the literary community but for his friends and fellow poets Al Alvarez and Tom Paulin. Critics were divided on the artistic merits of *Birthday Letters*. Issues like these tended at times to overshadow the literary excellence of both Plath and Hughes.

Hughes's *Birthday Letters* delineates the artistic concepts of the two poets as encroaching their reality. Hughes accomplished to communicate the generation and exchange of their convergent, universal poetic overtones in an unprecedented and outspoken manner. It is impressive how the metapoetic substrate of *Birthday Letters* compositions grandly effects the welter of excruciating emotion.

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ETIČKE VJERODAJNICE POEZIJE: ROĐENDANSKA PISMA TEDA HUGHESA

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Pjesnička zbirka Teda Hughesa *Rođendanska pisma* (*Birthday Letters*, 1998) upravljena je prema ispisivanju sveza međusobno prožetih pjesničkih i osobnih povijesti Sylvije Plath i Teda Hughesa. Posežući za unutarpredmetnim opozivom isključivih izvanpjesničkih tumačenja odnosa dviju snažnih pjesničkih osobnosti, Hughes zaokreće vlastitu nekonzfesionalnu poetičku prizmu zahvaćajući pritom putanje dvaju pjesničkih putova s pripadnim stalnim metaforama.

Rođendanska pisma isprepleću pjesničke glasove Plath i Hughesa u kontrapunktu baštinenih anglofonih kultura, povjesnica i topografija. Rad utvrđuje umjetničko-pjesničke parametre Hughesova pothvata suprotstavljanja društvenim i kritičkim predrasudama prema pjesničkom djelu Plath, kao i prema vlastitom udjelu u uspostavljanju značenja njezina opusa. Oživljujući središnja mjesta navlastitih imaginarija, supostavljajući svoje „duhove“ „demonima“ Plath, Hughes priziva i ostvaruje neotuđivo pravo na pjesnički integritet u kojem se oslobađa puni etički potencijal pjesništva.

Ključne riječi: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, pjesnički imaginarij, konvergencije, preispisivanje, pjesničko nasljeđe