

“The child’s cry/ Melts in the wall”¹: Frieda Hughes and a Contemporary Reading of Sylvia Plath

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For decades now, critics and academics have condemned the ways in which Ted Hughes censored and altered the work of his late wife, Sylvia Plath. He has been roundly attacked for his destruction of her 1962 journal and for his reordering of the *Ariel* poems prior to their 1965/66 publication. Despite Hughes’s claims that he was simply “omit[ing] . . . more personally aggressive poems” (qtd. in Plath *CP* 15), or that the journal was destroyed because he “regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival” and he “did not want her children to have to read it” (qtd. in Plath *J* xiii), critics rightly remain outraged at his disruption of Plath’s voice and a myriad of books and articles have concerned themselves with his censorship of her writings. It is interesting, then, that Frieda Hughes, daughter of Plath and Ted Hughes, occupies a seemingly sacrosanct space when her mother is concerned. Interviewing Frieda Hughes in June 2001, Mick Brown claims: “she has carefully avoided becoming embroiled in the fierce discourse about her parents’ marriage – the elevation of her mother to feminist martyr, the demonisation of her father as callous, insensitive uber-male . . . she has never contributed to any books about her parents, nor does she intend to” (2001). He quotes Hughes: “There’s nothing I could say. In my mother’s case, everybody’s made it up already and they’re sticking to their stories. And in my father’s case, no” (2001). In fact, Frieda has increasingly come to play a key role in the manipulation of her mother’s work. Her actions have served, once again, to marginalize Sylvia Plath’s artistic achievements. It is shocking that this active silencing of Sylvia Plath continues with little protestation. As critics, scholars, and readers, we have a duty and responsibility to bring Frieda Hughes to task for her suppression of Plath’s voice and for her insistence that Plath be viewed through her own clouded lens.

As acting executor of Plath’s estate,² Frieda Hughes’s refusal to allow academics or filmmakers full access to her mother’s oeuvre is an act of censorship which serves only to

¹ *Ariel*, 24-25.

² Frieda and her brother, Nicholas, are responsible for Plath’s estate; they assumed this responsibility shortly before Hughes’s death.

undermine Plath's talent and to control the images of Plath perpetrated by scholars and critics. Most offensive is Frieda's deeply ironic decision to mount, in the introduction the restored edition of *Ariel*, a hysterical defense of the man who selfishly altered, edited and omitted portions of his recently deceased wife's masterpiece. Few commentators have questioned the links between the problematic control that she exercises over her mother's work while simultaneously capitalizing on her mother's public image in her own. Kate Moses, in one of few pieces that significantly challenges Frieda Hughes's censorship of Plath's work, succinctly writes:

This is the kind of schizophrenic attitude that has characterized the Plath estate for many years: The desire to realize the income created by making Plath's works available to the public, coupled with active distaste at the possibility that those some works might elicit some response other than A) a narrowly circumscribed, family-approved interpretation, or B) the ringing of a cash register. (Moses 2003)

Perhaps it is sympathy for Frieda Hughes's demand for privacy that has coloured the understanding and judgment of her involvement with the Plath estate: but more disturbing is the fact that scholars whose work concerns Plath are continuously impeded by Hughes's control. It is imperative that we consider how Frieda Hughes attempts to market herself, despite all her claims to the contrary, as the daughter of Sylvia Plath, and how she problematically reconstructs Plath, and her work, in this attempt.

In 2003, Frieda Hughes publically protested the BBC's decision to go forward with a film about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. She claimed the film, *Sylvia*, would be a voyeuristic re-telling of Plath's suicide and voiced her objections to what she felt would be a glorification of her mother's death in a poem entitled "My Mother", published in the *Tatler* in February of the same year:

. . .

They are killing her again.
She said she did it
One year in every ten,
But they do it annually, or weekly,
Some even do it daily,

. . .

Now they want to make a film
 For anyone lacking the ability
 To imagine the body, head in the oven,
 Orphaning children.

. . .

