from "Ted Hughes's Birthday Letters: Annotations and Commentary"

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The following sets of annotations are taken from my Doctoral project "Birthday Letters: Annotations and Commentary." Because the project of annotating Hughes's poems has become larger than I ever imagined, only thirty sets of annotations comprise my dissertation – which I will defend in August 2010. The completion, revision and preparation of the annotations for the other fifty-eight poems continue to be my academic focus.

In this issue of Plath Profiles, you will find annotations for Hughes's "Black Coat" and "The Inscription." I hope these selections will stand as evidence of the richness of Hughes's poems and that they will reveal them as intensely intertextual. The Birthday Letters poems demand the sort of deconstruction and close reading I provide here. They are imbued with references to people, places, events, and other texts and each of them requires further examination.

Because Hughes returns to and makes use of (often problematically) Plath's own writings throughout the collection, I feel my annotations reclaim her voice as they send readers back to her work to examine how it informs Hughes's. It is my intention in writing these annotations that I might educate, and therefore liberate, readers of Birthday Letters. By providing the information to which Hughes alludes throughout, I feel that I offer the reader an opportunity to better appraise the poems as well as to better interrogate Hughes's intentions in writing his collection.

In his personal correspondences, Hughes often claims that Birthday Letters is a "simple" (Letters 712) and "plain" (692) book, with no "concern for [his] artistic reputation" (692). Knowing the text as I do, it is difficult to take him at his word. These poems are complex, intricate and extremely self-conscious. I hope that my close analysis might allow critics and readers to re-think this extraordinary volume.

The annotations are all headlined with a small summation of the poem's agenda. The poems are numbered according to their place within the sequence of eighty-eight; "Black Coat" is number 41, "The Inscription" is number 74. I then number each individual annotation I include within the sequence (##.1, ##.2, etc.). Finally, I include the page number(s) for each of the poems at the beginning of each set of annotations and I also indicate, in square brackets, from which page I take the lines I am addressing. For example, an annotation for the first lines of "The Inscription" reads like this: 74.1 [172]. I hope my methodology is both clear and helpful.
"Black Coat"

Annotations 41.1-41.6: 102-103

In this poem, a direct response to Plath's poem "Man in Black," and one that certainly has her "Full Fathom Five" in mind, Hughes continues to address Plath's obsession with the ghost of her father. In particular Hughes explores the ways in which he and Otto Plath become inseparable in Plath's psyche as she undergoes psychoanalysis with Ruth Beuscher in 1958-9. This is a "deadly connection" that is "catastrophic" for Ted Hughes (Wagner, Ariel's Gift 103; Bundtzen, The Other Ariel 92). The poem suggests that Hughes had no knowledge of this transference at the time; it is only with the knowledge of her later poems that he comes to understand the complicated relationship he shared with Plath's father through her "eye's inbuilt double exposure" (37). The complicated relationship between time and the construction of meaning may be a clue to why Hughes places "Black Coat" out of chronological order in Birthday Letters. Though Hughes's and Plath's trip to Winthrop happens months before their 1959 cross-country tour of America, placing "Black Coat" after the poems concerning this trip suggests that it is only later that he begins to grasp his problematic relationship with Otto Plath.

41.1 [102]

I remember going out there,
The tide far out, the North Shore ice-wind
Cutting me back
To the quick of the blood— that outer-edge nostalgia,
The good feeling. My sole memory
Of my black overcoat.

"[O]ut there" refers to the sandbar that extends from Water Tower Hill in Winthrop, Massachusetts. Winthrop, where Plath lived as a child, is the burial site of her father. Plath recounts in her journals the visit to this ocean town that sired her, and ostensibly Hughes's, poem: "A clear blue day in Winthrop. Went to my father's grave, a very depressing sight. . . . Walked over rocks along the oceanside under Water Tower Hill. . . . Walked the seawall to Deer Island: hey, you can't go any farther, the guard said" (Plath, Unabridged Journals 473).

Plath, just over a month later, comments on her composition of "Man in Black," acknowledging the "transference" that took place in the composition of her poem: "Also, yesterday, my second acceptance from the New Yorker: . . . the Watercolor of Granchester Meadows . . . and Man in Black, the only 'love' poem in my book . . . which I wrote only a little over a month ago at one of

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1 See Collected Poems: 119-120.
3 Due to issues of permissions, the excerpt is cut significantly; please refer to Plath's journal entry for a more detailed account of her experience.
my fruitful visits to Winthrop. . . . The 'dead black' in my poem may be a transference from the visit to my father's grave" (477-478).

