

Sylvia Plath's Presence in Recent Ted Hughes Publications

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Terry Gifford, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, New York: Cambridge UP, 2011.

Hardcover: \$69.56, Paperback: \$28.99. 220 pages. ISBN: 978-0-52-114576-3.

Edward Hadley. *Elegies of Ted Hughes*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. \$84.00. 200 pages. ISBN: 978-0-23-023218-1.

Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar. *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*. Ed. Keith Sagar. London: The British Library, 2012. 320 pages. £25. ISBN: 978-0-71-235862-0.

Since the publication of Ted Hughes's *Collected Poems* (2003) and *Letters of Ted Hughes* (2007), new scholarship has analyzed the breadth of his *oeuvre*.¹ Inevitably, this means addressing his first wife Sylvia Plath's poetry and posthumous presence. In Edward Hadley's *Elegies of Ted Hughes* (2010), Plath is one of several women whom Hughes mourns, particularly in his final collection, *Birthday Letters* (1998). Terry Gifford's *Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (2011) includes essays by Jo Gill on "Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath" and Tracy Brain on "Hughes and Feminism." Most recently, in *Poet and Critic* (2012), Keith Sagar has published his letters from Hughes from 1969 to 1998, which The British Library acquired in 2001 and relevant excerpts from Sagar's responses to Hughes, the selection that Sagar had saved because he had composed them electronically and those that Hughes had saved, housed in Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (vii).² Throughout his letters to Sagar, Hughes discusses poetics, criticism, and Plath's writing. Taken together, the monograph, critical guide, and collection of letters address the academic, personal, and poetic dimensions of Hughes's career.

¹ I would like to thank Emory University's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry, whose Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Poetics enabled my completion of this review.

² <<http://pressandpolicy.bl.uk/Press-Releases/The-British-Library-publishes-30-years-of-letters-between-Ted-Hughes-and-critic-Keith-Sagar-591.aspx>> Accessed 28 May, 2012.

As a critic, Sagar observes in his introduction, he presented a complicated audience for Hughes, who may have been inclined to trust Sagar because of their mutual admiration for D. H. Lawrence and nature (2). Hughes and Sagar shared a common sensibility, having both lived in Yorkshire and attended Cambridge at the same time (3). As their relationship developed, Hughes discussed his composition of such books as *The Remains of Elmet* (1979), *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (1995), and *Birthday Letters* (1998). These letters will be invaluable to scholars interested in Hughes's response to Shakespeare.

For Hughes, Sagar represented a self-selected academic representative with whom Hughes could express his dislike of contemporary criticism. Hughes explained to Sagar in May of 1981 that Hugh Kenner's "principles were set in the fifties, O. K. for some" (107). Hughes explains that "Kenner seems to me simply wrong about *The Colossus* [sic]. The metrics of those poems express limbo—immobility of fear—inability to come to grips with the real self. If a stasis of that sort, which she experienced as psychic paralysis, is a control of 'dangerous forces'—well, he can be said to be right, but he doesn't mean that" (108). Hughes's use of the word "paralysis" here perhaps unknowingly recalls Kenner's own terminology in *Dublin's Joyce* (1955), whose interpretations, along with those of Cleanth Brooks and Harry Levin, shaped Plath's teaching of modernism as an instructor of English from 1957 to 1958.³ Brooks's reading of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922) informed Levin, Kenner, and other critics' subsequent reading of Joyce's depiction of paralysis in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914). In her teaching notes, Plath incorporated passages from Levin and Kenner defining paralysis in relation to the idea of "death-in-life." The terms "death-in-life," "life-in-death," and "living death" not only informed Plath's sense of modernism, but also her understanding of the texts she aspired to emulate (*Golden Annotating Modernism*).

Sagar also presented Hughes with an audience for his concerns regarding education. He feels that the emphasis on criticism and theory in academia has stifled students' production of creative work. In 1994, Hughes proposed that "English studies [is] gradually turning into something that has nothing to do with the original concern, enjoyment of books and literary works. The way a snake's skin gradually separates itself, till it lies there as an object on its own, a

³ Sylvia Plath, "Teaching – notes" Box 13, Folder 10. Plath mss. II Memorabilia. The Lilly Library. Indiana University. Bloomington, IN.

trophy of some kind, for the snake-skin collector. While the snake escapes renewed, to live its own unpredictable life" (241). He envisions possible solutions as "a whole new branch of communal activity" maybe "an extra mural business. Utterly separate from the Academy. A wing of the Arvon Foundation maybe" (241).

