

“YOUR STORY. MY STORY” FINALLY:

BIRTHDAY LETTERS

The great poetic quest of Ted Hughes ends with *Birthday Letters* (1998) – a collection of eighty eight tantalizing responses to Sylvia Plath and the furies she left behind. In the decade following her suicide on February 11, 1963, Hughes had continued to write his dark unconfessional verse but in *Birthday Letters*, the alarm seemed to go off as he finally acknowledged that Plath's ghost was inseparable from his shadow. Ranging from accessible, short-story like verses to more tightly wound ones these poems push forward from initial encounters to key moments long after Plath's death. No longer taking recourse to myths, Hughes is overtly confessional in this volume in which, he lays bare the secrets of his stormy relationship with Plath:

I look up – as to meet your voice
With all its urgent future
That has burst into me, Then look back
At the book of the printed words.
You are ten years dead. It is only a story
Your story. My story. (BL 9)

With the publication of *Birthday Letters* we have for the first time, a collection in which Hughes talks directly about his dead wife Sylvia Plath. A kind of dialogue which re-weaves the threads of deep-seated memories, obsessions and their life together, the volume is a work that carries with marked assurance, the weight and bearing of what Hughes has to say. As Traci Hukill suggests in an on line essay, it is "... his song, Its' one rarely sung by men and almost never sung so well: a song of pure deep sorrow".

While Jay Parini views this volume as a "huge gift" from the poet, which has "cost him dearly", Kate Moses believes that the poems are "vivid with tenderness and sincerity, appreciation, incredulity, humility and courage and like"tea left too long, tanic with sorrow". However, most reviewers are of the

view that the wide attention accorded to this volume is on account of the poet's attempt to complete the story of his tempestuous relationship with his long dead wife. Hughes' and Plath's domestic tragedy might have remained largely private had not Plath, already an established poet, left behind a powerful and searing sequence of poems published posthumously as *Ariel*. *Ariel* ensured Plath lasting fame even while her published stories, letters, journals and uncompromising poetry, galvanized many women who found in her words an echo of their own feelings. A heroine of the women's movement of the 1970's, Plath remains till date, one of the best selling women poets' ever. All this made her a martyr and vilified Hughes advertently or otherwise, as her oppressor and even her murderer. Critics found Hughes' conservancy and his cuts to her letters to be in self interest. His destruction of the journals of her final years, which he insists was in the best interest of their children, was the last straw on the camel's back as far as his villainy was concerned.

A precocious young woman from Massachussetts, Plath began publishing when she was just seventeen and won several prizes for her poetry at Smith College. She met Hughes in 1956 while in England on a Fulbright scholarship at Cambridge. Their marriage ended with Hughes leaving Plath for another woman and her eventual suicide. Many critics and biographers had laid the blame for Plath's suicide directly or indirectly on Hughes and until the publication of *Birthday Letters*, he had said or published nothing in response. But in this volume we finally have him telling their story as he experienced it, addressing her at times as if she were still able to read or hear him.

Birthday Letters indeed has the feel of cauterizing a long festering wound, of a release of tension, of finally breaking free. The poems harbour many strong emotions of regret, anger, pain and at times even self-pity and recount experiences of their life together in bitter, jarring sometimes even crude images. The volume is a response to Plath's white hot mythologizing and lost happiness intensifies present pain as the past raises its head. *Birthday Letters* is full of conditionals and might have beens, which do not let us forget about the forces in motion before their seven-year marriage and separation. When Hughes first met Plath she was both, scared from an earlier

suicide attempt and radiant:

Your eyes
Squeezed in your face, a crush of
diamonds,
Incredibly bright, bright as a crush
of tears (BL 15)

But fate and her dead father Otto Plath would not let them be. 'The Shot' shows that her trajectory is already plotted and that Hughes is her victim, although the real target is her dead father--"the god with a smoking gun".

Coming to the title of the volume, *Birthday Letters*, many critics are of the opinion that 'Birthday' probably alludes to those poems by Plath in which, birth is used as a metaphor for artistic creation. 'Morning Song' 'Stillborn' 'A Birthday Present', 'Three Women', 'Poem for a Birthday' are some of her poems that engage with the metaphor of birth as a reminder and sign of self-renewal. Plath's seven-part 'Poem for a Birthday' (1959), is undoubtedly crucial to Hughes' schematic interpretation of her work in which, the poems of *Ariel*, figure as the pinnacle of her poetic achievement. In his Introduction to Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981), Hughes states that he regarded 'Poem for a Birthday' as a metaphorical record of the first real breakthrough in her writing. Plath too writes in her journal:

