



Ted Hughes  
Society Journal

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Volume VIII Issue 2

*The Ted Hughes Society Journal*

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## Editorial

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Quite sensibly, Samuel Beckett once warned literary critics that ‘the danger is in the neatness of identifications.’ And yet this Spring, as the world locked down and, through the horrors of the coronavirus, emerged into a strange place of quiet and resurgent nature, it was hard to avoid the growing sense of an urgent resonance between the ecological and poetic vision of Ted Hughes and the place our planet finds itself in now. So this morning, when opening the *Letters of Ted Hughes* (a marvellous selection which badly deserves supplementing with a *Collected Letters* along the lines of the recent exhaustive *Letters of Sylvia Plath* volumes), pretty much at random, I hope the shade of Beckett will forgive me for the strength of the identification I felt on finding Hughes on 7 February 1990 describing the mooted successor to his and Seamus Heaney’s *The Rattle Bag* anthology as

The handy vol for carrying into the frightful battles of the next century (the famine battles, the Greenhouse flood-out battles, the refugee migration battles, the general devilry battles, the democratic mutual abuse battles, the roaming bands of hand-to-mouth warrior battles. A book to deflect the bullet, the bayonet, and the long hours in the fox-hole. (*LTH* 576)

Whilst I might perhaps not have chosen quite so military a register to express it, the identification I felt with this notion of poetry as a method by which to resist the ‘general devilry’ of our particular moment (of the moment which the whole world has seemed to be living through – and living into – for the last few years) was a strong one.

And the succour which Hughes continues to offer to those readers and writers of poetry who are struggling through the ‘frightful battles’ of our current century resides not just in his own work and words, but in the other legacies his career left. Hughes’s unflagging support for the Arvon Foundation has long been known and justly celebrated. Therefore it seems entirely appropriate – indeed perhaps almost inevitable – that when the Arvon Foundation (having been forced to close all of its centres in March 2020 in the face of the pandemic) opened up its innovative ‘Arvon at Home’ courses online in May 2020, they would be based out of Lumb Bank, the house which Hughes once owned and which since 1974 has been Arvon’s home in the North. When the virus is finally brought under control and Arvon’s residential courses can start up once more, visitors to Lumb Bank will be

visiting a place now even more deeply rooted into Hughes's legacy and story than was previously thought, as the long, ground-breaking essay by Steve Ely which closes this issue of *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* will reveal.

Putting this issue of the *Journal* together in this time of coronavirus has not been a simple task, but the strength of the articles which have emerged would have been remarkable at any time. The issue begins with the welcome return of 'editor-emeritus' Mark Wormald to give the promised account of a very significant interdisciplinary conference hosted recently by Pembroke College and which emphasised Hughes's continuing significance to the study of the salmon across the arts, humanities and sciences.

Then there is an unintentional but richly rewarding 'double-bill' of Baskin. The friendship between Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin was a key artistic connection in both men's lives, and the articles by Steve Ely and Peter Fydler in this issue cast new and fascinating light on two of their most well-known collaborations: *Capriccio* and *Crow*. 'A Prologue to *Capriccio*' represents the most thorough exploration yet of the biographical, material-textual and artistic background of the 1990 Gehenna Press publication. Usually *Capriccio* is figured as simply Hughes's poetic meditation on his destructive relationship with Assia Wevill, but Ely persuasively shows us that the book needs understanding as a joint enterprise, one in which Baskin's artwork is utterly inseparable from Hughes's poems.

Peter Fydler's 'Crow Zero' then considers the origin – and originating myths – of the famous Baskin-Hughes collaboration on *Crow*. Through painstaking and imaginative consideration, Fydler shows how hitherto undiscussed Baskin artwork was implicated in the genesis of the *Crow* project, arguing that any definitive 'boxset' of the project would need to include a four-foot high piece of sculpture. Sadly, there's no word yet on whether the forthcoming 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition of *Crow* will even have any 'unreleased tracks', although it will come with a foreword by *The Ted Hughes Society* patron Dame Marina Warner.

The last article in the issue, also by Steve Ely, continues the focus on 'Baskinian' projects by drawing *Capriccio* into a thoughtful and compelling investigation of the place of Assia Wevill in the poetry of Ted Hughes. In 'The Key of the Sycamore', Ely draws upon deep archival research and allies it to clear-sighted and scrupulous close readings of both poetry (published and unpublished) and landscape to reveal the depth of Hughes's poetic meditation on Wevill and, for the first time, to locate the final resting place of her and her murdered daughter, Shura.

