



Family Phantoms: Fish, Watery Realms and Death in Virginia

Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes

Dianne M. Hunter

Shared fascination with fish, watery realms, and the dead connect the poetry of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath to Virginia Woolf's work, as does the aftermath of World War I. The grief and anxious energies that accompanied the release of massive violence in the twentieth century haunt their writing.

Woolf embedded the Grimm fairy tale of the hapless fisherman and his greedy wife in To the Lighthouse, an elegiac novel written about the death of Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen, imagined to carry with her the end of the era preceding the Great War. Hughes actualized in his life the role of fisherman-as-poet and eco-warrior, and saw fish as muses. Plath found fish at the core of her imaginary identity. Examination of Plath's continuity with Virginia Woolf and the uncanny Grimm fairytale "The Fisherman and his Wife" in To the Lighthouse shows how Plath and Hughes transform literary expression of marriage. Plath and Hughes were not only hooked on one another, he swallowed her.

Plath's poem "All the Dead Dears" (1957), Hughes's "Pike" (composed in 1958 in Northampton, Massachusetts, USA; published in 1960), and Plath's reply to it in "Mirror" (1961), and numerous appearances of fish imagery elsewhere in their writings carry on from Grimm and from Woolf the theme of the anguished couple imaginatively bound for eternity. Mourning and purgatory inform this work.

Plath's poem "Mirror" can be read as a rejoinder to Ted Hughes's poem "Pike," which in turn can be illuminated by lines in Plath's poem "All the Dead Dears." Plath's "Mirror" shrinks Hughes's mythic grandeur to reveal a psychodrama of the self as an ageing, vanishing façade. Whereas Hughes's "Pike" evokes M. C. Escher's 1955 lithograph Three Worlds, Plath's "Mirror" works more along the lines of Escher's (1935) Self-Portrait in Spherical Mirror as it might have been reconceived by Plath's favorite artist, the surrealist Leonor Fini (1907-1996).

David Ellison's study of the ethics and aesthetics of European modernist literature (2001) finds in Freud's essay "The 'Uncanny'" a model for the way modernist texts are

eerily inhabited by premodern texts and thus can produce purgatorial life-in-death/death-in-life effects in their readers. In analyzing Virginia Woolf's use of the Grimm fairy tale "The Fisherman and his Wife" in To the Lighthouse, where Mrs. Ramsay reads the tale to her son James in chapters VII, IX, and X of Part One, Ellison suggests that the embedded fairy tale casts uncanny light on the existential plight of the Ramsays' marriage and on the unhappiness that awaits the romantic alliance between Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle, whose marriage Mrs. Ramsay promotes, says Ellison, because misery loves company (198-200).

"The Fisherman and his Wife," as told by the brothers Grimm, moralizes against uxoriousness and unsatisfied wifely ambitions. A poor fisherman who lives with his wife in a hovel by the seashore catches a flounder. The flounder tells the fisherman his catch would not make good eating and asks to be let go. The fisherman thinks that since the flounder can speak, this fish had better go back into the sea, which is described as clear except for a long streak of blood left behind by the fish as it sinks to the bottom. When the fisherman reports to his wife that he had caught and released a talking fish, she complains about the dreadfulness of living in an evil-smelling hovel and tells her husband to call back the enchanted fish and ask it for a cottage. This the husband does, finding the sea now green and yellow, and not nearly so clear as before. Next, the wife asks for a castle in place of the cottage. Though the fisherman thinks it is not the right thing to do, he asks for and receives a castle from the flounder, now in a watery realm grown purple, dark blue, grey and thick, not green and yellow as before. The wife, transformed first into a king, then an emperor and finally a pope, all from an increasingly darkening, ill-smelling, and land-invading sea, at last asks for power over the sun and moon. In reply to this wish for divinity, the enchanted flounder transforms the couple's palatial and ecclesiastical splendors back into their old hovel, where the fisherman and his wife, says the story, are sitting to this very day.

Ellison sees the transformation of the hovel into a cottage, then into a castle, and then into a palace, and then back into a hovel as "an uncanny metamorphosis," a wish spinning out of control in unconscious imaginative transformation. He observes that the palatial setting produced for the couple compares to what must have once belonged to the enchanted prince, before his transformation into a flounder. Ellison thinks the darkening



sea indicates not only the morally transgressive quality of the wife's longings but also a plunge into madness. He reads Woolf's use of the tale as exemplifying her struggle between formalist beauty, ornamentation, art and the whirlpool of the uncanny drive toward death. Just as the wife's wishing presupposes the flounder's untold history before enchantment, so Lily's painting depends on the death of Mrs. Ramsay ten years before its completion, and the novel's own completion revolves around responses to this death.

The fisherman's wife's greed undermines itself through excess. Applied to the marital strains between characters in To the Lighthouse, this undermining points to overweening demands, expectations and needs between partners. Some commentators on the thematic resonances between "The Fisherman and his Wife" and To the Lighthouse see the roles of husband and wife reversed between the fairy tale and the novel (Hussey, 1995: 86). Mrs. Ramsay needs money from Mr. Ramsay, who she thinks will not want to give it for the repairs she wants to their greenhouse. He wants her to say that she loves him though she needs him to know it without her saying it. Mr. Ramsay demands exhausting amounts of emotional support from Mrs. Ramsay such that James, Cam and Lily see him as using her up, drinking her vitality dry and causing Mrs. Ramsay's premature death while he outlives her by more than ten years, though he is older than she. Beyond this, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay have a fundamental argument about "subject and object and the nature of reality" (Woolf, 1927: 38), Mrs. Ramsay favoring wishes and Mr. Ramsay insisting on facts. Mrs. Ramsay wants Paul and Minta to marry because she thinks all people must marry; the Rayleys' marriage fails. Of her own marriage, Mrs. Ramsay thinks, "people say he depended on her [...] all this diminished the entire joy [...] of the two notes sounding together, and let the sound die on her ear now with a dismal flatness" (Woolf, 1927: 62).

Ellison's psychoanalytically-informed reading applies "The Fisherman and his Wife" to the poetics of Woolf's creation of To the Lighthouse. For Ellison, the transgressive wishing in the fairy tale that takes a false turn and deviates out of control "transforms its author from human to inhuman creature, from prince to fish" (205). The aesthetic elaborations that transform a hovel into a palace and back again represent for Ellison analogues for fiction writing that borders on madness. The disquieting transformation of prince into fish and of fisherman's wife into emperor and pope and then

back into hovel-dweller proves ultimately “more powerful,” claims Ellison, “than the formal beauty born of a writer’s ornamentations.” Imaginative drive has within it an uncanny metamorphosing wish that “pushes apart the carefully constructed walls between life and art, between the sea and the shore, and thrusts the prince become fish into the whirlpool of invading waters” (205). Ellison concludes that this tale of enchantment and disenchantment concerns the intermingling of life and art, and a descent into impersonality--a demonic, purgatorial, death-in-life state that not only informs Lily’s painting and Woolf’s novelistic art, but the author’s life and death as well, for the novelist died in water. Woolf, says Ellison, conceived of writing as a maelstrom descent, an espousing of the impersonal world of fluid indeterminacy. Toward the end of her life, observes Ellison, four-and-a-half months before she committed suicide by walking into a river, she went out to look at a flood and fell into a watery hole, eliminating, she claimed, her human features (Virginia Woolf, 1940 letter to Ethel Smyth, quoted by Lee, 1997: 739-40; Ellison, 2001: 209-210).