Ambitions seeds birthday – To be a dwelling on
madhouse, nature: meanings of tools, greenhouses,
florists' shops, tunnels, vivid and disjointed. An
adventure. Never over. Developing Rebirth Despair
Old women. Block it out. (Qtd. from Sansom, "I Was
there, I saw it" 3)

Likewise, *Birthday Letters* too can be regarded as a long sequence poem that records a never-ending 'adventure' and dwells on madhouse nature, tunnels, rebirth, despair and old (dead) women. To this extent it can then be read as a response to Plath's Birthday poems. 'Suttee' is Hughes' record of Plath's rebirth as a poet in which, he rewrites Southwell's Christmas Day poem

'The Burning Babe', substituting Plath for the fiery Christ child. She is the "Babe of dark flames and screams" and he figures himself as a Frankensteinian midwife, delivering an "explosion of screams". After that he is "dissolved" washed away in scorching fluid, "engulfed / In a flood, a dam, burst thunder / Of new myth". The flaming newborn Plath, the "Childbride on a pyre" "cries for help". The poem concludes with:

Both of us consumed
By the old child in the new birth...
Babe of dark flames and screams
That sucked the oxygen out of both of us.

(BL 149)

'Suttee' is not the only poem in *Birthday Letters* in which, Hughes confronts, contradicts or otherwise engages with Plath's poetry. As 'Letters', many of the poems of the volume function as replies. It has often been possible and even instructive, to read the two poets together to discover signs of one on the other. From immature cross-references between Plath's 'Sow' and Hughes' 'View of a Pig', to Plath's influence on the psychodrama of *Crow* (1970), many critics have drawn comparisons between the works of these two poets. *Birthday Letters* however, offers fresh opportunities for reading, rereading and counter reading of an entirely different order. The unwelcome spectators and viewers of their relationship, who had been peering over Hughes' shoulders all these years, squinting at Plath's private journals and letters and straining to hear the buzz of tittle tattle and rumor, are finally confronted full force in *Birthday Letters*. In this vein Ian Sansom sees *Birthday Letters*, as close to Auden's elegies for Yeats and Freud. This work is not addressed to some obscure reader but to the great mass of his own and Plath's readers. There is also no mystification about the themes. He wants us to see his side of the story. If *Birthday Letters*, can be viewed as public replies on the one hand, they can also be seen as public rebukes on the other.

In a letter to Plath's biographer Anne Stevenson, Hughes wrote: "She never did anything that I held against her. The only thing that I found hard to understand was her sudden discovery of our bad moments ('Events', 'Rabbit

Catcher') as subjects for poems". In this volume he repays her back in kind. 'Sam' (BL 10), refers back to a runaway horse incident described in, Plath's poem 'Whiteness I Remember' Hughes here imagines himself as the stallion and writes:

When I jumped a fence you strangled me.
One giddy moment, then fell off
Flung yourself off and under my feet to trip me
And tripped me and lay dead over in a flash.

(BL 57)

Another poem 'The Earthenware Head', coolly deflates Plath's 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', criticising her compositional methods as strategies of evasion:

You ransacked thesaurus in your poem about
it,
Veiling its mirror, rhyming yourself into safety
From its orphaned fate (BL 57).

A lot of poems in *Birthday Letters*, are about Plath's hidden or the other self. In his forward to Plath's *Journals* published in 1982, Hughes claimed that:

Though I spent everyday with her for six years, and
was rarely separated from her for more than two or
three hours at a time, I never saw her show her 'real
self to anybody except perhaps, in the last three
months of her life.

In 'Trophies', Hughes refines and refutes Plath's famous poem 'Pursuit' :

Your journal pages. Your effort to cry
words
Came apart in aired blood
Enriched by the adrenalins
Of despair, terror, sheer fury-
After forty years
The whiff of that beast, off the dry pages,

Lifts the hair on the back of my hands.

(BL 19)

In 'Black Coat', he responds sharply to Plath's 'Men in Black':

... I had no idea I had stepped

Into the telescopic sights

Of the paparazzo sniper

Nested in your brown iris (BL 102).

Hence, we see that Hughes' critical engagement with Plath's poems goes on. There is nothing simply sentimental or nostalgic about it. In fact a lot of it is pretty unpleasant. To be witnessing other people's arguments and disputes is bad enough, but distilled into poetry this concoction of passion and dispute seems hard to swallow at times. On his part, Hughes makes no effort to sweeten his blows with affection, often making his readers gulp. He renders very precisely what Janet Malcolm has called Plath's "not-niceness". In the opening poem 'Fulbright Scholars', Hughes remembers scrutinizing Plath's photograph, her put on grin "for the camera", the judges, the strangers and the frighteners". Thus, Hughes establishes an immediate distance between himself and Plath between Plath, and her true self and between Plath and her public. The poem opens with a sardonic:

Where was it, in the Strand? A display

Of new items, in photographs.