As the world continues to move through the 'general devilry' of this time, the next issue of *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* will probably not be easy to put

together. All over the world libraries stand closed, and scholars are busily adjusting to a reality largely lived online, for the foreseeable future. But I am determined that the *Journal* will continue to produce two issues each calendar year, and so I close with an appeal: if anyone has an idea for an article they would like to write, or have worked something up but aren't sure if it's a fit for the *Journal*, please don't hesitate to contact me: [journal@thetedhughessociety.org](mailto:journal@thetedhughessociety.org)

James Robinson

York (and online), 16<sup>th</sup> June 2020

## List of abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes

- CB* *Cave Birds* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978)
- C* *Crow* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970)
- CP* *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber, 2003)
- E* *Elmet* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)
- G* *Gaudete* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977)
- LTH* *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber & Faber, 2007)
- IM* *The Iron Man* (London: Faber & Faber, illustrated by Andrew Davison, 1985 [1968])
- IW* *The Iron Woman* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993)
- MW* *Moon-Whales and Other Moon Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976)
- PC* Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, *Poet and Critic* (London: The British Library, 2012)
- PM* *Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989 (1967))
- RE* *Remains of Elmet* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979)
- SGCB* *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)
- UNS* *Under the North Star* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981)
- WP* *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)
- WT* *What is the Truth?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984)

### ***And by Sylvia Plath***

- JSP* *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2000)
- LSP1* *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Volume I, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017)
- LSP2* *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Volume II, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2018)

## 'Owned by everyone': a Cambridge Conference on the Salmon, inspired by Ted Hughes

by Mark Wormald

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It began in bed, or somewhere high on the Taw, in the autumn of 1965. For the remaining thirty years of his life, Ted Hughes dreamed and caught and wrote of salmon. He raised his own voice and pen in their defence at least as effectively as he searched for them, looking intensely into the water he hoped held them. And though he loved the taste of wild salmon, it was never just about catching fish for the table. As 'Earth-numb' puts it, 'The lure is a prayer'; the stakes were as high as they could be, and not just for his quarry. 'December River', from his days discovering the Taw and the Torridge in the early to mid 1970s, makes that as transparent as the windows of water, 'strongholds/Of a total absence', into which these extraordinary elusive wanderers of the seas and rivers had disappeared:

So day in, day out, this whole summer  
I offered all I had for a touch of their wealth –  
I found only endlessly empty water. (*CP* 340)

But Hughes also recognized why he carried on looking. It wasn't just personal, or the way salmon fishing attuned him to the complex interdependencies and swim ways that connected him as an individual to their element. He did acknowledge that 'One of the rewards of having been an obsessive salmon fisher is that salmon remain installed in some depth of your awareness, like a great network of private meteorological stations, in that primitive otherworld, inside this one, where memory carries on "as if real"'. (*CP* 1216) Yet the very openness and boldness of that assumption that his – 'your' – awareness was fed by something larger, deeper, 'that primitive otherworld', also reveals another crucial component in Hughes's beliefs about the importance of salmon as 'such sensitive glands in the vast, dishevelled body of nature' (*CP* 1215). Hughes knew who was responsible for that dishevelment, and worse. And it fuelled his anger to speak and write on behalf of a fellow creature he regarded as both 'The Best Worker in Europe' (*CP* 697) for its ability to convert the richness of its northern feeding grounds into that carotin-pink, protein-rich flesh, and the most vulnerable. The smolt to which he gave voice in the fundraising



ballad in 1985 had become ‘a slave’, and not just to the industrial drift nets that awaited these two-year olds once they have navigated their journey to sea, and on their return. All of us, every single consumer, shared that responsibility. The salmon is, he knew, ‘owned by everyone’.

In December 2019, inspired by that phrase and by Hughes’s larger example – as environmental activist, contributor to public inquiries on the economic realities of salmon fisheries, campaigner for water quality and against pollution, as father to a son who became a leading salmonid scientist, and as well as the author of some of the language’s greatest poems about salmon – an international and interdisciplinary group gathered in Cambridge for two days to celebrate the natural history of the salmon, to hear the latest scientific discoveries, and confront its worsening plight.

Hughes scholars were prominent among the speakers – Terry Gifford spoke of his exchanges with Hughes about the ethics of fishing in the 1990s, Yvonne Reddick reported on his campaign to save the Torridge in the 1980s, and Katherine Robinson revealed a direct line between medieval Welsh stories of ‘the oldest animal’ and ‘That Morning’. But there were also leading authorities, from both sides of the Atlantic as well as from the Pacific North West of North America, on salmon genetics and taxonomy, the importance (for conservation purposes as well as for scientific understanding) of mapping Salmon populations and sub-populations across the river-systems of Canada, Alaska, Norway, as well as Ireland, Scotland and England. Arlin Rickard, the founding director of the Westcountry Rivers Trust and then of the Rivers Trust, spoke about Hughes’s role in inspiring both bodies – whose headquarters are still at ‘Rain-Charm House’ in Stoke Climsland, within a couple of miles of the Tamar. And there were writer-fishermen friends of Hughes’s too: Ehor Boyanowsky, who spoke about their shared passion for the steelhead and their trips to the Dean River in British Columbia; Ian Cook, whose own battle for the water and salmon of the River Creedy and Exe Hughes supported in the early 1990s; and David Profumo, at least some of whose extraordinary after-dinner speech at Pembroke College about his friendship with Hughes may, if we are lucky, feature in his imminent fishing memoir *The Lightning Thread* (Simon and Schuster, 2021).