Sylvia Plath evokes Woolf’s death by water in the conclusion to the poem “Mirror,” where the speaking pool of water says of the woman who looks into it “in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish” (lines 17-18, Plath [1961], Ed. Hughes, 1981, 1992: 174). The woman in this poem whose features are a vanishing façade dreads being claimed by a drowned old woman. This drowned old woman evokes Virginia Woolf, who, along with Aurelia Plath, I am arguing, is at the core of Plath’s imaginative identity.

Woolf brings “The Fisherman and his Wife” to the idea of the Victorian couple, and this convergence recycles in fish imagery shared by Plath and Hughes, who form a chapter in the history of literary couples. In the history of married couples who are published writers, Plath and Hughes can be described as postmodern exemplars. For the sake of comparison, it is interesting to note that in the romantic relationship between Percy and Mary Shelley, Percy at the time was perceived to be the genius in the pair, while Mary thought of herself as a lesser writer as well as a monster. In retrospect, this view has been reversed: Percy is now regarded as a monstrous egotist, Mary Shelley as the creator of at least one masterpiece; and Mary Shelley is now more widely read than



her husband. In the Virginia-Leonard Woolf marriage, Virginia was and is perceived as a modernist genius.

In the marriage of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, she at first saw Ted as the genius and the more successful and more important writer; but then she outgrew him and there unfolded a power struggle between them as to whose talent would prevail. The answer to the question of who is the more powerful writer in this couple remains indeterminate. According to Diane Middlebrook, it is as collaborators in the literary history of marriage that they seem most significant today (2003). According to Susan Van Dyne, Plath ceded to Hughes her place in the pantheon of great writers (cited by Lee, 2009: 12).

Aurelia Plath presented her daughter with a 1937 German edition of Grimm's Fairy Tales inscribed "*für ein gutes Kind von ihrer liebenden Mutter*" ["for a good child, from her loving Mother"]. Hughes kept this book after Plath died, and sold it, along with Plath's copy of To the Lighthouse and his own collection, to Emory University, where it can now be found. In a letter to her mother dated May 26, 1956, shortly before Sylvia and Ted married, she wrote, "I generally meet [Ted] after lunch for an afternoon of study while he writes, and cook dinner here [...] and read aloud. Our minds are just enraptured with words, ideas, languages. I took out [...] my dear *Märchen der Brüder Grimm* [Fairy Tales of the Brothers' Grimm] to read aloud my favorite German pieces to him (he doesn't know German) and translated on the spot, getting very excited. [...] I can't tell you how wonderful it is to share so completely my greatest love of words and poems and fairy tales and languages . . . also, the world of nature and birds and animals and plants. I shall be one of the few women poets in the world who is fully a rejoicing woman, not a bitter or frustrated or warped man-imitator, which ruins most of them in the end. I am a woman and glad of it, and my songs will be of fertility" (A. Plath, Ed. 1975: 256). The next letter home is to Sylvia's brother announcing she is now Mrs. Hughes. So much for Grimm.

It is remarkable here that in the German version of the Fisherman tale the flounder is a "*Plattfisch*," a flat fish or Plathfish—Plath sounds like *Platt*, which is German for flat, a point Plath puts to poetic uses in her verse play "Three Women," wherein the second voice, "heroine of the peripheral," harps on deathly flatness as opposed to the mountainous rotundity of pregnancy ([1962] Ed. Hughes, 1992: 176-187).

Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath

Virginia Woolf was constitutionally depressed, lost her mother at 13, lived with a depressive, histrionic father (Leslie Stephen) for about 10 years thereafter, and had suicidal episodes early in her life. At the age of 59, with the prospect of Nazi invasion of England in view, her London home having been bombed, and hearing enemy air incursions nightly over her Sussex home, and having prepared for suicide by poison with her husband in the case of Britain's defeat in World War II, and in physical pain, Virginia Woolf ended her life in 1941 when she thought she was going mad.

In 1952, Plath wondered, “Why did Virginia Woolf commit suicide?” (Ed. Kukil, 2000: 151). Hearing Elizabeth Drew read To the Lighthouse in a huge classroom sent a shiver down the spine of Sylvia Plath during her sophomore year at Smith College. She reports in her 1957 journal, “But her suicide I felt I was reduplicating in that black summer of 1953. Only I couldn’t drown” (Ed. Kukil: 269). Echoing Woolf’s description of Mrs. Ramsay’s art and Lily’s in To the Lighthouse, Plath says her own work gives her “being a name, a meaning: ‘to make of the moment something permanent’” (Ed. Kukil: 338; cf. Woolf, 1927: 158). Plath says Virginia Woolf’s novels made her own possible (Ed. Kukil: 289); but Plath expected to “go better” than Woolf, who, thought Plath, was “too ephemeral, needing the earth. I will be stronger: I will write until I begin to speak my deep self, and then have children, and speak still deeper” (286). Asking herself to describe her own voice in 1958, Plath answers, “Woolfish, alas, but tough” (315). She admired Woolf for her “luminousness—the catching of objects [...] and the infusion of radiance: a shimmer of the plasm [sic] that is life” (342; Plath’s underlining). But in 1959, during her second therapy with Ruth Beuscher, Plath faults Woolf’s late novel The Years for its “dull old women who have never spilt blood.” Plath claims one misses “potatoes and sausages” in Woolf, who “shows no deeper current under the badinage.” “What is her love, her childless life, like, that she misses it, except in Mrs. Ramsey” [sic]. “Surely if it is valid there,” declares Plath, “she should not keep losing it to lighting effects followed over the general, geographic area of England” (494).



Plath's account of her vocation as a poet in "Ocean 1212W" (January 1963), on the other hand, echoes the "Time Passes" descriptions in To the Lighthouse as well as its seascape setting. Plath writes, "There might be a hiss of rain on the pane, there might be wind sighing and trying the creaks of the house like keys" (Ed. Newman, 1971: 266). The "1212W" in Plath's title sounds like Woolf's 1939 memoir "A Sketch of the Past" (published in 1975, twelve years after Plath's suicide), in which Woolf recalls being an infant in bed in the nursery at the family's summer house in St. Ives, "hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach" (Ed. Schulkind, 1975: 64). As Woolf does in her memoir, Plath reports her first memory—the breath of the sea. Plath reports that hearing her mother, "a sea-girl herself" read Matthew Arnold's "Forsaken Merman" gave her gooseflesh; she wanted to cry. "Had a ghost passed over?" asks Plath. "No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill" (Ed. Newman: 266-7). These memories of uncanny affect get reinforced by Plath's imagining her "infant gills." She then recounts a magical sign of election the sea produces in the form of a wooden monkey, "a Sacred Baboon," a "simian Thinker" wrapped in a "caul of kelp" -- a kind of consolation totem from the sea, countering the displacement the young poet felt upon the birth of her brother when she was two and half years of age, and then, six years later, upon the death of her idealized father which became the occasion for the Plath family's move inland (266, 270). This move, which Plath characterizes as loss of her childhood paradise, can be seen as parallel to the raising of the oatmeal-colored hotel between the Stephen family's summer home and the sea at St. Ives the year before the death of Julia Stephen. This hotel, writes, Quentin Bell, "turned its back" on Talland house, "blotting out the view of the sea" (1972: 37.) The excrescence cut Virginia Stephen's family off from the view of Godrevy lighthouse that is memorialized in To the Lighthouse. "The doors of paradise were closing," writes Quentin Bell, for "Cornwall was the Eden" of Virginia Woolf's youth (1972: 37, 33).