Figure 1: The sandbar Plath speaks about is visible here in the middle of the image. Note the red and blue water tower rising on the hill above and Deer Island in the distance. © Peter K. Steinberg.

Figure 2: Another view of the "oceanside under Water Tower Hill." © Peter K. Steinberg.
Figure 3: A map of Winthrop that notes the Winthrop Cemetery. The Water Tower is located on the east end of Prospect Ave.

<http://www.holyrosaryparish.net/images/map_winthrop.gif>

Figure 4: A map of Winthrop and the isthmus to Deer Island where Hughes and Plath walked along the shore. <http://pics4.city-data.com/mapszip/zma469.png>

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4 See also: <http://maps.google.ca/maps?f=q&source=s_q&hl=en&geocode=&q=point+shirley+winthrop+mass&sll=42.539018,-71.64586&sspn=0.710318,1.458435&ie=UTF8&ll=42.359536,-70.971993&spn=0.044523,0.091152&t=h&z=13>
41.2 [102]

I was staring at the sea, I suppose.
Trying to feel thoroughly alone,
Simply myself, with sharp edges –
Me and the sea one big tabula rasa,

Hughes self-consciously suggests a longing for freedom and transcendence in the face of nature's sublimity. In attempting to be one with the ocean and to accept its therapy, Hughes describes himself as a blank canvas, a *tabula rasa*, ready for inscription. He is trying to feel "thoroughly alone" with the ocean; this is certainly an irony, the reader comes to realize, as Hughes discovers how Plath's perception of him at that moment is both stifling and constricting. As she comes to associate him with her dead father, Hughes is anything but alone, never "simply" himself. Rather than liberated by the forces of nature, he is imprisoned by Otto Plath, who, mythologized as a sea god in Plath's mind, comes to share Hughes's skin.

Hughes describes himself in line nine as having "sharp edges," and later, in line 42, as "sharp-edged." Though this suggests that Hughes is strong and ready to receive, it later depicts him as a series of borders, an outline to be filled. He is simply the "Black coat," "black shoes," "Black hair" that picture him as a "Fixed vortex" in Plath's "Man in Black" (Plath, *Collected Poems*)
Despite the strong angles of his character, Plath blurs Hughes until he embodies her father; he becomes only a black coat, housing the dead man in both his glories and flaws. The use of tabula rasa also conjures Plath's own description in her poem "Lyonnesse." This 1962 poem, tellingly concerned with male abandonment and the loss of family ties, describes an ambivalent male God whose mind is a "white gape," "the real Tabula Rasa" (234). As Hughes re-imagines her, Plath is fearful and resentful of such a "gape"; she is seeking to bring her life and its mythology into sharper focus in Hughes's poem. See more on this in annotation 41.5 [103].

41.3 [102]

Putting my remarks down, for the thin tongue
Of the sea to interpret. Inaudibly.
A therapy.
Instructions too complicated for me
At the moment, but stowed in my black box for later.
Like feeding a wild deer
With potato crisps
As you do in that snapshot where you exclaim
Back towards me and my camera.

Hughes describes the therapeutic value of human interaction with nature – an encounter so sublime he takes the experience away with him for further analysis and future catharsis; he references a "black box," suggesting flight data recorders that survive catastrophic events. A "black box," more specifically, however, is "any comparatively small, usually black, box containing a secret, mysterious, or complex mechanical or electronic device" (dictionary.com). Hughes attempts to preserve the mystical experience of the Winthrop sandbar. He compares such an experience with one of Plath's own, where she encounters the raw wilderness in the form of a deer. Hughes references a well-known photo of Plath, taken in Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada, July 1959. In the photo, Plath extends her hand to a deer which eats from her palm. Plath, who turns her head toward the camera, captures the uniqueness of the experience in her facial expression.6

That she feeds the deer "potato crisps" speaks to awkwardness of the encounter between human and animal, a moment where industrialization also meets wilderness; there is irony in Plath's feeding the deer "junk food." To photograph this moment is to store it, to "black box" it for future reference. In both instances in question, the Winthrop sandbar and the encounter with a deer in Algonquin Park, Hughes sees the interaction with nature as also potentially deceptive.