Tony Juniper, the Chair of Natural England, chaired one panel in which folk singer and song collector Sam Lee transfixed us all; poets Sean Lysaght and Katrina Porteous reported on their own experiences of salmon and traditions of fishing for them in County Mayo and the Northumberland coast respectively. And one of the

world's leading salmon anglers and conservationists, Mikael Frödin, spoke of, and shared stark images of, the horrors of closed-net salmon farms and the terrible damage they inflict not just on the fjord beds but to the wild salmon that swim past them. Corin Smith of Salmon & Trout Conservation Scotland reported with equal passion on the decline of Scotland's once-famous Loch Maree salmon and sea-trout fishery within months of the arrival of an open-net salmon farm there in the late 1980s, and of the urgent need to keep campaigning. And there were screenings of three films: one by Corin, aimed at Members of the Scottish Parliament; a second, narrated by Sir David Attenborough, and of immediate relevance to our venue, the Cambridge Conservation Initiative (housed in a building named for him), on the wonders and existential threats facing the salmon at the end of the International Year of the Salmon. Perhaps most powerful of all was *Artifishal*, a feature-length film now available on YouTube about the well-intentioned but themselves enduringly damaging consequences of North American damming and hatcheries programmes over the last century and a half. Two of the film's clearest and most urgent voices answered questions about it. And one of them, Kyle Young, also spoke about hatcheries and his hopes for a unity on the development of common principles and practices in protection wild salmonid populations, wherever they existed across the world.

But the conference was by no means dominated by the science of salmon, however compellingly and clearly it was presented. Indeed, among the most moving presentations were by the anthropologists Tom Thornton and Barbara Bodenhorn, and by the representative of the Sámi Parliament Jon Petter Gintal, about Polar First Nations' approaches to living with the salmon in ways that balance a need for them as food source with a recognition of their essential importance for their cultures, and the ecosystems these fish support. Hughes's own deeply-informed recognition of the enduring cultural and anthropological importance of the salmon, as 'the weaver at the source..., a universal totem, a global unity' (*PC* 156), as he told Keith Sagar, was never far from our thinking. Nor was his poetry: Nick Measham of Salmon & Trout Conservation invoked Hughes's 'poetic electrons' in his own description of S&TC's own work on riverine entomology, and Ken Whelan of the Atlantic Salmon Trust surprised us all by reading from another hitherto unknown occasional poem Hughes had shared with a meeting Ken had attended years ago. And if it seemed appropriate to close proceedings with a reading of 'October Salmon,' so it has seemed as inevitable as it is essential in the months since – months not just of a pandemic, but also of the relaxation by the Scottish government of environmental and fish welfare regulations a number of speakers at the conference had fought long and hard to negotiate – to keep waving Hughes's

banner, 'owned by everyone'. The conference website, <https://ownedbyeveryone.org>, now hosts a number of the presentations and accompanying images, as well as several blogs. This autumn we hope to publish many of them in an inaugural issue of an online magazine *Wild Fish*, which will provide one more example of the enduring inspiration of this great poet and environmentalist.

# A Prologue to *Capriccio*

by Steve Ely

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*Capriccio*, Ted Hughes's 1990 collaboration with Leonard Baskin, is a breathtakingly opulent, large-folio fine-book comprising twenty poems by Hughes and twenty-five engravings by Baskin. The book was originally published by Baskin's Maine-based Gehenna Press in a limited edition of fifty copies, in which the regular edition (forty copies) retailed at \$9000 and the special edition (ten copies, each including a second set of prints, a sheet of Hughes's working manuscript and a watercolour by Baskin) retailed at \$14,000. The broadsheet advertising *Capriccio* asserted that 'the poems will not be published again in the poet's lifetime.'<sup>1</sup> The rationale for this statement is not difficult to discern. *Capriccio* was, at the time of publication, an unprecedentedly personal work for Hughes, addressing his explosive relationship with Assia Wevill; although the publicity for the book coyly avoided mentioning this, describing the poems more generally as being 'revelatory of the human condition'.<sup>2</sup> Hughes had hitherto seemed reluctant to write so explicitly and unguardedly about any of the women he had loved and the feelings of grief and guilt that he felt in relation to their deaths – the poems later identified as being about Sylvia Plath, Susan Alliston and his mother in the 'Epilogue' to *Gaudete* (1977) are so obliquely expressed that they conceal even as they reveal.<sup>3</sup> This strategy of concealing while revealing also informs *Capriccio* – by publishing his first collection of overtly confessional poems in a prohibitively expensive limited edition, Hughes was able to fulfil an apparent compulsion to

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<sup>1</sup> Gehenna Press sales broadsheet advertising *Capriccio*. Personal copy.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes confirmed the autobiographical basis of some of the 'Epilogue' poems in a letter to Terry Gifford & Neil Roberts, indicating that 'Once I said lightly' is about Sylvia Plath and 'I know well' is about his friend and former lover Susan Alliston (BL Add. MS 78756). In 1998 Hughes told Ann Skea that 'Waving goodbye from your banked hospital bed' is about Edith Hughes, his mother, see, 'Ted Hughes' *Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*', in Terry Gifford, Neil Roberts & Mark Wormald (eds.), *Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to Collected*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 82. Jonathan Bate has more recently argued that the last-named poem also incorporates allusions to Sylvia Plath, see *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*. (London: William Collins, 2015), pp. 340-41. *Editorial Note*: Neil Roberts further highlights that both 'You Hated Spain' and 'The Earthenware Head' which would eventually be included in *Birthday Letters* had been published in 1979 in the *Poetry Book Society Supplement* and in 1980 in *The London Review of Books*.

publish, and at the same time conduct a controlled experiment in ‘testing the waters’ of audience reaction.