Figure 1: Sylvia Plath and her mother at Winthrop Beach, c. July 1936, courtesy of the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, with the permission of Susan Plath Winston; copyright estate of Aurelia S. Plath.

“Medusa,” Plath’s 1962 hate poem to her mother, represents Aurelia as a jellyfish. This clinging, stinging mother figure is “always there, / Tremulous breath at the end of my line” (Ed. Hughes, 1981, 1992: 225), an echo of Virginia Woolf’s description of the idea that she had for her lecture on “Women and Fiction”: “an idea at the end of one’s line . . . Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating” (1928, 1929: 5). Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* fishes up ideas from phrases that wash through her mind (88). The throwing of the fish-idea back in *A Room of One’s Own* so

that it flashes hither and thither and sets up a wash and tumult of other ideas may be connected to the scene in the boat in Part Three of *To the Lighthouse* where Macalister’s boy cuts a square out of the side of a fish he has caught, baits his hook with it, and throws the mutilated body, still alive, back into the sea, a demonstration that life can be nasty, brutish, and short, as the “ashen-coloured ship” on the bleeding sea horizon of World War I and the “idiot games” of “amorphous bulks” of copulating leviathans suggest in Part Two of the novel (268, 201-203). The blood in the water during the war recalls the turmoil surrounding the magical flounder in Grimm. The mutilation of the fish suggests the fragmentation of the family created by the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew and Prue.



The piece of the fish that gathers more fish suggests the way thoughts accumulate, flow and associate in the novel.

Sylvia Plath exults to her mother that Ted Hughes has fish and poems in his pockets. Hughes considered Neptune a major force in his destiny. Fish for him represent vitality, desire, sexuality, biological inheritance, and literary generativity. Plath wrote often of the sea, the sea god, mermaids and sirens; she often imagines “death by water” (Lucie-Smith, Ed. Newman, 1970: 93). In 1959’s “The Beast,” written while Plath and Hughes were in residence at Yaddo, the speaker declares, “I bed in a fish puddle” (line 19).

Both Plath and Hughes had inspirational teachers named Fisher—Alfred Young Fisher for Plath at Smith College, John Fisher for Hughes at Mexborough Grammar School. It was John Fisher who gave Ted Hughes Robert Graves’s The White Goddess in 1951, when Hughes matriculated at Cambridge University. This book shaped Hughes’s idea of the death-in-life woman as fundamental to his poetry (Middlebrook, 2003: 31).

Recalling in Birthday Letters his initial sexual encounter with his first wife, Hughes describes Plath’s “Pisces chin.” Making love, says this poem, was like going over Niagara in a “barrel together”: “You were slim and lithe and smooth as a fish” ([1998] 2003). The now literary landmark Falcon Yard launch party for the St. Botolph’s Review where Plath and Hughes first met took place on the second floor of the Cambridge Women’s Union, over a fish market, the odor from below permeating the party space. This odor is sexual, as in the joke about the blind man who gets an erection every time he passes a fish market.

Hughes signed a birthday letter to his friend the sculptor and engraver Leonard Baskin, “Silly salmon whose one wish/ Is to die fucking a fish” (4 August 1982). Hughes is unique among poets, as far as I know, for being featured in the fishermen’s magazine Wild Steelhead & Salmon (interview with Tom Pero, Vol. 5:2 [Winter 1999]: 50-58, which reprints Hughes’s poem “October Salmon”). Hughes fished all his life, including expeditions to Alaska and central Africa to visit his son Nicholas, who earned a doctorate in 1991 studying fish at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, where he taught fisheries

ecology. At the time of Nicholas Hughes's suicide in March of 2009, his sister Frieda Hughes remarked of him, "His lifelong fascination with fish and fishing was a strong and shared bond with our father" (quoted by Wilkinson, 2009).

Fish figure as one of Ted Hughes's totem species, creatures that inspired him and creatures of identification for him. He experienced fish as exemplars of male regenerativity and continuity. In the Wild Steelhead & Salmon interview, Hughes states, "[A]ny kind of fishing provides ... connection with the whole living world. It gives you the opportunity of being totally immersed, turning back into yourself in a good way. A form of meditation, some form of communion with levels of yourself that are deeper than the ordinary self. When I'm fishing alone ...[it is] as if I'd been into some part of myself that pre-dates language" (56). Fishing for Hughes "engages you on a deeper level—a deeper, older, bigger level" (56). Hughes describes himself as "hooked" on fishing. The appeal of fishing is "this big powerful submarine thing, this huge appeal of the hidden watches. I used to be hooked on pike fishing when I was a teenager. Pike were the great thing. I was totally obsessed by pike. And then, when I began to fish for salmon, my son was just coming to the age I'd been when I became obsessed by pike. [...] You become hooked on pike at some very deep level.... [...] I began to dream regularly about pike and about one particular lake where I did most of my fishing for them. Pike had obviously become fixed at some very active, deep level in my imaginative life. [...] They'd become symbols of really deep, vital life. That's how I see it. My obsession with pike maybe was my obsession with those energies. [...] I remember the day before I got married for the first time. I hooked a pike in my dream. I hooked it at tremendous depth. As it came up, its head filled the lake. I brought it out and its girth filled the entire lake, that same lake. And I was backing up, dragging the thing out." Hughes associates getting married to Plath with hooking an enormous pike: she is a monster fish for him.

Although Sylvia Plath "liked fishing," Ted Hughes never took it up obsessively again until after she died. Then he "got back into fishing quite heavily" (1999: 55). At that time, Ted Hughes went to live in Ireland, and changed his obsession from pike to salmon: "By then I'd already begun to be pretty interested in salmon." In the following (fishy) description, waking and dreaming merge as Hughes imagines himself anointed with fish milt and spawn as he makes his transition to the phase of his life after Plath's



death. Salmon imagined to be anointing him with their young are swimming upstream to spawn and die. He reports, “The night before I left for Ireland ... I came down by this swift, big river. And coming up this river were these big salmon. As they came past me they were leaping. And as they leapt they shook themselves in the air. As they shook themselves in the air, their milt and spawn were splashed over me. I was completely covered with milt and spawn from these leaping salmon. . . these giant salmon as they went past. Since that dream, all my recurrent fish dreams have been about salmon. They just took over from the pike” (1999: 50).

Describing the context of his poem “Eighty and Still Fishing for Salmon,” Hughes narrates an incident of fishing in Ireland in which an inexperienced fisherman who is newly married fishes on a bank opposite from Ted, his son and an Irish friend. Ted’s party catches no fish but they watch as the young husband, “in a wild excitement,” with his wife standing behind him, hauls in the only two fish to be caught on the whole river that week. The implication of this tale is that the sperm-like fish were drawn by the active sexuality of the honeymooners (1999: 53-54).

Hughes’s letters to his friends, now collected in the British Library and at Emory University, are full of fish stories, accounts of and directions to good spots for fishing, and instructions on how to clean and prepare fish for human consumption (see, for example, Ed. Reid 2007: 464-470). A letter he wrote in 1983 describes a peak experience during a trip to Lake Victoria that culminated in a Biblical fishing adventure with his son Nicholas, and a huge catch of tremendous-sized perch Ted Hughes calls “Mughes.” He sent Leonard Baskin photographs of himself standing beside fish he caught that were almost as big as the poet was tall, including a Lake Victoria perch (an invasive species), weighing 104 pounds. Ted Hughes was active in the environmental movement to clean up the rivers where he fished, and alarmed by the effects of pollution on fish reproduction. In anticipation of his own death, Hughes requested that his name be cut in a long slab of granite and placed between the sources of the rivers Teign, Dart, Taw and East Okement, and that his ashes be scattered in that area. Hughes observed that in religious traditions, “rivers have been gods. Water has been the soul. And water is life, the ultimate life.” Hughes speculates, “Maybe that’s what we brought out of the Africa

deserts—the notion that water is life. [...] In Revelations it issues from under the throne of God, pure as crystal. The divine influx” (1999: 52).