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5 See also annotations for "Error.
6 To see this photo – which could not be published due to issues of permissions – please visit <http://sylviaplath.org.uk/wp-content/gallery/sylviaplath/spfeedingdeeralgonquinprovincialpar.jpg>.
Hughes's choice of the word "therapy" also speaks to the psychotherapy Plath was undergoing at the time of her "Man in Black"'s composition. Psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher encouraged Plath to confront her latent feelings for her father; Hughes, as we see throughout numerous *Birthday Letters* poems, felt this confrontation fatal, and as Lynda Bundtzen describes, Hughes felt this "fatal insistence on the daughter's incestuous desire for the dead father [was a] fiction [that] menaced their marriage and instilled Plath's poetic symbolism with a morbid paternal influence" (92).  

Hughes's attention to a "snapshot" in line 25 of "Black Coat" extends to an important metaphor in subsequent lines where Plath now has Hughes in her sights: see subsequent annotation.

41.4 [102-103]

So I had no idea I had stepped  
Into the telescopic sights  
Of the paparazzo sniper  
Nestled in your brown iris.  
Perhaps you had no idea either,  
So far off, half a mile maybe,

As in so many of his *Birthday Letters* poems, Hughes insists that he is bewildered by the situation in which he and Plath find themselves. He becomes the prey here, targeted by Plath's gaze. His reference to the paparazzo also recalls how Hughes has been prey for the hoards of Plath fans who demonize him, sensationalize his life with Plath while condemning him for her death. They, as he suggests Plath does, confuse him with someone – and something – he is not. Plath is "perhaps" unaware of the transference that takes place between Hughes and her father; she is "So far off," literally (she is "half a mile" away) and figuratively (far from any "reality" of the situation as Hughes sees it) outside the picture she constructs. She is intellectually unaware of her performance in an Oedipal Freudian drama that plays out in her subconscious. Hughes continues to construct both himself and Plath as governed by forces beyond their control, a recurring theme in *Birthday Letters*.

In Plath's "Man in Black," the speaker is even further removed; "For Plath, this distance permits her to make a stake on safer ground, but also signals her position of exile in relation to Hughes's enviable (and increasingly ominous) centrality; for Hughes, this centrality is not only unwanted, it transforms him into a prey in a telescopic rifle lens" (Wurst 22-23). Hughes laments this construction of himself; in retrospect he feels stalked, hunted.

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7 Bundtzen also suggests that a reading of Hughes's "The Hidden Orestes" is helpful in understanding his disdain for the Freudian drama in which Plath was encouraged to participate. This poem is found in the collection *Howls and Whispers*, on page 1175 of his *Collected Poems*. 
41.5 [103]

No idea
How that double image,
Your eye's inbuilt double exposure
Which was the projection
Of your two-way heart's diplocic error,
The body of the ghost and me the blurred see-through
Came into single focus,
Sharp-edged, stark as a target,
Set up like a decoy
Against the freezing sea
From which your dead father had just crawled.

This "double image," of course, is Hughes as Otto Plath, Otto Plath as Hughes. In a December 27 entry from 1958 (less than three months before her fateful visit to her father's gav) Plath writes in her journal: "I identify [Ted] with my father at certain times, and these times take on great importance . . . Ted, insofar as he is a male presence is a substitute for my father: but in no other way. Images of his faithlessness with women echo my fear of my father's relation with my mother and Lady Death" (Plath, Unabridged Journals 447).

This entry, in particular, "implicate[s] Hughes as a scapegoat for unresolved feelings toward Otto Plath" (Bundtzen 92). Whereas Hughes was earlier gazing upon the sea for therapeutic possibilities, Plath's own therapy led her to project her anxieties concerning her father onto her husband: "Even as Hughes is claiming the virtues of erasure in confrontation with the sea – that is, the proverbial sense of human diminishment before a mighty natural force – Plath's gaze insists on appropriating the image for her own, perhaps unconscious, meanings, and she inscribes his tabula rasa with paternal signification" (Bundtzen 93). Plath's fears of abandonment, stemming from the sudden and preventable death of her father, are transferred to Hughes.

Plath's journals reveal that the association between Otto Plath and Hughes is acknowledged as early as May 11, 1958: "Another title for my book: Full Fathom Five, . . . has the background of The Tempest, the association of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems . . . to the father image – relating to my own father, the buried male muse & god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted, to the sea-father Neptune" (Unabridged Journals 381).