Hughes seems to have been emboldened by the response – or lack of response – to *Capriccio*, and in 1995 he went back on the promise of the Gehenna Press marketing department and published eight *Capriccio* poems (alongside eight poems subsequently to appear in *Birthday Letters* and three other ‘elegiac’ poems) in the ‘Uncollected’ section of *New Selected Poems*, where again, they seemed to have generated little critical or readerly attention, perhaps emboldening Hughes to publish *Birthday Letters* in 1998.<sup>4</sup> However, the twenty poems of *Capriccio* in their original sequence were only made available to a wider audience after Hughes’s death, with the publication of the *Collected Poems* in 2003, which is where virtually all his readers encounter them. This presents us with a problem. The full text of *Capriccio* as originally conceived comprises not simply the twenty poems, but also Baskin’s twenty-five engravings, which fulfil the multiple roles of inspiring Hughes’s poems, informing their meanings, and interpreting, amplifying and augmenting their content. In a letter to Baskin dated October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1989, in which he discusses the *Capriccio* collaboration, Hughes writes, somewhat convolutedly,

I’ve been looking at the drawings again, which seem to me all marvellous, with several wonders and I’m quite sure it was the associations I make with what such drawings mean to you – I mean, my idea of the origin of the meaning of these images in you, these particular emblems and totems – that focused me on those of my verses. So to my mind, the combination is all of a piece at a deep level (as far as I’m concerned), though I can see that for you my verse might seem like an arbitrary choice of guest for that chamber.<sup>5</sup>

In a later, undated letter to Baskin, Hughes gives him the sequence of the *Capriccio* poems, but invites him to ‘toy’ and ‘make a curious counterpoint’ by artfully selecting and juxtaposing his engravings with particular poems as he puts the book together.<sup>6</sup> In an earlier letter to Hughes, Baskin comments more generally on the dialectical, symbiotic nature of their collaborations:

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Reid seems to suggest this in his note to the letter Hughes wrote to Seamus Heaney on 1 January 1998, in which Hughes explains the process which led to his decision to publish *Birthday Letters*. Reid writes, ‘When TH’s appeared in 1995, the inclusion of poems about Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill passed without comment from reviewers.’ (*LTH* 704-5). The implication is that Hughes was relieved that the publication *New Selected Poems* of these poems did not provoke a revival of the controversies of the previous decades and thus gave him the confidence to go ahead with the *Birthday Letters* project.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 6.

As usual I have that profound feeling that we can inevitably inform, reinforce, elaborate, enlarge each other's work. I do not feel that way about any other writer or artist.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, the reader must ideally encounter the *Capriccio* poems and engravings together. The engravings are not simply illustrative and the poems are not merely ekphrastic paraphrases of the engravings, but independent works of art that nevertheless combine to create a single, integrated text. To read one without taking the other into full account leads to an impoverished reading of both – and of the whole artistic undertaking.

Aspects of the material textuality of the fine book itself also frame our understanding of *Capriccio*. A comparison of the final leather cover of the book (a red-brown stripe enclosed by two green stripes) with an earlier version contained in the archive of the Gehenna Press at the Bodleian Library, in which the central brown stripe is coffin-shaped, makes clear that the cover is a schematic representation of a freshly dug grave, framing the whole book in the context of death – specifically that of Sylvia Plath.<sup>8</sup> Hughes believed that Plath's suicide had the effect of consolidating his relationship with Wevill in a way that might not have happened had Plath lived, even if she and Hughes had not been reconciled. In the *Capriccio* poem 'The Error' he writes:

When her grave opened its ugly mouth  
 Why didn't you just fly  
 Wrap yourself in your hair and make yourself scarce,  
 Why did you kneel down at the grave's edge  
 To be identified  
 Accused and convicted [...] (CP 795)