Uncanny Fish in “Pike” and “Mirror”

Ted Hughes’s poetic trajectory into history and myth, and Sylvia Plath’s into a Lacanian world of the specular can be demonstrated in their choice of imagery. Plath’s “Mirror” narrates a lifetime of interactions with a nameless, faceless woman and imagines ageing as disfigurement. “Pike” and “Mirror” can be contrasted via their pond and mirror images. Both pond and mirror have reflecting surfaces, but whereas a mirror is just a surface, a pond conceals depths. If Hughes’s “Pike” evokes M.C. Escher’s Three Worlds, Plath answers with Escher’s self-portrait in a mirrored globe, filtered through a female gothic and surrealistic lens. Plath’s (1961) “Mirror” builds up to the appearance of a terrible fish, an internalized counterpart of the disquieting watcher under the dark pond of Hughes’s (1958) poem “Pike.” Hughes’s poem evokes the spirit of the place where he fishes and the genetic residue of England’s violent past, a version perhaps of Clarence’s dream of the sea of fish-eaten victims of the Wars of the Roses in Shakespeare’s history play Richard III, as well as the sunless sea from where ancestral voices prophecy war in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.”

In Hughes’s poem, pike are both weapons (cf. a “pike” as an instrument of warfare) and vital presences in the physical world that provide inspiration for his poetic vocation—a literary and mythic revisioning perhaps of Elizabeth Bishop’s (1946) wise, old veteran warrior fish with its mouth full of hardware in “The Fish” (itself an homage to Marianne Moore’s 1921 Imagist poem of the same title, “The Fish”).

Moore, who admired “Pike,” especially the phrase describing the aquarium “jungled in weed” (line 18), declared that poets should present “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” Hughes and Plath seem to turn this dictum inside out. They start by objectively describing a scene and then unconceal an uncanny imaginary presence. As Hugh Kenner remarked, Plath often genteelly sets her poetry table for New Yorker-style editors and then serves up a death’s head (Ed. Lane, 1979: 33-44).

In Plath’s “Mirror,” which can be read as a shrinking mirror of Hughes’s “Pike,” a



fish resides in the mirror, a monstrous figuration of coming to recognize oneself as an ageing, vanishing façade. The poet speaks through the voice of her mirror, a foursquare, shining silver little god, utterly exact in what it sees and reflects. This mirror is imagined to be a swallower: “Whatever I see I swallow immediately” (line 2).

In contrast, “Pike,” exploring timeless, primitive, ruthless fish, chronicles a series of three fact-based vignettes that, as Matthew Fisher observes, begin in plain diction, presenting an apparently objective, scientific description: “Pike, three inches long, perfect/ Pike in all parts, green tigring the gold.”

The word “tigring” in the second line, *pace* Matthew Fisher, evokes the fearfulness of William Blake’s “Tiger! tiger! burning bright/In the forests of the night,” an image of the destructive, devouring element of Creation. The green and gold in Hughes’s first line may recall Ovid’s description of the Golden Age, when “golden honey was trickling from the green oak”; and closer to home, the green and golden “Fern Hill” of Dylan Thomas. But Hughes’s creation has stillness and horror at its core.

Line three of “Pike” introduces the interpretive, overtly poetic image “Killers from the egg,” suggesting the poet’s view of elegant death-by-design at the origin of life, a universe thriving on streamlined predation (Porter, 1974: 13-25). These green and golden three-inch pike have “grandeur,” for they are a “hundred feet long in their world,” an example of the poet’s putting his perspective inside a submarine and animate nonhuman microscope, attempting to get at life as it is lived from within Nature.

The three-inch pike knead quietly under water. Their underjaws form “the malevolent aged grin,” a vividly precise image that, together with their “hooked clamp” appearance, evoke the “sullen face, / the mechanism of his jaw” in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem. Bishop writes, “I saw/ that from his lower lip/ --if you could call it a lip—grim, wet, and weaponlike, / hung five old pieces of fish-line, /or four and a wire leader/ with the swivel still attached, with all their five big hooks/ grown firmly in his mouth” (“The Fish,” 1946: lines 45-55). The “hooked clamp and fangs/Not to be changed at this date” in Hughes’s “Pike” give permanent expression of “A life subdued to its instrument” (lines 3-15), for pike are machine-like weapons of death and eating.

One can see the difference between Hughes’s idea in his youth that the world is made of blood and his later view that the world is made of light by comparing these pike

as machines of predation with the salmon and the fishermen as creatures of light in 1983's "That Morning": "Solemn to stand there in the pollen light/ Waist-deep in wild salmon... So we stood, alive in the river of light/ Among creatures of light, creatures of light." In "October Salmon," from the same collection, the salmon's body is "simply the armature of energy" (*River* [1983] Ed., Keegan, 2003: 663-664, lines 9-10, 29-30; 678, line 46).

In the first of the three vignettes of the 1958 "Pike," three-inch pike "dance" on the pond surface among flies or move in "submarine delicacy and horror." They are a beautiful and deadly species contained within their natural habitat, lords of the flies.

Stanza five introduces a second vignette, this one indoors, enclosed behind the transparent walls of a figurative jungle with unusual inhabitants for a domestic aquarium—three pike. These three are specified by size. One pike is three inches long; the other two are a bit larger, a pecking order of inches. These three are subject to intimate observation: "Three we kept behind glass, /Jungled in weed: three inches, four, / And four and half: fed fry to them--/Suddenly there were two. Finally one// With a sag belly and the grin it was born with. / And indeed they spare nobody" (lines 17—22). These fish seem at first to be thriving in their enclosure, but then the fittest one survives the others. Though their devouring is brought close for our inspection, the wall of the aquarium provides "a symbolic partition," writes Matthew Fisher, effectively protecting the viewer from the savage encounter to be viewed (1989: 58).

The third vignette keeps us from mistakenly assuming the cannibalism demonstrated by the pike "behind glass" was a result of captivity; and it examines self-destructive devouring (Fisher, 1989: 58). Depicting a gory scene that may owe something to Coleridge's "Christabel" (the green snake strangling the dove) and to Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (the choked snake with a toad in its mouth), the second half of stanza six and the next stanza confront us with the corpses of mutually destructive pike in the wild. "Two, six pounds each, over two feet long, / High and dry and dead in the willow-herb—One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet" (lines 23-26). This encounter with violent fish is close up; but it is on land, in a human frame of reference. We see the pike from a dry world, where the fish are "High and dry and dead in the willow-herb" (line 24).



The eye of the fish with the devouring gullet has an iron stare—an alien, blank stare. Since the observer is alive and the objects of his inspection are not, detachment remains between human and fish. The devourer fish, its prey jammed down its throat, stares from a dead eye--“Though its film shrank in death” (line 28). This staring, dead eye may recall for some readers the fish eye that lacks mutuality with the poet’s gaze in Bishop’s “The Fish.”