They want to use her poetry
 As stitching and sutures
 To give it credibility,
 They think I should love it –
 Having her back again, they think
 I should give them my mother's words
 To fill the mouth of their monster,
 Their Sylvia Suicide Doll (1-5, 13-16, 37-48)

In a poem that ironically appropriates “Lady Lazarus” and “The Applicant,” Hughes laments “monstrous” reconstructions of her mother; her dismay seems especially tied to any reconstruction of Plath’s death. It is not surprising then, that Frieda Hughes objects to the use of Plath’s poems in the film. The irony, of course, is that the refusal to allow writer John Brownlow and director Christine Jeffs access to her mother’s poetic voice makes her complicit in the voyeurism she rejects; her censorship of Plath’s work doomed the screenplay to focus on Plath as a suicidal and troubled woman, rather than to rightly see her as a revolutionary feminist and poet. Hughes’s refusal to allow Plath’s poems, journals, letters, and novels to speak for themselves propelled this film towards censorship.

The film does as Hughes suggests in her poem, it “fills the mouth of their monster,” but it is the lack of her mother’s words that turns this version of Sylvia Plath into the “suicide doll” she dreads. In the introduction to the *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, Frieda argues that “My mother’s poems cannot be crammed into the mouths of actors in any filmic reinvention of her story in the expectation that they can breathe life into her again” (xx); however, in the same piece, she acknowledges the necessity that “these *Ariel* poems . . . speak for themselves” (xx). Her paradoxical, perhaps even dishonest, position is laid bare: the instant that she acts to preserve and protect her mother’s memory through control and censorship, she denies the public the very writings she herself acknowledges are necessary for an accurate reading of Sylvia Plath.

The restrictions placed on the writer and director of *Sylvia* resulted in snippets of Plath's writings (allowed by copyright law) being used in an anachronistic and inappropriate manner. Perhaps the more glaring example is the film's opening scene. Director Jeffs opens the film with one half of Gwyneth Paltrow's face³ lying horizontal across the bottom of the frame. The other half occupies a spot just outside it. The image conjures Plath as a divided self, a conflicted woman, and calls to mind, for those viewers who know her work, her poem, "I am Vertical." This provocative and promising visual is interrupted as Paltrow begins to speak:

Sometimes I dream of a tree, and the tree is my life. One branch is the man I shall marry, and the leaves are my children. Another branch is my future as a writer and each leaf is a poem. Another branch is a glittering academic career. But as I sit there trying to choose, the leaves begin to turn brown and blow away, until the tree is absolutely bare. (Jeffs 2003)

The film then cuts to a shot of a large and foreboding tree moving in the wind, then pans to the branches themselves and the tenuous grasp they have on each leaf. This image, combined with the words most viewers will assume are Plath's, is powerful. Most viewers will fail to notice that these are not, sadly, Plath's own words. Instead, the monologue is a highly problematic reworking of the words of Plath's protagonist Esther Greenwood, from Plath's only published novel, *The Bell Jar*:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.
From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to

³ Gwyneth Paltrow plays Plath in the film.

describe, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the group at my feet. (73)

Surely, it is obvious how, despite Jeff's creative vision from these scenes, Brownlow's rewriting of this monumental image from Plath's novel serves only to silence her writings. The screenplay's version of Plath's extraordinary metaphor denies her the authority of voice that she rightly deserves and legitimizes tampering with her work. This is a poignant example of the damage Frieda Hughes does to the legacy of the mother she claims she wishes to protect. The discrepancies in these two scenes reveal much of the Plath that is missing in *Sylvia*. She lacks wit, intelligence, talent and agency throughout; that Plath's protagonist finds herself starving to death in the crotch of the fig-tree is a different image indeed from the barren tree Paltrow describes from a dream. It is noteworthy that websites and blogs now quote the filmic version as Plath's text⁴; the dangers of Frieda Hughes's censorship are far-reaching.