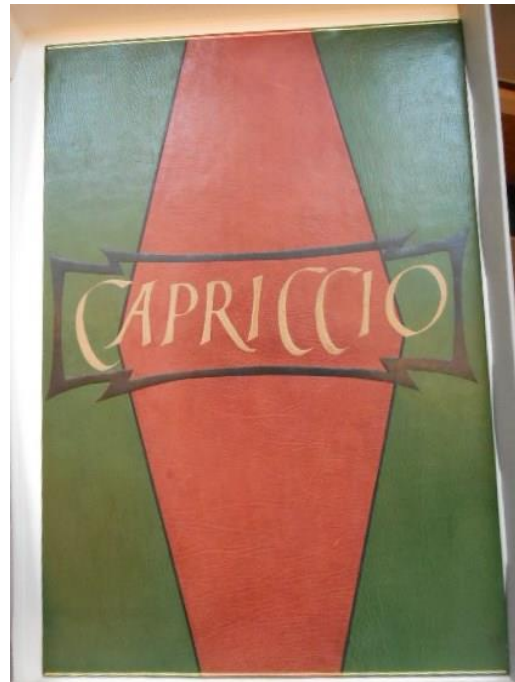
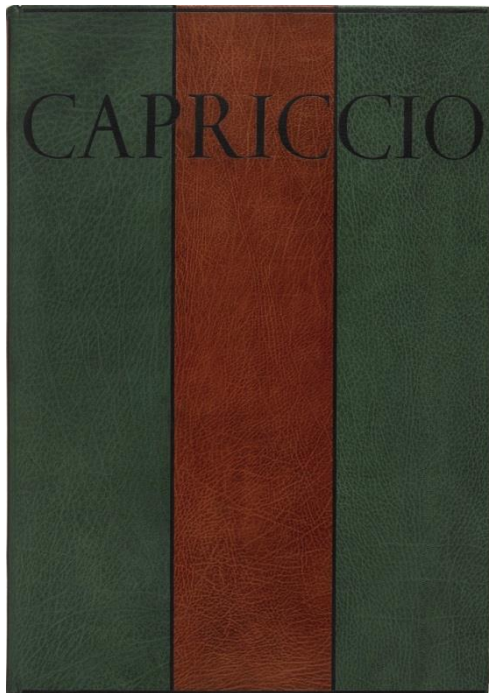
Although Hughes and Wevill had clearly developed a serious relationship, at the time of Plath's suicide they both had other partners with whom they had not definitively broken (Plath and Assia's husband David Wevill) and both were involved in other, more casual relationships. They were not living together, and it would have been easy, not to mention understandable, for Wevill to choose to 'fly' from the world of scandal, upheaval and accusation that descended upon her from February 1963. Nevertheless, Wevill chose to stay with Hughes, ultimately leaving her husband and moving in with him, despite her reservations.<sup>9</sup> Over the following six years, the couple failed to develop a sustainable relationship. Hughes blamed

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Baskin, Letter to Ted Hughes, 26 September 1984. Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

<sup>8</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, Leonard Baskin, 'making copy' cover of *Capriccio*. MS Gehenna Press a10, f. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Bate describes Wevill's ambivalence about moving in with Hughes, his attempts to persuade her to do so and her fears of a relationship in which she would be 'immersed in the Hughes monumentality, his and hers', with 'Sylvia, my predecessor, between our heads at night.', *The Unauthorised Life*, p. 221.

this failure on the guilt and other complications that ultimately flowed from their roles in the events that led to Plath's death and the psychological burden this placed on them both. In a planning notebook for *Capriccio* held in the British Library, Hughes personifies the impact Plath's post-mortem presence had on Wevill as 'the homicidal ghost'.<sup>10</sup> In a journal entry for 20 March 1969, four days before her suicide, Wevill writes of a 'terrible talk' about their relationship she had with Hughes in the lounge of the Manchester hotel they stayed in while Hughes was recording a television programme for the BBC. She reports Hughes as saying, presumably about his inability to commit to their relationship: "It's Sylvia – it's because of her", and comments: 'I can't answer that. No more than if it were a court-sentence. It says die, die soon. But execute yourself and your little self, efficiently.'<sup>11</sup> The teleological framework of *Capriccio* reflects Hughes's belief that Wevill's death was ultimately rooted in the death of Plath, hence the choice of cover design. However, before further considering this issue of the relationship between the poems and the artwork, it is necessary to deal with two important preliminary issues: the origin of the *Capriccio* project, and the significance of the book's name.



Final cover of the Gehenna Press *Capriccio* (left). 'Making Copy' in the Gehenna Press Archive at the Bodleian Library (right).

<sup>10</sup> BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 166.

<sup>11</sup> Assia Wevill, Journals of Assia Wevill, entry for 20 March 1969. Emory MSS 1058, box 2.

## From ‘Caprichos’ to *Capriccio*: the Origins of the Project

The collaboration that culminated in the 1990 Gehenna Press *Capriccio* began in 1976 when Baskin sent Hughes sixteen grotesque engravings and invited him to write poems in response to each image. The aim, as ever, was to produce a limited edition, fine-book which Baskin would publish via his Gehenna Press. By the summer of that year, Hughes had started work on the poems. In a letter to Hughes dated 22 June 1976, Baskin writes that he is, ‘delighted that “Capriccios” is occupying you, it will make a super book’.<sup>12</sup>

Hughes’s approach to the “Capriccios” work was business-like and schematic, and is effectively captured in a notebook in the Ted Hughes archive at Emory University, in which he refers to the collaboration as ‘Caprichos’ (Hughes and Baskin referred to the project casually or interchangeably as the Italian ‘Capriccios’ or Spanish ‘Caprichos’ throughout the various iterations of the collaboration, only definitively settling on *Capriccio* in November, 1989). Hughes prepared the blank notebook by sketching a thumbnail representation of each Baskin artwork in the top-right corners of successive double pages – the first double-page has a representation of a crow man, the eighth is a demon with a crow’s head protruding from his anus, the tenth is a grotesque hen, and so on.<sup>13</sup> Having prepared his notebook with these shorthand *aide memoires*, Hughes then seems to have started to draft his poetic responses, starting with the first image and apparently intending to work his way through the lot, one after the other. Although much of the notebook remains blank, with only the first half-dozen or so thumbnail pages containing drafts, Hughes did in fact finish the ‘Caprichos’ sequence. Typescript drafts of the sixteen poems exist in the Ted Hughes archive at the British Library and Hughes sent a copy (along with a typescript of *Gaudete*) to Yehuda Amichai in May, 1977.<sup>14</sup>