At this point, “Pike,” paralleling the final stanza of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” switches from third to first-person narration. Shifting to subjective meditation, the poem tells a fishing story in which the fishing line of the speaker connects him more deeply to the watery realm where fish swim. This part of the poem culminates in an effect generated according to principles Freud explains in his essay “The ‘Uncanny’”: having established one reality, the poem supplies it with another (See Freud, 1919, Ed. Strachey, XVII: 250). Following the three vignettes described in various degrees of scientific, cautious detachment, the poem reaches into deep time: “A pond I fished, fifty yards across, / Whose lilies and muscular tench/ Had outlasted every visible stone/ Of the monastery that planted them--//Stilled legendary depth:/ It was deep as England. It held/Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old/ That past nightfall I dared not cast” (lines 29-36). The “fifty yards across” gives an objective sense of the pond’s size; the lilies and the tench [i.e. carp] that have outlasted monastery stones contrast the survival of these denizens of natural habitat with the ephemeral, medieval human institution of the monastery and its stone construction. The still, deep pond is so old, it is legendary, prehistoric yet rich in history, “as deep as England” (line 34). Its pike are imagined to be so big, deep and old, they disquiet the speaker, who dared not cast “past nightfall.” Imaginatively transgressive and dreadfully alone in proximity to such huge fish, the poet fishes on, his hair frozen as if in fear, waiting for “what might move, for what eye might move” (lines 38-39), as if expecting a visitation from the drowned or dream world of the ancient dead, the Celtic underworld of animating power.

Instructing Leonard Baskin in 1959 on the woodcut illustration he wanted for this poem, Hughes states that the poem’s pike are dead: “The skull of a pike would have been best, since the pike in the poem are not really the living. Maybe something like a skull, or even just a jawbone, would be most subtly explosive—illumine the undermeaning of

the poem a bit and not overdefine the real pike in it” (letter to Leonard and Esther Baskin, written from Boston, January 1959 [London: British Library manuscript], Ed. Reid 2007: 137). As in the poem’s repetition of the word “three,” suggesting a third realm, Hughes wants to both evoke and undermine reality: “not really the living,” but a mythic frieze of death-in-life or life-in-death.

Interviewed by Clive Wilmer for a BBC Radio 3 program, “Poets Talking,” in 1992, Hughes identified the pike as “angels hanging in the aura of the Creator. So they were just hanging in the great ball of light, just pulsing away there, very still, because they were originally angels. My model, I remember, was Blake’s ‘Tyger.’ I was thinking, if I could raise my pike to that kind of intensity and generality! That was the ideal. There were much more obvious efforts to do that in the original draft, but I cut them out and left myself with the old South Yorkshire fish” (quoted by Raine [2005] 2006: 12).

“Pike”’s final stanza merges the outer scene with the imagination of the speaker as the woods begin to float and the sound of owls and splashes on the pond grow frail to the poet’s ear in contrast to the dream freed from the darkness that he identifies as deeper than night’s darkness. This deep dark dream, says the poet, “rose slowly towards me, watching.” If one receives an image of an immense pike from prehistoric times rising, one may imagine a meeting of awarenesses, or, at least of beings—the poet’s and the pike’s; the fisherman has stirred a deep fish in the pond. This suggests both the stirring of a live fish and a recalling of the dead. The effect might be a successful evocation of the animistic world in which, as in Celtic lore, each pool has a genius of the place and provides an opening into the underworld, an idea implicit in the pond of “legendary depth,” “deep as England” (lines 33-34). A pond has a surface that reflects, with a deep world underneath it, as in M. C. Escher’s Three Worlds, which shows a large fish in the foreground bringing into focus the surface of the water on which leaves float, the world above the surface--observable by the water’s reflection of trees, and the world below the surface--observable in the swimming fish.

Hughes’s poem brings a submerged state of being to the surface of awareness and reanimates the dead. This corresponds to Freud’s claim that disquieting effects are produced by the return of superseded modes of thought. In “Pike,” the scientific



perspective of the first seven stanzas gives way to the animistic, pantheistic perspective of the last four stanzas; boundary-conscious, scientific voyeurism opens a line to Celtic animism, to the spirit of the place where the poet fishes and to the spirit of the dead, as well as to the prehistoric, genetic residue of the origin of evolutionary life in water. “Pike”’s final two words, “me, watching,” suggest ambiguously: I watched or sensed the presence of another consciousness as the immense, prehistoric pike rose toward me, watching me—I, the speaker was a watcher being watched. Simultaneously, in so far as the immense old pike from legendary depths corresponds to an aspect of the mind of the speaker and to his genetic past, the “me, watching” is the “I” or “eye” of the poet’s identification with his meditatively-freed, genetic, biological heritage, his vocation as a shaman casting a spell, and his survival as predator, his own iron-eyed awareness that by fishing he is partaking of what Sylvia Plath calls in “All the Dead Dears” (1957) “the gross eating game” --feeding on corpses (line 9, Ed. Hughes, 1992: 70), or what Hughes himself calls “the whole living world” (1999: 56), which includes death as a vital force. In 1959, Hughes wrote to his sister Olwyn of his concept of God as a devourer; at that point in his life, God for Hughes was “the irrefutable authority of the need to devour to live” (Ed. Reid, 2007: 148).

Hughes’s mesmeric accuracy in making a cast with a fly-line was described by one of his friends as “Merlin-like” (Memorial Address, Westminster Abbey, London, 13 May 1999). Hughes himself remarked that what goes out with the hook comes back with the line, a poetic way of describing what psychoanalysts call “projective identification”—finding in the outer world entities that have been projected from the subjective world of the perceiver. Hughes’s sense of being “hooked” on fishing conveys a similar merging of inner and outer worlds.

Late Hughes poems revisit “Pike” in order to say that something has died. In “The Great Irish Pike,” for example, “The pike has been condemned . . . Even the deft snake of Freud/ Invested him . . . For nightmare returns only” ([1997-1998]: lines 1, 26-28, Ed. Keegan, 2003: 627-628). “In the reservoir, behind the mirror,” the pike is a “sunk stone,” “Non-participant/ Under the lake’s slow lungs.” The pike has somehow “Sailed out of the sun//Into this measured hole. / A cold/ Finger of the silence of space. //A smile/ Of the deafness of earth//Making the skull creak” (“The Pike” [1997-1998]: lines 1, 5, 9-10,

16-23, Ed. Keegan, 2003: 701-702).

The 1958 “Pike”’s final image of dream darkness “beneath night’s darkness” raising a primitive watcher has a counterpart in Plath’s fish rising menacingly in “Mirror” and the spooky ancestral figures in the poem “All the Dead Dears”: “From the mercury-backed glass/ Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother/Reach hag hands to haul me in, // And an image looms under the fishpond surface” (lines 19-22). This image looming under the fishpond surface, says the poem, is “Where the daft father went down” ([1957]: line 23, Ed. Hughes, 1992: 70). In a 1957-1958 short story based on Plath’s experiences among her Yorkshire in-laws, and titled the same as her sinister poem of *unheimlich* ritual homecomings, Plath uses the phrase “fugue of family phantoms” to describe the claim of ancestral forces who, writes Plath, generate a coldness more deadly than any knife strike to the marrow of one’s bones (Plath, “All the Dead Dears,” Ed. Hughes, 1977, 1979: 201-202).

Whereas Hughes’s disquieting pike is external, environmental, and cross-species genetic as well as projected from the psyche of the poet, Plath’s submerged, watery presences are internal, psychological, and familial. Hughes’s pike frieze living and dead; Plath’s fish mirrors disfigurement and death as personal destiny. Hughes’s pond with pike in its legendary depths seems to be reworked by Plath as a mirror, in which ancestral imagoes claim a doomed, ageing subject who cannot look away from what appalls and swallows her.