Critical responses to Plath's poetry also shaped Hughes's dislike of feminist critics. In "Hughes and Feminism," Tracy Brain begins with his response to feminist critics and resolves "to explore what a sympathetic feminist reading of Hughes's poems reveals" (94). Brain argues that "feminism and Ted Hughes share powerful concerns about relationships between men and women" (94). Like Heather Clark, who thoroughly addressed Hughes's complex representation of gender in *Crow*, Brain considers Hughes's representations of femininity throughout his later books.

In his letters, Hughes routinely offers Sagar copies and information regarding Hughes's publications for Sagar's own interest, future scholarship, and the bibliography that he was completing.⁴ As Amy Chen has recently argued, Hughes was conscientious about his archive and contributed to it. In 1968, Hughes wrote to the poet Richard Murphy asking him if he had heard that the manuscript of Eliot's *Waste Land* had been found among John Quinn's papers.⁵ In 1984, after he sold Plath's manuscripts to Smith College, Hughes explained to Sagar that when Valerie Eliot published the *Waste Land* facsimile (1971), "[f]or me, if anything, that MSS made Eliot even more interesting" (134). When he came to assemble his own manuscripts for his archive at Emory, Hughes turned to Sagar for assistance, but Hughes ultimately resolved that he had to sort through the materials himself. In October of 1995, he began cataloguing his materials, "making simple notes & breaking each group down into numbered folders. Up to 89, so far" (248). As he put it beautifully in July of 1996, he was busy "just handling the past" (251).

Sagar's *Poet and Critic* also contains new details regarding Plath's poetry. In 1981, for instance, Hughes specified that part of the second version of his poem "Lines to a Newborn Baby," "a shorter piece in 3 line paragraphs . . . was the template for Sylvia's much superior" first line of "Morning Song" (1961) (101-2). In *The Cambridge Companion*, Gill and Brain make broader comparisons between these two poems. Gill explains that Middlebrook "cites Hughes's 'Lines to A Newborn Baby' as one example of an opening call, to which Plath responded with

⁴ Keith Sagar and Stephen Tabor, *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography* (1983) and *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography* (1998).

⁵ "Rec'd 11 November 1968." Ted Hughes to Richard Murphy. Richard Murphy Collection. Unprocessed Collection. University of Tulsa. Tulsa, OK. I thank Gillian Groszewski for helping to decipher Hughes's handwriting.

'Morning Song', a poem which then solicited a further response in his 'Full Moon and Little Frieda'" (Gill 53-54). Brain observes that "[l]ike many of Plath's poems, Hughes's 'Lines to a Newborn Baby' explores what women 'most intimately know', in this case breastfeeding" (95). She concludes that "Hughes's poem admires the good of what breastfeeding does, its special female power" (95).

Of particular interest to Plath scholars is Hughes's long letter from July of 1998 responding to *Birthday Letters*, which Neil Roberts in *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (2006) and Heather Clark in *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (2011) have quoted from. In this letter, Hughes grappled with writing about personal details in a way that did not

bury the main features of it in some dramatic action . . . That seemed to be reprehensible, not truly creative. When poets did it—as Snodgrass, then Lowell, then Sexton did—picking it up from each other—I despised it. In poetry, I believed, if the experience was to be dealt with creatively, it would have to emerge obliquely, through a symbol, inadvertently . . . And in fact with me, in retrospect, I can see that it began to emerge in exactly this fashion in *Crow*—which I started in 1965. (269)

Hughes's realization regarding *Crow* is interesting as well because Anne Sexton had admired his use of a persona in the volume.⁶ When she taught a course on her own poetry at Colgate University in 1972, Sexton cited *Crow* as an exemplary demonstration of the use of persona.⁷

In his July 1998 letter, Hughes also notes that at the time of her death, Plath had left typescripts of his *Wodwo* (1967) poems "Green Wolf," "Out," "Heptonstall," "Full Moon and Little Frieda," and "New Moon in January," on her desk (271). Hughes adds that "I think she got certain things from them [the *Wodwo* typescripts]. Also a piece I never collected—The Road to Easington, to which her reply was The Bee Meeting, mocking the rhythms with a different meaning i.e. your escape is my funeral. That's how she read it, I think, eventually, though she was excited by it when I wrote it" (271-2).