Sylvia, the movie, was released in October of 2003, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, followed in the winter of 2004. Frieda Hughes participated in its first public reading on November 30, 2004, in New York. Hughes's involvement with this text continues to contaminate a now infamously compromised collection of poems. Unlike *Sylvia*, it is through additions, rather than omissions, that Frieda Hughes bastardizes *Ariel* yet again; her statement that she will never contribute to any book about her parents is directly at odds with the manner in which she reconstructs Plath's magnum opus. Though we must certainly recognize that the restoration of *Ariel* is an important, even essential, endeavor in resituating Plath at the centre of her own masterpiece, Hughes uses the edition as a venue for an emotional defense of her 'daddy.' Ted Hughes, through his daughter, once again manages to exert influence and control over the reception of the work of his former wife. The attention paid, by Frieda Hughes, to the domestic crisis of Plath's marriage seems inherently sexist. The choice to frame this "restored edition" with the biases and prejudices of a daughter who focuses on Plath's shortcomings as a wife and mother is extremely problematic in terms of understanding Plath as a poet. Again, the offensive nature of this defense – Frieda's information about Plath largely coming from her "daddy" – is one sided and contemptuous; Hughes, like her father before her, assumes an inappropriate position of authority.

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/theoneshow/gallery/trees.shtml>

Frieda Hughes unconsciously dispels this authority in the first paragraph of her Foreword:

This edition of *Ariel* by my mother, Sylvia Plath, exactly follows the arrangement of her last manuscript as she left it. As her daughter I can only approach it, and its divergence from the first United Kingdom publication of *Ariel* in 1965 and subsequent United States publication in 1966, both edited by my father, Ted Hughes, from the purely *personal* perspective of its history within my family. ("Foreword" xi, my emphasis)

This perspective taints any reading of the newly ordered poems. Hughes calls readers to reevaluate the role Ted Hughes played in his wife's death. In her Foreword, Frieda Hughes tellingly describes Plath as having "a ferocious temper and a jealous streak," while her father is "more temperate and optimistic" (xviii). She again reveals her bias when she writes: "The collection of *Ariel* poems became symbolic to me of th[e] possession of my mother and of the wider vilification of my father" (xvii). These are the instructions readers are given as they read the "authentic version" of Plath's *Ariel*; undoubtedly, readers of this ironically labeled "restored edition" are coloured and influenced by Hughes's shrill introduction. Hughes constructs her mother as an aggressor in a domestic drama: "On work-connected visits to London in June 1962, my father began an affair with a woman who had incurred my mother's jealousy a month earlier. My mother, somehow learning of the affair, was enraged. . . . Tensions increased between my parents, my mother proposing separation . . . By early October . . . my mother ordered my father out of the house" (xiii). This disquieting and degrading portrait of her mother most certainly alters a reader's reception of Plath's *Ariel* poems, particularly texts such as "The Rabbit Catcher," "The Other," and "The Jailor," to name but a few.

While Frieda Hughes, as daughter of Plath and Ted Hughes rightly owns her feelings, they have no place in an attempt to restore the dignity of Plath's work. As readers, we are again distanced from any textual experience of Plath – her biography continues to infringe upon her work. Hughes's Foreword tellingly deconstructs itself as it approaches conclusion; consider the Foreword's aporia: "Since she died my mother has been dissected, analyzed, reinterpreted, reinvented, fictionalized, and in some cases completely fabricated. It comes down to this: Her own words describe her best" (xx). Of course Frieda has made it clear that she, like her father before her, will not allow Plath's words to "describe her best." Ted and Frieda Hughes, whether or not they act out of pure self-interest or an instinct to "protect," insist on insulting Plath's

poetry with commentary and personal biography, thereby exerting their own brand of control over her body of work. Frieda Hughes both reconstructs and reinvents her mother. Her demand that readers reinterpret the poems from her perspective denies Plath's words the power they deserve.