“Mirror” can be read as shrinking Hughes’s mythic grandeur into an introspective psychodrama. If “Pike” can be read as refiguring the image that “looms under the fishpond surface” in “All the Dead Dears,” “Mirror” can be read as Plath’s rejoinder to “Pike.” Plath’s “Mirror,” confined to a psychic, imaginary realm, leaves out the dimension of reality Freud thought necessary for setting the conditions for an uncanny effect. Though Plath’s poem demonstrates a disquieting theme of the mirror image as encroaching death, her poem remains less spooky than “Pike” because by beginning with a speaking mirror—and thus invoking the fairy tale “Snow White,” where the queen’s magic looking glass can declare in words who is fairest, Plath’s poem resides already in a fantasy world before its terrible fish gets disclosed (Cf. Freud, 1919, Ed. Strachey, 1955, XVII: 250).



In “Mirror” we see an intellectual confrontation with otherness but not the suspension between worlds created in “Pike.” This difference suggests a difference at the level of their bones within this literary couple. Like the conflict between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse, this difference concerns the subjective, the objective, and the nature of reality. Plath, an American by birth, was oriented toward the future, and her view of reality was psychologized, a product of the American nineteen-fifties. Whereas Hughes writes in “Go Fishing,” “Join water [...] / Let brain mist into moist earth” (lines, 1-2, Ed. Keegan, 2003: 652), Plath’s philosophical perspective was at-one with the idea that we see things not as they are but as we are. Plath’s undergraduate villanelle “Mad Girl’s Love Song” says, “I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; / I lift my lids and all is born again” (lines 1-2). Her 1956 “Soliloquy of the Solipsist” says, “my look’s leash / Dangles the puppet-people” (lines 13-14, Ed. Hughes, 1992: 37), and more of the same.

Americans have traditionally believed in the malleability of reality to human wishes, and they reward self-invention. Plath believed reality as perceived constitutes reality per se. A subjectivist, she struggled between 1956 and 1959 to write about objects in the world and to embrace the kind of impersonality T.S. Eliot thought defined an artist (Hargrove, 1994). Plath’s embracing of the subjective in poetry in the wake of her encounters with Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton during the year Ted and Sylvia spent in Boston made her into an effective confessional poet whose main subject was herself and the subjective creation of this self in words. In this regard, George Steiner remarked that Plath’s poems in Ariel are “proof of the capacity of poetry to give to reality the greater permanence of the imagined” (The Reporter, printed on the back cover of the American edition of Ariel, Ed. Hughes, 1965).

Plath’s journals iterate her primary concern with creating a powerful and an idealized image of Sylvia Plath in the minds of other people. In New England Pioneer Valley, Massachusetts, USA Puritan fashion, Plath believed in perfectibility. Like all idealists, she was disillusioned by her inability to control her world. She had tunnel vision.

For Plath, a reader was someone to manipulate; for Hughes, a reader was someone to heal. Hughes, a traditional Englishman who, it has been remarked, would have been at home with Caedmon, saw reality in a factual world of objects that open into a deep past

of empowering ancestral lore. He was a megalomaniac visionary, a fatalist, and quite simply, a bigger fish than his wife. He swallowed her. And there they exist on paper together to this very day.

Disenchantment and Alienation

“Death only wants to be life. It cannot quite manage.

Weeping it is weeping to be life

As for a mother it cannot remember.”

--Ted Hughes, “Life is Trying to be Life”

The poets' respective use of pond imagery and of surface and depth reflect their concepts of the unconscious, and of the married couple as mutual mirrors. They bear out claims made by Jacques Lacan and D. W. Winnicott about the mirror role of the mother in child development and the child's formation of its subject position as an “I.” The two poets share with Virginia Woolf a psychic complex the French object-relations psychoanalyst André Green terms “the dead mother.” (Green's essay “The Dead Mother,” written in 1980, was published in his 1983 book *Narcissisme de vie*, *Narcissisme de mort*, and translated into English by Katherine Aubertine as Chapter 7 of *On Private Madness*, 1993).

Hughes and Plath are depressive poets, with images of a bereaved mother at the core of their respective subjectivities, a psychic foundation they share with Virginia Woolf, whose mother had been a widow and whose father had been a widower before they made the second marriage that was the formation of Virginia. The maternal figure in Part One of *To the Lighthouse* contains a well of sadness; in Part Three, she is dead. Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Ramsay are creative mental images for Sylvia Plath, whose penned underlinings in her copy of the novel archived at Emory University emphasize the theme of Mrs. Ramsay's creative force.



Plath's actual maternal figure was the widow Aurelia Plath, imagined in the poem "Medusa" to be a tentacled jellyfish who hovers at the end of the poet's line and who will not let go, a self-sacrificing mother-figure who suffocates the poet. This Mother-Medusa forms a barnacled umbilicus keeping the Atlantic cable between England and America in miraculous repair so that the daughter, in an unnerving communion, cannot escape paralysis. Plath's "Medusa" presents a woman trying to separate from her origins but unable to break intact lines of communication with a disquieting muse. Though Plath's 1958 poem "Perseus" had hoped for the triumph of wit over suffering and defined Medusa's head as "madness" (Ed. Hughes, 1981, 1992: 82-84), the Medusa poet of late 1962 could not avoid clinging exposure to her mother's paralyzing power.

Lacanian reader Elisabeth Bronfen observes Plath's uncanny "insistence that clandestine traumatic knowledge not only haunts its host but will strike back and shatter protective fictions of infallibility with force equal to the effort put into repressing this truth." "In hindsight," adds Bronfen, "the Ivy Smith girl who can do everything with a clean bright smile on her face is in fact a horrific monster, because we cannot help but sense the forces of destruction lurking beneath the duplicitous surface of utterly perfect artificiality" (1998: 126).

Plath's traumatic core concealed by superficial composure became Ted Hughes's figure of the death-in-life white goddess muse, most explicitly in "Moonwalk," which describes Plath as "The Ancient Mariner's Death-in-Life woman" (line 9), and a "surfaced Kraken" ([sea monster] line 60, *Birthday Letters*, 1998: 41-42).

Freud thought that a woman marries a father figure and then, if the marriage is successful, turns him into her mother. Hughes's well-documented role as a replacement figure for the dead Otto Plath, the man in black who was a teacher and an oppressor, has produced voluminous commentary, though less attention has been given than should be to Hughes role as mother figure or child figure for Plath, though Hughes's speaker in "The Rag Rug" asks, "Was I the child or the mother?" (line 53, [1996], Ed. Keegan, 2003: 1130).

When she died, Sylvia left Ted Hughes in the role of a single parent with two young children who were dependents, just as Otto Plath had left his wife Aurelia. With this legacy, Sylvia Plath turned her husband into a version of her mother.

Whereas Plath suffered from fear of becoming her mother, Hughes was driven by a wish to bring a deadened mother to life. Bereavement of Hughes's own mother, as recorded in his work, reached back to the First World War, when her husband was traumatized in the barely-survived battle of Gallipoli. Hughes Sr. returned from the war not the same man who went. Ted Hughes in the 1950s eschewed autobiographical poetry and deplored what he thought was Plath's excessive subjectivism. But, in 1967, the same year that D. W. Winnicott published the now-famous essay on the mirror-role of the mother in child identity-formation, Ted Hughes published "Out." This autobiographical poem describes its speaker as his wounded father's "luckless double, / His memory's buried, unmovable anchor" (lines 14-15), and says there are "cenotaphs [gravestones] on his mother's breasts." She is "woe-dark" under her eye (Ed. Keegan, 2003: 165-166).