Plath recognizes her father's association with the sea in her poetic mythology; she sees him as the "god-creator" who rises to be her companion in the figure of her husband. The above entry closes by quoting James Joyce's Finnegans Wake: "O, only left to myself, what a poet I will flay myself into. I shall begin by setting myself magic objects to write on: sea-bearded bodies . . .

8 Due to issues of permissions, this enlightening excerpt has been shortened.
digging into the reaches of my deep submerged head, 'and It's old and old it's sad and old it's sad and weary I go back to you, my cold father, my cold mad father, my cold mad feary father...' so Joyce says, so the river flows to the paternal source of godhead" (381). As Hughes suggests in "Black Coat," it is this attempt to "get back" to Otto that causes, in part, Plath's demise as well the destruction of their marriage.

Lynda Bundtzen argues that Hughes's "insistence... on Plath's 'two-way heart' and her 'double image,' her 'double exposure' and 'diplopic error,' refutes the persistent charges in her poems that Hughes is a master of smiling pretense, charming duplicity, and dishonesty. In her projections on the world, she is the source of the doubleness she perceives, not he" (Bundtzen 95). Hughes may, indeed, imply that Plath is responsible for this duality of vision, excusing himself as a "target" for Plath's needs, a mere "decoy." His poem, however, is also an act of "double exposure" where Hughes projects his own emotional responses to this moment onto the blank page. The black words on the white page too are sharp edged, an outline or vortex begging for reinterpretation and new meanings.

Hughes reference to "double exposure" exposes multiple meanings of its own. Double Exposure was one of the working titles for Plath's third novel. Though it was never published, Hughes confirms its existence and disappearance in the introduction to Plath's Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams. In a 1962 letter to Olive Higgins Prouty (housed at the Lilly Library at Indiana University), Plath tells how this work is "semi-autobiographical" and how it concerns itself with infidelities and a husband who came to be a "deserter and philanderer" (qtd. in Bundtzen 95). Hughes's choice to reference a novel where Plath exposes his adulterous behaviors, suggests that his later indiscretions can, in part, be seen as a reaction to his victimization by Plath early on in their marriage.

41.6 [103]

I did not feel
How, as your lenses tightened,
He slid into me.

Hughes pleads ignorance; he was unaware at the time of the ways in which he would "bec[o]me the villain in Plath's psychobiography" (Bundtzen 92). The visit to Otto Plath's grave on that cold March morning found Plath needing to "dig" her father "up." In her "vision," he rises, indeed, from the "freezing" Winthrop sea, and "slid[es] into" Hughes who becomes a "fixed vortex" for Plath's mythology (Plath, Collected Poems 120). As she writes in "Full Fathom Five:" "Old man, you surface seldom. / Then you come in with the tide's coming / When the seas wash cold, foam – /...The muddy rumors / Of your burial move me / To half-believe: your reappearance / Proves rumors shallow, /" (92-93).
"The Inscription"

Annotations 74.1 -74.8: 172-173

In "The Inscription," Hughes recounts a visit Plath paid him when he was living in London after their separation. Hughes describes Plath's despair, her demands for reassurance and his failure to provide her with what she needs. Her discovery of an Oxford Shakespeare, inscribed by Assia Wevill and like the one Plath had previously destroyed, is represented as a fatal bullet that wounds them both. Hughes uncharacteristically writes this poem, from the collection, in the third person. Ann Skea suggests that his use of "pronouns 'she' and 'he', 'her' and his' . . . is less personal and gives the poem a more general meaning" (ann.skea.com). I argue that this poem is a particularly difficult memory for Hughes and that his act of distancing himself in the third person isolates himself from pain. This is one poem where he records a specific instance where he feels, in retrospect, that he held the power to keep Plath alive.

74.1 [172]

Snow-cakes banked the streets. Frozen grey
Barricades of dirty sugar. Hard
Cold. Cold

The setting of this poem is London in the winter of 1962-63; Hughes is addressing an event that took place just prior to Plath's death. Koren and Negev conclude that the date is Thursday, February 7 (Lover of Unreason 113). Jillian Becker's memoir of Plath's last days, Giving Up, also remembers this as the day Plath and her children moved into the Becker household for what became the final weekend of her life. Becker remembers Plath calling around 2 p.m., asking if she could "come round with the children" (2). When she arrived, she declared she felt "terrible," needed to "lie down," and later that she "would rather not go home" (2). Becker's memoir describes a distraught and depressed Plath unable to care for her children. If we assume Koren and Negev date Plath's visit to Hughes's apartment correctly, than her meeting with him, and her discovery of his Shakespeare volume, quite possibly set in motion a negative chain of events for which Hughes still feels responsible. On the other hand, Becker's memoir also recalls Plath's leaving their house, alone, in a dress, on the night of Saturday, February 9 (14-15). Many biographers speculate that she met Hughes; Becker can neither confirm, nor deny, this assertion. The possibility that Plath met Hughes this night suggests another possible date for the encounter that Hughes writes about in his poem.