Not only does Frieda Hughes inject herself into Plath's work, she also relies on injecting Plath into her own. The jacket cover of Frieda Hughes's 2006 collection of poems, *45*, reads: "Breaking forty-five years of near-silence on the subject of her life, Frieda Hughes finally opens up through the medium she knows best. . ." When asked if she would see the film *Sylvia*, Frieda Hughes responded: "Why would I want to be involved in moments of my childhood which I never want to return to?" (Leeman 1) Hughes, however, increasingly returns to these very childhood moments and repeatedly invokes the image of her mother in her own writings. Surely the fact that she capitalizes on her mother's cultural currency in the marketplace, when promoting her own work, is yet another level of self-interest in the depiction of her mother that should prevent her from having the ability to control and censor her writings. It is obvious that Frieda Hughes makes a sizeable profit as the daughter of Sylvia Plath and it seems that maintaining her own version of Plath is in her own financial best interest.

Interestingly, Frieda Hughes accepted an \$80, 000 grant to write the "life story" of *45*: In June 2002, Frieda Hughes further complicated her propriety stance over her family's story by accepting a . . . grant to be distributed over three years from Britain's National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. Hughes's NESTA grant, which is funded through national lottery money and is therefore rightly considered a public charity, is intended to give her the "opportunity and means" – apparently without regard to the fact that she is one of the two sole copyright holders and financial beneficiaries of the works of her mother . . . — to write her life story, charting her first 40 years through poetry and painting. (Moses 2003)

This blatant choice to market herself and her art as tied to her poetic lineage bluntly reveals the inherent hypocrisy of her position as poet and daughter of Sylvia Plath. Her insistence that she wishes her personal life to be her own, that readers and scholars need back off where her parents are concerned, is completely undermined by her choice to capitalize on their status for her own artistic process. This is not only highly offensive to those of us wishing to study Sylvia Plath without limitations or control, but it simply makes no sense.

Indeed, *45* is a collection of 45 poems corresponding to each year of the poet's life. Each poem has a corresponding painting, available for viewing online at <http://www.friedahughes.com/>. This website telling introduces its viewer to Frieda Hughes as the daughter of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. The jacket cover of the collection of poems reads: "for anyone who wants to know what happened in the life of Frieda Hughes, after she tragically lost her mother, this book is the answer." Though Plath is not named, the message here is clear; this is a book for those interested in *Plath's* daughter and the aftermath of *Plath's* death. In the introduction to an interview with Frieda Hughes, TIME online (from March 13th of 2007) describes *45* in the following way:

Hughes has broken her near silence about her own life and family drama, in her moving new book of poetry, *45*, a must-read for *any Plath devotee*. The collection of poems (one for each year of her life) is an act of creative courage, as Hughes goes back through her painful past to delve into the family history. . . In addition, Hughes spent five years painting an abstract landscape of her life, 4 ft. high and 225 ft. long in 45 panels, which complements the poetry. (Sachs, my emphasis)

But what silence has Hughes broken? Not only has she remained publically vocal about her parents and the public's reception to them, she's been writing about them since her 1998 poetic debut in *Wooroloo* (notably dedicated to "daddy"): "While their mother's lay in quiet graves/ Squared out by those green cut pebbles/ And flowers in a jam jar, they dug mine up" (61). Unearthing Plath has, certainly, become a popular endeavor; Frieda Hughes, too, regularly exhumes and exhibits her mother for public viewing.

45 begins with a Foreword – sanctioned by Frieda Hughes – written by Libby Purves. Astonishingly, Purves confuses and conflates two of Plath's most well known poems:

When I first met Frieda Hughes over a decade ago, I found it impossible not to blurt out that she was the baby in my favourite poem of childbirth, beginning, "Love set you going like a fat gold watch" // But then at least I remembered the last words of that poem, acknowledging that every baby comes individual into the world, "a clean slate, with your own face on." (ix)