However, the initial 1976 Baskin-Hughes ‘Capriccios’/‘Caprichos’ was never published, probably due to Hughes’s dissatisfaction with the poems he had produced. In a letter to Jennifer Habel (a postgraduate student at the University of Maryland who had written to Hughes enquiring about his collaborations with Baskin), dated 1 November 1993, he refers to the poems as being, ‘very lightly written’.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, he never published the work as a sequence, although he did salvage or recycle some of the poems – ‘Caprichos’ poems comprise poems 2 to 7

<sup>12</sup> Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

<sup>13</sup> Emory MSS 644 box 68, folder 48.

<sup>14</sup> See BL, Add Ms 836691, ff. 10-25; and Yehuda Amichai, Aerogramme to Ted Hughes, 15 May 1977, Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 3.

<sup>15</sup> Emory MSS 644 box 54, folder 8.



of the ‘Seven Dungeon Songs’ in *Moortown* (CP 559-563) and the three poems of the Gehenna Press *Mokomaki* (CP 694-695). ‘For Leonard & Lisa’ in *A Primer of Birds* (CP 599) is a version of the *Caprichos* poem, ‘He cast off the weight of space’. The remaining six poems remained unpublished in Hughes’s lifetime, although four of them are published in *Collected Poems* as ‘[Caprichos]’ (CP 352-354). None of the *Caprichos* poems appear in the 1990 *Capriccio*.

After 1977, the *Capriccios/Caprichos* collaboration seems to have fallen into abeyance, until Baskin revived the project in 1986:

How did you like that group of prints I sent? I hope to do about twenty or so grotesques, diaboleries, arabesques, etc, forming, “Capriccio” & I hope the prints will turn you on to write an equally grotesque, diabolic, capricious poem to each. I intend a very small edition (25 copies) & we can sort out emoluments; I see the possibility, a year or two later, of a popular edition of “Capriccio” or embedded into another book of yr poems. I am very keen to make “Capriccio” a very great book & have been very busy on a woodcut of a beaked demon & have many other notions and ideas. I hope all of this exhilarates, invigorates and inspires you: please write!!<sup>16</sup>

Not only the name and the nature of the project (at this stage) suggest it was a revival of the earlier project. In the letter to Jennifer Habel cited earlier, Hughes writes,

*Caprichos* had a staggered history. He [Leonard] had a bunch of miscellaneous drawings. I wrote a series of verses [...] I don’t know what happened to his drawings. I salvaged a few of the verses. But then the title resurrected, and without my having seen any, but, I think, one or two of the early designs, I decided to write an integrated group of pieces from my point of view seriously. As I sent them to him, he picked up my mood, I think, to some extent. Anyway, he ended making that most magnificent book of books which I expect you’ve seen.<sup>17</sup>

The decision to write an ‘integrated piece’ seems Hughes’s oblique way of signalling that he’d decided to make his relationship with Assia Wevill the subject of his poems. At least one of the engravings Baskin supplied Hughes in 1976 was included in the 1986 batch (the demon with a crow’s head protruding from its anus). In a letter of 22 November 1986, Baskin writes to Hughes.

Here are the three latest for “Capriccio”. Do you remember the drawing in the original group of that indecorous bird looking out at

<sup>16</sup> Leonard Baskin, Letter to Ted Hughes, 26 September 1984. Emory, MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

<sup>17</sup> Emory. MSS 644 box 54, folder 8.

the world, through his ass-hole, with his balls miraculously intact & visible?<sup>18</sup>

The engraving was included in the 1990 *Capriccio* as the accompaniment to ‘Possession’.

The account of the collaboration Hughes gives to Habel is a somewhat streamlined account of the actual nature of the project. In fact, Hughes was slow to respond to Baskin’s images and by mid-1989 he had become dissatisfied with the poems he had so far written and decided to redraft them in order to get deeper and more unflinchingly into his subject matter. This caused a delay to the production process and some frustration for Baskin. On 23 May 1989, he wrote to Hughes,

“Capriccio” will earn you some money, esp. if you could get the poems to me for printing [composition] resolution, well before I leave for Italy in very early July.<sup>19</sup>

On 9 July, after the ‘very early July’ deadline had passed, Baskin writes again:

Just the briefest of notes, upon our arrival in fantastic Florence. Before I left I sent the etched plates to Bobby Wakefield & the woodcuts to my printer in Hadley: work is thus going forward on ‘Capriccio’: Hosie tells me that you are reworking the poems??? I plan to visit London when you are not away or fishing, so we can meet & you can hand me the poems, please. Let me know exactly when in August will suit you.<sup>20</sup>

Hughes seems to have made good progress with his redrafting and in a letter to Baskin dated 21 October, he indicates that he sent the ‘revised and full text’ to Baskin sometime in early or mid-October.<sup>21</sup> In the same letter Hughes provides a sequential list of the twenty *Capriccio* poems which is entitled *Beleaguered by Complications*, presumably a reference to the chaos that beset Hughes and Wevill in the aftermath of Plath’s suicide and which prevented them from developing a stable relationship.<sup>22</sup> In the same letter, he refers to the book (as opposed to the sequence) as *Caprichos*.<sup>23</sup> ‘Caprichos’ is a Spanish word, the plural form of capricho — meaning ‘whims’ or ‘fancies’ — ‘caprices’. In that letter he also changes the title of the opening poem of the sequence, ‘Superstitions’, to ‘Capriccios’, an Anglicised pluralisation of the Italian capriccio which has the same meaning as the Spanish

<sup>18</sup> Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

<sup>19</sup> Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 14.