For some reason I noticed it.

A picture of that year's intake

Of Fulbright Scholars. (BL 3)

This strategy gives him space enough to view Plath more objectively and with impunity. In '18 Rugby street', Plath's body becomes a continent as she exposes him to America:

You were a new world. My new world

So this is America, I marveled. (BL20)

In '9 Willow Street', Plath is a machine in which:

My bubbles
Wobbled upwards and burst emptily.
In the reverberation of the turbines
Home and college had assembled in
you,
That thundered the parquet.
And shook you to tremblings.

She is presented as the lively, enthusiastic director of her own drama in 'Visit', where Hughes is being auditioned for the lead role:

Nor did I know I was being auditioned
For the male lead in your drama
...
As if a puppet were being tried on its strings,
Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes.
(BL 7)

confirming exactly, what the speaker in Plath's poem 'Soliloquy of the Solipsist', had said about herself long ago:

My looks leash
Dangles the puppet people.

Hughes describes himself as stunned trapped and manipulated by Plath the puppet master, in their famous first meeting:

You meant to knock me out
With your vivacity....
And the swelling ring moat of tooth marks
That was to brand my face for the next month
The me beneath it for good. (BL 15).

Plath is the high velocity bullet full of fury: Gold jacked, solid silver / Nickle tipped. Trajectory perfect / As though ether.... (BL 16) who has targeted him.

Hughes projects himself as being under attack in several other poems like '18 Rugby street', and 'The Machine', as well, though it is not always without pleasure and relief. In these poems, the couple goes, deep into labyrinths, catacombs and temple crypts, with Hughes often being mistaken by Plath, for her father. In the complicated symbolism of the book, if Plath is a priestess, a dybbuk, Cinderella and Rumpelstiltskin, her mother is a Krakien – an unnamed rival, while Hughes "not quite the Frog Pince / May be the swine herd." There is a vast supporting cast of ogres, genies and demon slaves. Fate continually overrules the star-crossed lovers when they seek knowledge of their future from oracles, ouijes and astrology, for that knowledge is a fatal gift:

Maybe you'd picked up a whisper that I could not,
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 you happiness,
Your husband and your life'. (BL 56)

One of the most interesting features *Birthday Letters*, is its structure. The poems appear to be arranged chronologically rather than the way Hughes wrote them. They are arranged by the date of the event which they describe and that this is a stroke of brilliance that enriches both the momentum and the significance of the poems. It adds depth to the landscapes and highlights the way the poems change pace and tone as they approach Plath's death. For instance, the dust and flavour of Spain, described, in the poem 'You Hated Spain':

Spain frightened you. Spain
Where I felt at home...
....
... the dust red cadaver
You dared not wake with, the puckering
amputations . No literature course had
glamorized. (BL 39)

permeates the other three poems about their honeymoon as well. This progression also bears a breathtaking resemblance to the way Plath's own writing changed over the course of her career. Her early poems which were stilted, despite their ingenious images and flawless form later grew fevered and searing with their careful crafting, thus highlighting their intensity. Similarly, some of the poems of the first half of *Birthday Letters* seem somewhat forced. Powerful images get bogged down by too much exposition or Hughes tendency to use sentences without predicates. The later poems however, achieve a crescendo that brings out the deep pain as he says:

At your sixtieth birthday, in the cake's glow,
Ariel sits on your knuckle.
You feed it grapes, a black one, then a green
one,
From between your lips pursed, like a kiss.
Why are you so solemn? Everybody laughs
....
Only you and I do not smile. (BL 192)

Commenting on the structure of *Birthday Letters*, in a paper 'Poetry and Magic', presented at the International conference Universite Lumiere Lyon 2, France 2000, Ann Skea gives it an entirely different interpretation. Exploring instead, Hughes use of the occult Biblical theory of Cabbala and of Tarot in structuring these poems. Hughes is no longer alive to confirm whether he had this kind of a structure in mind while organizing the poems of this volume, however there is no doubt that *Birthday Letters* brought him an inner sense of liberation and he, felt 'renewed after publishing them', (Carol's letter to Ann Skea 1999).

If Hughes' progression is similar to that of Plath's, his themes too are similar. Much of Plath's work was about the experiences that they shared so that the bull fights and bee boxes of her poems are also the subject of *Birthday Letters*. The vocabulary too, seems to be issuing forth from the great Plath dictionary. The 'Panic Bird', from her journals becomes the subject of 'The Bird'.