Purves draws the first line from "Morning Song" and then, badly (mis)remembers the concluding line: "a clean slate, with your own face on", the closing line of "You're." It is, perhaps, telling that Frieda, who wields such tight control over her mother's poetry and image in the marketplace,

allows Purves to make reference to her mother in the Foreword, but fails to catch a striking error in the poetry itself. This blunder functions as a metaphor for Frieda's contradictory attitudes towards her mother's work: she insists that Plath's texts must signify on their own, yet she continually disrupts and distorts the reading of the work for reasons that are "personal" and unconcerned with the integrity of the art. Often claiming that she did not read her parents work until 1995 (Brown 2001), Hughes seems unfamiliar with Plath's writing; this is especially interesting since the poems confused in the Foreword to her collection are both concerned with pregnancy and infancy, likely inspired by Frieda herself. We must infer that Frieda has paid little attention to Plath's work and must acknowledge how this is problematic in light of her control of these same writings.

45 is a book that very much returns to all the memories that Frieda Hughes tells us she never wants to "relive," including the death of her mother who she describes again as having her "head in oven." She relives the death of her father and her second rejection and betrayal as a daughter at the hands of stepmother, Carol Orchard. It seems intriguing that Frieda Hughes capitalizes, yet again, on all the things that she tells "readers"—time and time again – that she'd rather we "leave alone." Where she forgives her father for omitting Plath's more personally lacerating poems, she viciously attacks her step-mother with a hatred that calls to mind Plath's "Medusa": "Daddy, Daddy, come and see/ What she's done to me in your name"(95-96) and from her "1999," "I found myself orphaned from/The woman in whose promises/ My father's wishes shone./ Dead now, he couldn't see/ The skill and brilliance/ With which she severed me/ From what he'd wanted done"(93). Again, Frieda misses the irony of her words; in no way does she accept responsibility for tampering with what Sylvia Plath "wanted done."

There are many discrepancies in Frieda Hughes's claims about artistic integrity; her actions "on behalf" of her mother's art reveal many contradictions. As Kate Moses shrewdly offers: "[s]ince taking on the responsibility of active control of her mother's literary estate . . . Frieda Hughes has done a single-handedly remarkable job of further muddying the Plath waters while protesting against public intrusion into her "personal" history at the same time"(2003). We must seriously interrogate the ways in which Frieda Hughes condemns studies of her mother while constructing her own version of the "suicide dolls" that she claims to despise. She has, in the last decade, as executor of Plath's estate, become increasingly involved in the public reception of Plath. Despite all her claims to the contrary, she has defined and exploited herself as

daughter of Plath and Hughes; she makes a good living doing so. She seems unable to acknowledge her dependence on the reading public for the profit she has garnered; Hughes relies on the very same audience she condemns in her *Wooroloo* poem, “Readers,” for making her mother “theirs”:

[T]he familial umbilicus, for Frieda Hughes, seems not to be simply the convenient notion of “privacy” but the distribution of money. From the time of her death the income from Sylvia Plath’s estate has been designated for her children’s benefit . . . Yet Plath’s daughter seems to maintain a psychic disconnection between the financial security supplied by the estate she controls and the book buyers whose investments in Sylvia Plath find their way into her checkbook. (Moses 2003)

Ironically, Hughes depends on us to “finge[r] through [Plath’s] mental underwear,” to “wan[t] to know what made her” (“Readers” 4, 6).

Whether it is her disdain at a voyeuristic retelling of her mother’s suicide by publishing a poem that recreates the very image she rejects, or her insistence that the work should speak for itself as she simultaneously tampers with it, Frieda Hughes has involved herself in our knowledge of Sylvia Plath. Hughes claim that “poetry is for everyone”, declared on Britain’s National Poetry Day in 2003, is sadly ironic in light of her tight grip on Plath’s estate (qtd. in Moses 2003). Through her exploitation of Sylvia Plath, Frieda Hughes contributes a chapter to the work she condemns us all for reading. As readers of Sylvia Plath, it is our responsibility to re-view Frieda Hughes’s involvement with the Plath estate through a more critical lens; it is time to speak, not only on Plath’s behalf, but on our own, lest Frieda Hughes successfully silences us all.

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