Hughes's 1979 poem "Life Is Trying to Be Life," says "Death is also trying to be life." "Death only wants to be life. It cannot quite manage." The speaker imagines a child who is living death, trying to remember a vital mother:

Death mews in the blankets...
 It plays with dolls but cannot get interested.
 ...
 It wears baby clothes...
 It learns to talk, watching the other's mouths.
 It laughs and shouts and listens to itself numbly.
 ...
 Weeping it is weeping to be life
 As for a mother it cannot remember.

(Earth-Numb, 1979, Ed.

Keegan, 2003: 553-554, lines 1, 4-9, 18-20).

On this evidence, one may imagine that the bereaved Sylvia and behind her the bereaved Aurelia Plath were mirrors to the young poet Hughes. When he looked into these mirrors he saw a death's head, for both Sylvia and Aurelia Plath were as if symbiotically bound to the dead man Otto Plath, also known by Ted and Sylvia during



their Boston year (1959) as “Prince Otto” of the Ouija board underworld. This fugue of phantoms comes full circle in Birthday Letters when Hughes responds to Plath’s poem “Daddy” in imagery from Wilfred Owen’s World War I elegy “Strange Meeting.”

Owen wrote, “It seemed that out of battle I escaped/Down some profound dull tunnel [...] I am the enemy you killed, my friend. /I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned/ Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed./ I parried; but my hands were loath and cold./ Let us sleep now” (Wilfred Owen, c. 1918: lines 1-2, 40-44).

Reliving Wilfred Owen’s encounter with his German enemy friend, Ted Hughes sees in his own son’s face a picture of the German-American Otto Plath:

You stand there at the blackboard: Lutheran
Minister manqué . . .

A big shock for so much of your Prussian backbone
As can be conjured into poetry
To find yourself so tangled with me—
Rising from your coffin, a big shock

To meet me face to face in the dark adit
Where I have come looking for your daughter.
You had assumed this tunnel your family vault.
I never dreamed, however occult our guilt,

Your ghost inseparable from my shadow
As long as your daughter’s words can stir a candle.
She could hardly tell us apart in the end.
Your portrait, here, could be my son’s portrait.

...Not that I see her behind you, where I face you,
But like Owen, after his dark poem,

Under the battle, in the catacomb,

Sleeping with his German as if alone.

(“A Picture of Otto” [1998], Ed. Keegan, 2003: 1167).

Imagining himself as an Orphic shade in the underworld, Hughes as Plath’s husband and the father of her son forms part of the aftermath of World War I, heir to the legacy of Wilfred Owen and Britain’s conflicted history with Germany.

Mirroring

“His navel fitted over her navel as closely as possible

Like a mirror face down flat on a mirror”

--Ted Hughes, “His Legs Ran About”

Jacques Lacan’s (1949, 1966, 1977) account of the mirror-stage in child-development posits the precipitation of the human subject as an alienated structure. The child experiences itself first as bits and pieces and only comes to see itself whole after seeing a reflection of its body in a mirror. This new, monadic concept of self gets superimposed on an inner incoherence and fragmentation, leaving the initial subject split between rivaling versions of who and what it is. Being and subjectivity or self-consciousness in this account can be said to be at odds. Lacan thought they were destined aggressively to be so.

Sylvia Plath was a Lacanian, as evidenced in her many poems that speak in rivaling doubled voices and mutually canceling realities. “There are two of me now,” says “In Plaster”: “I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose/ Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain.” Secretly “she began to hope I’d die. /Then she could [...] wear my painted face the way a mummy-case/ Wears the face of a pharaoh....” “I’m collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her, / And she’ll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me” (lines 2, 16-17, 39-42, 55-56, 1961, Ed. Hughes, 1992: 158-160). “Lesbos” (1962) contains “two venomous opposites” (line 36, 1962, Ed.



Hughes, 1992: 228). “Landowner” (1956) splits between the denizen of a rented attic who sees other people’s houses as “a spectral/ Corridor of inane replicas, / Flimsily peopled,” vs. the material reality of property ownership that makes her life “vaporous” and her “eyeful of reflections a ghost’s/ Eyeful [...] envious” (lines 7-9. 13-14, 16, Ed. Hughes, 1992: 53). “The Other Two” describes a loving couple haunted by its grieving, purgatorial double (Ed. Hughes, 1992: 68-69). “The Thin People” (1957), in the thinnest possible stanzas—couplets, describes how exposure to images of suffering on film invade the speaker’s reality, leaving the world dismal, thin and papery “as a wasp’s nest/ And grayer” (lines 46-47, Ed. Hughes, 1992: 65). The film images invade the mind and wither reality.

D. W. Winnicott revised Lacan’s account of the mirror stage by identifying the mother’s face as the infant’s first mirror (1967). Winnicott says there is an intersubjectivity within the incipient subjectivity of the child because what the infant sees when it looks at the mother is related to what she sees when she looks at the infant: the intersubjectivity emerges from the mother’s subjectivity to which the child brings its being and to which she responds with an interpretation. The mother interprets her child’s being according to her social situation, unconscious wishes, and historical circumstances. The child’s identity for Winnicott is not necessarily predicated on Lacanian alienation, with its rivalry between the visual image of the monadic body’s wholeness and the child’s inner sense of fragmentation. Winnicott asks, “What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother’s face?” He replies, “Ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there*” ([1967], 1971: 131; Winnicott’s italics). Lacan’s mirror-stage mother implies a particular kind of mother, a depressed mother, whereas Winnicott maternal mirror potentially provides a sustaining source of vitality.

André Green’s essay “The Dead Mother” (1980, 1983, 1993) offers a way of mediating Lacan’s alienating mirror and Winnicott’s responsive mother. Green analyzes not “the psychical consequences of the real death of the mother, but rather that of an imago which has been constituted in the child’s mind...following maternal depression...transforming a...source of vitality for the child... into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate, [and] deeply...weighing on...[the child’s] destiny” (1993:

142). The affect associated with the depressive mother, says Green, suggests “the colours of mourning: black or white” (1993: 146). Depressive affects and black and white images recur in the poetry of Plath and Hughes.

One may call André Green’s figure of the dead mother a disenchanting mirror, who, like the Grimm flounder, gives but then takes away, itself having been deprived of features. The disenchanting mother and her child share the mother’s depression.



Figure 2: Sylvia Plath on her mother’s lap, April 1933, courtesy of the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, with permission of Susan Plath Winston; copyright estate of Aurelia S. Plath. Note the shadow on infant Sylvia’s face.

What did baby poet Sylvia Plath see when she looked at the figure of Aurelia Plath? A smiling, loving mother whose hidden core was a disquieting muse, a blank face on a head like a darning egg, as in Giorgio de Chirico’s 1918 painting “The Disquieting Muses.”

Plath says of these muses:

They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
Will betray the company I keep

(lines 50-57, Ed. Hughes, 1992: 76).

These natal muses spell depression and blankness. “The moon is my mother,” says “The Moon and Yew Tree”: “She is not sweet like Mary.” Like de Chirico’s disquieting muses, “She is bald” (22 October, 1961, lines 17, 27). In a letter written 18 October 1962, Sylvia Plath articulates fear of becoming her mother in complaining that Aurelia Plath identified too closely with her daughter (*Letters Home*, Ed. A. Plath, 1975: 472).