Under its glass dome, behind its eyes,
Your Panic Bird was not stuffed. It was looking
for the glass-not there and yet there
A zoo gecko glued against nothing
With all its life throbbing in its throat,
As if it stood on ether. (BL77)

The 'dismal-headed fairy godmother' in 'Night-Ride on Ariel' (BL 174), is almost a direct quote from Plath's 'The Disquieting Muses'. Although the experiences of their shared six years have always been present in Hughes' Poems, they have never been more rich than in *Birthday Letters*. In many of these poems Hughes intimates that it was Plath's conventional expectation that trapped and destroyed her. Their marriage and his poetic influence had given a new direction and purpose to her fight to become a writer. When they both travelled to the U.S., Hughes acted as a counterweight to her fear of breaking away from the conventional expectations of success. He had a strong distrust of university respectability and was convinced that any tenured academic job would suffocate them. In a poem entitled 'The Blue Flannel Suit', he satirized Plath as she prepared to go back and work as a lecturer in English at Smith College for Women, sitting nervously at the breakfast table in an ugly blue suit in keeping with the idea of what was expected of her:

The first morning,
Before your first class at college,
You sat there
Sipping coffee....
... I watched
The strange dummy stiffness, the misery,
Of your blue flannel suit, its straitjacket, ugly
Half-approximation to your idea
Of the properties you hoped to ease into,...

(BL 67)

Hughes' image of the blue suit as "A mad, execution uniform, survived your sentence", is reminiscent of Plath's poem 'Daddy', in which she imagines

herself as a Holocaust victim.

In her *Ariel* poems, Plath had approached death from every possible angle. It was a longing for oblivion in 'Tulpis', and an art to be perfected in 'Lady Lazarus' it became a nameless, formless murderous intent in 'Elm'. She had even personified herself as the corpse of her next door Devon neighbour in 'Breck Plague', as a prey in 'Death and Co', as a sacrificial victim in 'Birthday present' and as a dead woman in 'Edge', one of her last poems.

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. (CP 272)

Her *Letters Home*, written at a time, when she was struggling to maintain an identity of common sense optimism, serve as a bizarre counterpoint to the searing brutality of the poems where she surveys her growing fascination with death and records her self immolation. *Birthday Letters* as a record of their lives together hence, has the marked assurance of the weight and bearing of what Hughes has to say. Most interesting are the moments that capture the energy of Plath's forceful poems. However, the strength and fascination of the volume lies in Hughes' refusal to explain Plath's emotions and his attempts to get in touch with his own self.

In her critique of the volume, Jacqueline Rose states that the power and conviction of the collection can be traced to the poet's attempts to convey the futility of trying to give a definite answer to their own queries, which run through these poems along with some other common place but pertinent questions. For instance what is it that makes or breaks a marriage, or what happens when sexual euphoria with its giddy sense of rebirth, walks straight into other attachments with prior claims that have already taken up their positions inside our heads? What happens when a shared and uplifting passion for poetry hits the reef of domestic day to day life? What happens when two complex contrary cultural legacies collide? Violence as these poems hint, is familiar,

domestic and takes place even in homes. There is indeed, something chillingly commonplace about what they describe. The leading question however, that one cannot help speculating on is why Ted Hughes chose to publish these poems as late as 1998 almost 35 years after some of them were written.

Birthday Letters, has generated immense interest in poetry lovers, general readers and critics alike. With this volume Hughes had become the first writer ever, to win the coveted Whitebread Book of the Year prize two years in a row. *Birthday Letters*, was declared the winner at a ceremony in London, a year after Hughes had won the same prize for *Tales From Ovid*. The Judges were conscious of the fact that it was a posthumous award and that the poet had won it the previous year too, however they assured the public that the discussion around the table to decide the winner, had been based purely on the quality of literature present. At the award presentation ceremony Hughes' and Plath's daughter Frieda, who accepted the twenty one thousand pounds award on behalf of her father, read out a letter he had written to a friend after the publication of *Birthday Letters*, commenting that the letter said better, what anyone else could have said on his behalf:

Yes, I think you are right. I think those letters do release the story that everything I have written since 1960's has been evading. It was in a kind of desperation that I finally did publish them. I had always thought them too inexplicably raw and unguarded, simply too vulnerable. But then I could not endure being blocked any longer. How strange that we have to make public declarations of our secrets, but we do. If only I had done the equivalent 30 years ago I might have had a more fruitful career - certainly a freer psychological life. Even now the sensation of inner liberation—a huge southern possibility of new inner experience. Quite strange.

(Qtd. from BBC online Network)

Although all his life Hughes had been struggling to find suitable metaphors for his own consciousness, *Birthday Letters* is his most overtly confessional volume. His letters makes it quite evident then, that though he had begun his journey as a poet searching for myths and symbols that could effectively convey the stages of his spiritual journey, he finally ends being a confessional poet fully appreciative of the therapeutic value of a mode he had rejected outright at the early stages of his poetic career.