<sup>20</sup> Emory, MSS 644 box 1, folder 14.

<sup>21</sup> Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 5.

<sup>22</sup> The ‘chaos’ arose from the difficulties the pair found in establishing a sustainable ménage in the context of the scandal attached to their relationship, the hostility of Hughes’s family to Wevill and the balancing of each partner’s various responsibilities and careers. See Bate, *The Unauthorized Life*, pp. 219-248, 265-283.

<sup>23</sup> Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press d.17, f. 2.

word.<sup>24</sup> By late 1989/early 1990, the title of Hughes/Baskin book has definitively become (the Italian) *Capriccio*.

### **Wort oder kunst? The Significance of the Name**

The layers of allusion loaded into the word ‘capriccio’ carry great significance and orient the reader to an understanding of the book. The name might refer to an aspect of the character of Assia Wevill herself – a woman given to indulging her whims, horribly so in the manner of her death and that of her daughter.<sup>25</sup> The name might also allude to Hughes’s capricious decision to embark upon his ultimately disastrous affair with Wevill, ‘despite all marriages’ and to his decision – as a private man and public poet (in his role as Laureate) with a reputation for writing rather difficult ‘mythic’ poetry – to go against the grain and publish such an unprecedentedly personal sequence.<sup>26</sup> Both Ann Skea and Carol Bere point to the allusive importance of Baskin’s engraving on the half-title page, in which a crew-cut demonic figure emerges from a tomb.<sup>27</sup> Noting an etymology of capriccio that roots it in the Italian words for ‘head’ (capo) and ‘hedgehog’ (riccio), they each see a visual comment on the story of Hughes’s relationship with Wevill as one that will make the reader’s hair stand on end.<sup>28</sup> Speaking of standing on end, in a draft of an unpublished poem in the British Library, Hughes characterises Wevill’s overpowering sexual allure as, ‘the mystery that fevers imagination/And makes the prick stand up willy nilly’: a case of the big head (capo) being led by the little head (prick).<sup>29</sup> Another allusion to the lust that propelled Hughes into his relationship with Wevill is found in the etymological connection of ‘capra’ – the Italian word for ‘goat’ – with the word ‘capriccio’: Baskin’s engravings and drafts for the work

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Wevill gassed herself along with Shura, the daughter she had with Hughes, at her flat in Clapham, on 23 March 1969. Hughes subsequently had both cremated. See Yehuda Koren & Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: The Life & Tragic Death of Assia Wevill, Ted Hughes’ Doomed Love*. (London: Robson Books, 2006), pp. 201-202.

<sup>26</sup> Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> Ann Skea, ‘Poetry & Magic 3: *Capriccio*: The Path of the Sword’ (2007), <http://ann.skea.com/Capriccio1.htm>. [accessed, 19 July 2019]; Carol Bere, ‘Complicated with Old Ghosts’, in Joanny Moulin (ed.) *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 29-37.

<sup>28</sup> An alternative etymology for capo-riccio is ‘head’-curly’ – curly hair being seen as an indication of a capricious character. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/capriccio>, derived from Alberto Nocentini & Alessandro Parenti. *L’Etimologico – Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010) [accessed 20 July 2019].

<sup>29</sup> BL, Add Ms 889/1/17, f. 167.

contain several representations of goats and satyrs.<sup>30</sup> So, loaded into the title is the sense of *Capriccio* as a book that is a risky departure from the norm for the poet, in which he narrates a story in which overwhelming goatish lust for a beautiful but capricious woman leads to irrationality, death and disaster.

We can gain further insights into the work by examining ‘capricci’ in the visual arts. In his book on the eighteenth-century Italian painter Giambattista Tiepolo, Michael Levey characterises artistic ‘capricci’ as works in which the free invention and imagination of the artist are given primacy, in contrast to the dutiful discipline that inevitably accompanies commissioned work. Initiatives of the artists themselves, ‘capricci’ were both entrepreneurial (designed to be sold on the open market to private buyers for profit) and ‘works of art’ in the modern sense – free, creative expressions of the genius of the artist – although ‘capricci’ became defined by conventions of their own. Tiepolo’s mid-eighteenth-century ‘capricci’ are typical of those of his precursors and successors in the genre in their presentation of bizarre scenes in which pensive and brooding figures are placed among the ‘ruins of antiquity in partly fantasy landscapes’.<sup>31</sup> Levey comments further that,

there is something elegiac about these landscapes, where a limitless space extends beyond the foreground figures and motifs. The mood is a lulling one, half siesta and half magical, an afternoon mood where strange shapes are described and strange incidents occur.<sup>32</sup>