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9 Jillian Becker, British novelist, critic and journalist, befriended Plath after her separation from Hughes. Plath and her children stayed with Becker and her then husband Gerry until Sunday February 10. Becker's memoir recalls her relationship with Plath and the experience of knowing her those final days.
Records of the year indicate this Great Britain winter, also called The Great Freeze of 1963, as one of the coldest and harshest to date. Alvarez describes the atmosphere of this winter in *The Savage God*: "It was an unspeakable winter, the worst, they said, in 150 years. The snow began just after Christmas and would not let up. . . . Nerves failed and marriages crumbled. Finally, the heart failed. It seemed the cold would never end" (48).

Plath writes her story "Snow Blitz" to describe the despair of the London cold. Peter K. Steinberg calls it "a faithful, funny and detailed account of that winter" (sylviaplath.info). In reality, her children developed flu, she lost power and she struggled with water as the result of frozen pipes. She describes these challenges in the semi-autobiographical story, revealing the unpreparedness of the British for abundant snow-fall: "The snow was a huge joke, and our predicament that of Alpine climbers marooned in a cartoon" (Plath, *Johnny Panic* 126). She describes the process of clearing "Barricades" like those Hughes describes: "Two hours later the boy [hired to shovel her steps] was still working. Four hours later he rang to borrow a broom. I glanced out of the window and saw a pram full of tiny icebergs. Finally, he had finished. I inspected the job. He seemed to have cleaned between the railing struts with a chisel" (126). In the story, the weather of late 1962 and early 1963 becomes a metaphor for Plath's inner struggle and for her dismal outlook; the cold and dreary winter certainly exacerbates her despair. In Hughes's poem, the "Hard / Cold. Cold," also extends to the difficulties of his and Plath's now cold relationship.

74.2 [172]

His morning flat in bright sun,
Cargo-dumped empty lightness.
Packing-case emptiness, lightness. Ice-breaker
Her bows had butted through, the missing supplies
Warm in her hold. Cracked through the frozen sea
A rigid lightning of icy but open water
Where she moved closer. So here he was.

Hughes describes his new flat as in Soho in the West End of London. During much of the twentieth century, Soho had a reputation for sex shops, night life and its film industry, although the area is now changed (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soho).

His new flat is actually located just north of Soho at 110 Cleveland Street, an area more commonly known as Fitzrovia. Hughes writes to Olwyn in December of 1962:

I've got a little flat in Soho – just North of Charlotte St, exactly where I wanted it. A bit like a hotel room, but nice, & a very pleasant district . . . Sylvia & I are great friends –
though it's better I steer clear of her, I shall see Frieda. Apparently she talks about me all the time. (Letters of Ted Hughes 210)\(^{10}\)

Diane Middlebrook times his move as "[o]nce the [1962] holidays were past" (Middlebrook 201). Hughes is seeing Assia Wevill at this time, though she still lives with her husband, David Wevill, at 14 Highbury Place, having just left Chalcot Square in December of 1962.

A page from Plath's 1957 address book, now held at Smith College, notes Hughes new address and phone number at 110 Cleveland in the "H" section, just after an entry for "Geoffrey Hill." Interestingly, Hughes's phone number (EUSTON 7534) is written in Plath's preferred black ink while his address, which is written above it, is written in blue. Peter K. Steinberg suggests that Hughes's phone number was entered prior to his address, "likely in early January 1963," and that this discrepancy in ink might indicate Plath "obtained his address while away from home; it isn't inconceivable to speculate that she carried [her] address book in her purse" (my personal correspondence with Steinberg, April 2010). Steinberg also proposes that Plath may have obtained Hughes's address when staying with the Beckers which would support an argument for Plath's visit to Cleveland Street on February 9 (see annotation 74.1) as opposed to February 7.