Like Hughes, Gill also addresses the influence that he and Plath had on each other's writing. When considering Hughes and Plath's literary relationship, Gill argues that "[b]y deploying Hughes's image of 'hidden supply lines' [inspiring him] . . . we can escape binaristic and competitive debates about who exerted the greatest power over whom, and we can open out

⁶ Sexton also supplied a quotation endorsing *Crow* on the back cover of the American paperback.

⁷ See Golden, "Ted Hughes and the Midcentury American Academy." Anne Sexton, "Lecture Materials for Colgate University Course." Box 16, Folder 5. Ransom Center. University of Texas. Austin, TX.

the enquiry in order to give full consideration to the multiplicity and fluidity of both poets' sources" (55). She also proposes further ways that the poets influenced each other. For instance, she argues that Hughes learned from "Plath's representation of Devon voices and landscapes in a number of poetry and prose texts. In the prologue to *Gaudete* (1977), Hughes's characterizations of people and settings bring to mind Plath's sketches of 'Rose and Percy B.' and 'Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers'" (57). Gill sees *Birthday Letters* "as a complex, profoundly textual and highly tentative exploration of what it means to read and to write about one's own experience and that of others. It is not Plath's influence per se that we might detect in *Birthday Letters*, but the influence of her words – and by extension other textual representations of their experience – as Hughes encounters them afresh on each and every rereading" (58).

Edward Hadley's study *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* is a rich consideration of Hughes's engagement with the lyric. Hadley turns to Plath's "Edge" early in his study as an example of what he calls the "trend in modern elegy to mute the sometimes hyperbolic feature of a transformation in death to a star or some form of natural energy. . . . the transformation might be death itself. Sylvia Plath's 'Edge' appears to present one such unadorned transition" (5). Hadley's final chapter contains a rigorous survey of Hughes's response to Plath in many *Birthday Letters* poems including "Fidelity," "St Botolph's," "The Literary Life," "Moonwalk," "You Hated Spain," "The Table," "Apprehensions," "Fulbright Scholars," "Caryatids (2)," "Wuthering Heights," "Your Paris," "Daffodils," and "The Offers."

Hadley's penultimate chapter, "Dust As We Are," sheds new light on the gravity and continued presence of the First World War in Yorkshire while Hughes was growing up. During her 1962 interview with the British Council, Plath mentioned her recent curiosity regarding Gallipoli, in which Hughes's father had fought (Orr). As Hadley cites,

Writing to Nick Gammage, Hughes stresses how the First World War left his father and his generation traumatized: "I never heard of anything but the First World War . . . Those towns in West Yorks were still stunned. So I passed my early days in a kind of Mental Hospital of the survivors . . . it wasn't simply the horrible mud struggle in a terrain more or less composed of liquefied corpses, the stories of how this or that village lost all its men in one day, one attack . . . My father's whole life was posthumous in some way, after that." (103)

Hadley adds that, "Hughes and his family seek to resuscitate his father, but . . . he remains 'killed but alive'" (104). The form of the elegy enables Hughes to capture his Uncle Walter's comparable

state of life-in-death: "The most effective war-elegy in *Wolfwatching* is 'Walt', which retells the *Recklings* poem 'My Uncle's Wound'. It is the same Uncle Walt who guides Plath and Hughes to the ruins which were thought to be the location of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* . . . Like Hughes's father, Walt is killed but alive" (104). The traumatized state of life-in-death is also reminiscent of that which Plath understood to be a part of literature of the first half of the twentieth century. In her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), Plath's heroine embodies a version of life-in-death, living life without fully engaging with it (*Golden Annotating Modernism*).⁸

Sagar, Gifford, and Hadley's books reflect the strength and range of Hughes scholarship and the light it can also shed on Plath's poetry. These volumes and such journals as *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* and *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sylvia Plath Scholarship* suggest that Plath and Hughes scholars will continue to find inspiration in each other's work.

⁸ See also Kroll regarding death-in-life in Plath's work.

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