The 12 January, 1958 entry in Plath's Journals identifies "vague, unseen flaws and faults in internal geography" (quoted by Hargrove, 1994: 136). Christopher Bollas and Murray M. Schwartz have presented a Winnicottian analysis of Plath's relational difficulties with maternal closeness, summing up Plath's identity as having an absence at its center (1976). The too-closely-identifying mother who is a blank with a veneer and whose daughter identifies herself as a mummy wearing the painted face of a pharaoh, a death-in-life center of "old stone gloom" in a "glass caul" with a pasted-on smile, suggest a developmental model for the postmodern ego as a set of fictions with absence at its center. Plath's collage of speaking fragments in her poems and in her novel The Bell Jar provide exemplars for postmodernism's attack on the fiction of a coherent, integral, unified human "I." Though Christopher Bollas and Murray M. Schwartz identify Plath's sense of an empty center as pathology, postmodernism, much as the grain of rice explodes in Plath's 1959 "Witch Burning" (lines 15-16), has exposed the idea of the monadic self as a fiction. In this sense the absent daddy and the blank medusa of Plath speakers can be seen to represent the absences revealed by exploded fictions of a unified self.

"A skull grins down
Through her bridegroom's wretched expression"
--Ted Hughes, "The Mythographers"

What did baby poet Ted Hughes see when he looked at Edith Farrar Hughes? A woeful woman living in a mournful landscape with a traumatized war veteran in the place of the man she had married. Ted grew up in a valley dominated on its southern exposure, the direction of London and of culture, by a glowering rock cliff associated with suicide and blocking the view even as it stared down at the depressed people in the valley. This rock, writes Hughes, was "the *memento mundi* over my birth: my spiritual midwife at the time and my godfather ever sinceIf a man's death is held in place by a stone, my birth was fastened into place by that rock, and for my first seven years it pressed its shape and various moods into my brain. There was no way to escape it" (British Broadcasting

Corporation script, 3 April 1963, quoted in Ennis and Kukil, 2005: 5). This staring rock and the gravestones on the poet's mother's breasts in "Out" provide glimpses of Ted Hughes's developmental and historical model for the dreadful, death-in-life watery setting of "Pike" where the fisherman seeks nurturance and contacts an alien realm. And it suggests why he thought Robert Graves's death-in-life woman was his muse.

Dianne Hunter

The Plath family photographs are reproduced with the permission of Susan Plath Winston, courtesy of the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library, Smith College, copyright estate of Aurelia S. Plath. Barbara Blumenthal prepared them for publication.

I thank Karen V. Kukil, Sheila Fisher and David Rosen for suggestive responses to previous versions of parts of this essay, which were published in Virginia Woolf Miscellany 71 (2007), and Yale Anglers' Journal X (2008), and delivered as papers at the University of Cordoba-Institute for the Psychological Study of the Arts Conference in Spain (2005), at the Plath 75th Year Symposium at Oxford University, UK (2007), and at the Smith College "Plath at 75" Symposium (2008), Northampton, Massachusetts, USA.

References

- Bollas, Christopher and Murray M. Schwartz, "The Absence at the Center: Sylvia Plath and Suicide." Criticism 18 (1976): 147-72, reprinted in Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, Ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1979).
- Bell, Quentin. Virginia Woolf: A Biography (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).
- Bishop, Elizabeth (1946), "The Fish," Modern American and Modern British Poetry, Ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).



Bronfen, Elisabeth. Sylvia Plath (Plymouth, UK: Northcote, 1998).

Ellison, David. Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature: From the Sublime to the Uncanny (Cambridge UP, 2001).

Ennis, Stephen C. and Karen V. Kukil, "No Other Appetite": Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and the Blood Jet of Poetry (New York: Grolier Club, 2005).

Escher, M.C. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hand_with_Reflecting_Sphere
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Worlds

Fini, Leonor. La fin du monde (1949).

Fisher, Matthew D., "Hughes's Pike," Explicator 47:4 (Summer 1989): 58-59.

Freud, Sigmund (1919), "The 'Uncanny'," trans. James Strachey, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955): XVII.

Green, André (1980, 1983). On Private Madness (Madison, Connecticut, USA: International Universities Press, 1993).

Grimm, Marchen der Bruder Grimm (Munchen: Droemersch Verlagsanstalt, 1937), edition inscribed to Sylvia by Aurelia Plath, Ted Hughes collection, Emory University Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

Grimm (1886). Household Stories, trans. Lucy Crane (New York: Dover, 1963).

Hargrove, Nancy D. The Journey Toward Ariel: Sylvia Plath's Poems of 1956-1959 (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1994).

Hughes, Ted. Birthday Letters (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998).

Hughes, Ted. Collected Poems, Ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber, 2003).

Hughes, Ted. Interview, Wild Steelhead & Salmon 5:2 (Winter 1999): 50-58.

Hughes, Ted. Letters (London: British Library manuscripts); Letters of Ted Hughes, Ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

Hughes, Ted, Ed. Sylvia Plath, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams (New York: Harper, 1977, 1979, 1980).

Hughes, Ted, Ed. Sylvia Plath, Collected Poems (New York: HarperPerennial 1981, 1992).

Hughes, Ted, Ed. Ariel: Poems by Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

Hussey, Mark. Virginia Woolf A to Z (New York: Facts on File, 1995).

Keegan, Paul, Ed. Ted Hughes, Collected Poems (London: Faber, 2003).

Kenner, Hugh, "Sincerity Kills," Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1979).

Kukil, Karen V. and Stephen C. Ennis, "No Other Appetite": Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and the Blood Jet of Poetry (New York: Grolier Club, 2005).

Kukil, Karen V., Ed. The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962 (New York: Anchor, 2000).

Lacan, Jacques. Ecrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977).



Lane, Gary, Ed. Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1979).

Lee, Hermione, "Sylvia's basket," TLS 5536 (8 May 2009): 11-12.

Lee, Hermione. Virginia Woolf (New York: Knopf, 1997).

Lucie-Smith, Edward, "Sea-Imagery in the Work of Sylvia Plath," The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, Ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington and London: Indiana U P, 1970).

Middlebrook, Diane. Her Husband: Hughes and Plath—A Marriage (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003).

Newman, Charles, Ed. The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1970).

Pero, Tom, Interview with Ted Hughes, Wild Steelhead & Salmon 5:2 (Winter 1999): 50-58.

Plath, Sylvia, "All the Dead Dears," Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, Ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper, 1977, 1979, 1980).

Plath, Sylvia. Collected Poems, Ed. Ted Hughes (New York: HarperPerennial, 1981, 1992).

Plath, Sylvia, "Ocean 1212W," The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, Ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington and London: Indiana U P, 1970).

Porter, David, "Beasts/Shamans/Baskin: The Contemporary Aesthetics of Ted Hughes,"

Boston Review 22 (Fall 1974): 13-25.

Raine, Craig, "Ted Hughes and the Visionary's Double Vision," Emory University lecture, 2005; edited version, TLS (November 24 2006): 11-13.

Reid, Christopher, Ed. Letters of Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

Schulkind, Jeanne, Ed. Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

Schwartz, Murray M. and Christopher Bollas, "The Absence at the Center: Sylvia Plath and Suicide." Criticism 18 (1976): 147-72, reprinted in Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, Ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1979).

Untermeyer, Louis, Ed., Modern American and Modern British Poetry, Ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

Wilkinson, Peter, "Tragic poet Sylvia Plath's son kills himself," London, England CNN.com (23.3.2009).

Winnicott, D.W. Playing and Reality (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971).

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1929).

Woolf, Virginia (1939), "A Sketch of the Past," Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings, Ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978).

Woolf, Virginia. To the Lighthouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1927).