Hughes finds "new light" in his new brick apartment, "lightness" to his life no longer burdened by wife and fatherly duties or by the stress of an unhappy marriage. With this freedom, however, comes an emptiness, a loneliness. Plath barges into his isolation like a cargo ship at sea, the "missing supplies"—the domesticity they had once shared, namely their children—still, "Warm in her hold." Despite his new found independence, Hughes pictures himself as marooned on this icy expanse without Plath; she is the "rigid lightning" that comes in to "crack" his "frozen sea."

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\(^{10}\) See the complete letter for more relevant commentary

Figures 1 & 2: Maps of Hughes's and Plath's respective London addresses in the Winter of 1963. Provided by googlemaps.com
Figure 3: a partial map of London marking the distance from Hughes's Cleveland Street addresses and Plath's Primrose Hill home (Fitzroy Road), which lies just outside the frame: <http://www.aaccessmaps.com/show/map/gb/soho_ecrsubn>
She had got what she wanted – to see  
The islet or reef or rock he’d ended up on.  
Her eyes went over the walls and into  
Every corner, like a dog in a new home. Like a dog  
That had seen a rat vanish, that smelt a rat.  
There was his bed, yes. There was his phone.  
But she had that number.

Plath is intent to inspect where Hughes has been living away from her. She visually explores his new quarters, all the while looking for evidence of her rival, Assia Wevill – the "rat" she smells. Hughes notes her attention to both his bed and his phone – the former a means for physical communication, the latter for verbal. Plath has his "number;" she can call, but they no longer share a bed. Though Assia is not a physical presence, Plath "smells" her lingering everywhere in Hughes's new space. Hughes indicates that this is "what [Plath] wanted," a chance to investigate where Hughes has come to live away from her and their children.
She wanted his assurance, weeping she begged
For assurance he had faith in her. Yes, yes. Tell me
We shall sit together this summer
Under the laburnum. Yes, he said, yes yes yes.
The laburnum draped deathly in the blue dusk.
The laburnum like a dressed corpse in full yellow.

Plath pleads for "assurance" that she and Hughes have a future together. The laburnum tree, an image referenced in her poetry\textsuperscript{11} has both literal and figurative significance in these lines. Literally, under the huge laburnum trees at Court Green, in Devon, is where she hopes to sit with Hughes in the summer of 1963; we can assume they spent time under this same tree the previous year. Ann Skea writes how, "[i]n reality, as in the poem, the laburnum tree was of special significance to Sylvia. . . . both she and Ted would have known of its association with The Goddess in myth and poetry, where its golden flowers represent the full summer sunshine of the Goddess's life-giving energies whilst its poisonous seeds embody her deathly powers" (ann.skea.com). Skea also points to a passage from Plath's letter to her mother in June 1962: "Isn't it odd that I've written about Golden Rain Trees in my book and now have six" (Plath, \textit{Letters Home} 455).

Hughes assures Plath four times that they will spend this time together. His use of the repetitive "yes" recalls Molly Bloom's "yeses" from the "Penelope" chapter of Joyce's \textit{Ulysses}. Joyce describes, in a 1922 letter to Frank Budgen, how his final chapter "begins and ends with the female word yes." In the same year, he writes to Harriet Shaw Weaver, "I sought to end \textit{[Ulyssess] with the least forceful word I could possibly find. I had found the word yes which is barely pronounced, which denotes acquiescence, self abandon, relaxation, and end of all resistance}" (ricorso.net). Hughes, familiar with Joyces's work and scholarship, suggests here the end of his own resistance. In these lines, he suggests he acquiesces to Plath's desires for their reunion, while occupying the more feminine role in their relationship in his need to nurture and console his wife. His use of the "female word yes" suggests his submission to Plath, her needs and demands, but also a sense of resignation in their relationship.

Though Hughes assures his and Plath's togetherness, the laburnum tree, as indicated by Hughes's lines, knows otherwise. The figurative significance of the tree as a poisonous beauty – all parts of the tree are poisonous and can be lethal – foreshadows Plath's imminent death: the tree is a "yellow" "dressed" "corpse" and is "draped deathly."

\textsuperscript{11} See "The Arrival of the Bee Box" and "Letter in November."
For more insight into Hughes's use of the laburnum tree, consider his poem, "The Laburnum," from Howls and Whispers, which shares lines with "The Inscription;" in the poem, the Laburnum represents Plath's and Hughes's relationship as a poisonous beauty.¹²


74.5 [172-173]

He had promised her everything she had asked for,
And she had told him all she wanted
Was for him to get out of the country, to vanish.
I'll do whatever you want. But which do you want?
Go together next week North
Or for me to vanish off the earth?

Plath, in her debilitating anger and sadness, sends Hughes mixed messages. On the one hand, she wants him far away from her, Frieda and Nicholas; like her pain, she wants him to disappear. On the other hand, she is desperate to return to a time when "happiness / Was invulnerable" (see 74.7). Her anger pushes Hughes away but her love bids him come closer; Hughes is confused about her real feelings.

74.6 [173]

She wept, pleading for reassurance – that he have
Faith in her, and he reeled when he should have grabbed:
'Do as you like with me. I'm your parcel.
I have only our address on me.
Open me or readdress me.'

¹² See Hughes's Collected Poems: 1176-1177. Erica Wagner notes that Hughes originally intended "The Laburnum" as the 74th poem of the Birthday Letters collection; it appeared this way in the first proof she saw (25).
Here is Hughes's admission of guilt and responsibility. He leaves their future open to Plath; he does not provide the solid reassurance that Plath needs. He is but a package addressed to their future; she must decide whether she is "open" to this future or if she should send him elsewhere. He laments his failure to "grab" Plath at this moment, a moment just prior to her suicide, and to reinstate their future together. His failure to act more aggressively, he believes, leads in part to their permanent separation. The sadness and guilt he experiences at this revelation demand that he distance himself from this memory – to witness it objectively in third person perspective.

74.7 [173]

She saw his Shakespeare. The red Oxford Shakespeare
That she had ripped to rags when happiness
Was invulnerable. Resurrected.
Wondering, with unbelieving fingers,
She opened it. She read the inscription. She closed it
Like the running animal that receives
The fatal bullet without a faltering check
In its stride.

Hughes alludes to an event that took place in early February of 1961. Several biographies and memoirs describe the destruction of his Shakespeare and it is fodder for a scene in the 2003 film Sylvia. Dido Merwin, in her controversial memoir of Plath, "Vessel of Wrath," recalls the event she claims Hughes confided to her in 1962. According to Merwin, the incident in question arose from Hughes's meeting with an older woman – Moira Doolan of the BBC – interested in Hughes's work. Plath, jealous of Doolan and angered by Hughes's tardy return from their meeting, "had torn up all his work in hand: manuscripts, drafts, notebooks, the lot. As a final, gratuitous act of pure spite, she had also gralloched his complete Shakespeare. Only the hard spine and the end boards had stood up . . . " (qtd. in Stevenson 334).

Anne Stevenson, in Bitter Fame, suggests that "Ted could neither forget nor forgive this desecration; it seems to have marked a turning point in his marriage" (206). Hughes himself later called for the extraction of this sentence from Stevenson's biography. In The Silent Woman, Janet Malcolm quotes from a letter the poet wrote to the biographer: "The truth is that I didn't hold that action against [Sylvia] – then or at any other time. I was rather shattered by it, and saw it was a crazy thing for her to have done. But perhaps I have something missing. She never did anything that I held against her. . . . But to say I could not forgive her for ripping up those bits of paper is to misunderstand utterly the stuff of my relationship to her. It is factually untrue" (143).

In "The Inscription," Plath astonishingly picks up the revived volume and reads the inscription. Assia Wevill's words – according to Hughes Wevill having inscribed the new edition – are fatal
to Plath. Though she tries to remain composed, Hughes realizes in retrospect how these words are like a bullet.  

74.8 [173]

The wound she had given herself, striking at him  
Had given herself, that had emptied  
From her hands the strength to hold him against  
The shock of her words from nowhere, that had  
Fatally gone through her and hit him.

Plath wounds herself whenever she lashes out at Hughes. The awkward syntax in this passage captures her self-defeating rage. Having destroyed the original Shakespeare volume, it now returns as a token of Hughes's mistress. Plath loses any strength to "hold" Hughes "against / The shock of her words from nowhere." These are the words that kill her and leave him permanently wounded. However, there is a double meaning at work here. Hughes also alludes to the "shock of" Plath's "words." Ariel wounds both her and him. In this moment, she is "Helpless handed," unable to accept Hughes's attempts to reassure her. The sting of this moment manifests itself in the powerful poems of *Ariel*, but, Hughes argues, to the detriment of them both.


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13 See also annotations for "The Shot."
Works Cited