It is this tradition of the artistic caprice that at least initially informed Baskin’s understanding of the collaboration with Hughes, and he expresses a kind a gleeful anticipation about working on a project in which they can both allow their dark and savage imaginations to run free in creating ‘grotesques’ and ‘diableries’.<sup>33</sup> Although the general tradition of the artistic caprice certainly informs *Capriccio* – the elegiac mood, the sense of foreboding, the occult undertones, the sense of life amid the ruins – it is Francisco Goya’s 1799 book of etchings, *Los Caprichos*, that is the most direct artistic influence on the work. We know that both Hughes and Baskin held Goya in the highest esteem, Hughes once telling his fishing friend Ehor Boyanowsky that he regarded Goya as one of the three greatest visual artists of all time and Baskin including a fulsome paean to him in his *Iconologia* that describes

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<sup>30</sup> Although only ‘Opus 131’ is accompanied by representations of satyrs in the final version of *Capriccio*, the ‘Making Copy’ of the book in the Bodleian Library includes plans for satyrs and goats to accompany ‘Flame’ and ‘The Pit and the Stones’, MS Gehenna Press b.10.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Levey, *Giambattista Tiepolo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 99-102.

<sup>32</sup> Levey, *Giambattista Tiepolo*, p. 102.

<sup>33</sup> Baskin, 28 September 1986, Emory MSS 644 box 1, folder 13.

him as ‘alone in the space he inhabits [as] the primal artist of this age’.<sup>34</sup> Like Hughes, Goya discharged a role as a royal functionary, being appointed Court Painter to Charles IV in the late 1780s. However, in 1792 he seems to have experienced a personal and political crisis from which he emerged a changed man, described by the critic Philip Hofer as, ‘bitter at times, secretive, far less exuberant’.<sup>35</sup> *Los Caprichos* was a product of this new Goya, elevating the tradition of the ‘capricci’ to a new level, using images drawn from witchcraft and the occult to bitterly satirise the corruption and irrationality of Spanish society. Sexual exploitation is a major theme of the work and Goya’s infatuated relationship with the aristocratic society beauty Maria Teresa Cayetana, the Duchess of Alba, ‘a vain [...] woman’, ‘ruled by her whims and caprices’, who nevertheless possessed a ‘great beauty and pride of race that made an irresistible appeal to a man of Goya’s comparatively humble origin’, is alluded to in several of Goya’s etchings.<sup>36</sup>

There are many parallels between *Los Caprichos* and *Capriccio*: both are escapes by artists with official, state roles from public to private expression (in Hughes’s case, if not Baskin’s); both comprise artwork and text (each of Goya’s etchings has a caption aiding interpretation); sexual corruption is at the heart of both, as is a beautiful woman and her besotted artist lover; both exploit symbols and imagery from the occult. Furthermore, the caption of Goya’s ‘Capricho 43’ – ‘*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*’, (‘The sleep of reason produces monsters’), which is at once a comment on the destructive irrationality Goya saw as characterising Spanish society and an assertion of necessity of the artists to be receptive to irrationality in order to fully release their creative potential – informs both Hughes’s and Baskin’s retrospective understanding of Hughes’s relationship with Wevill and their shared understanding of the creative process.

Some scholars have looked to the term ‘capriccio’ as it is understood in music to illuminate Hughes’s and Baskin’s work.<sup>37</sup> In classical music a ‘capriccio’ is a lively and virtuosic musical composition, often humorous or light-hearted. As such, the form is clearly not useful in understanding the Baskin/Hughes *Capriccio*, a ‘heavy’ book that begins with occult foreboding and ends in death. However, there is an alternative musical allusion which seems to offer some illuminating parallels with the book that may aid our understanding of it, namely Richard Strauss’s 1942 opera, also called *Capriccio*. Strauss’s opera is an attempt to answer a question that had

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<sup>34</sup> Ehor Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods, Silver Ghosts: In the Wild with Ted Hughes* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010), p. 63; Leonard Baskin, *Iconologia* (London: Andre Deutsche, 1988), pp. 204-206.

<sup>35</sup> Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos*, ed. Philip Hofer (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Vyvyan Holland, *Goya: A Pictorial Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), pp. 74, 76.

<sup>37</sup> See Edward Hadley, *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 141.

long preoccupied him: what is the most important part of an opera, the score or the libretto? This was a question summarised in the German phrase ‘Wort oder Ton?’: ‘the words or the music?’ The theme is dramatized around the conceit of a composer (Flamand) and a poet (Olivier) competing for the hand of the Countess Madeleine, an aristocratic society beauty, patron of the arts and presiding muse of an artistic salon. Flamand presents the Countess with a sextet he has composed for her while Olivier presents her with a love poem (actually Ronsard’s ‘Continuation D’Amours’ XXVIII). The Countess tells both Flamand and Olivier that their offerings, while excellent, are – on their own – insufficient, reminding Olivier when he presents his poem, ‘that Flamand is also wooing her with his composition in the next room’, and ‘that poetry, much as she loves it, cannot say all that she seeks to hear revealed.’<sup>38</sup>

Strauss’s opera was initially a collaboration with the Jewish writer and librettist Stefan Zweig. Zweig had fled from Austria to England after the 1933 Anschluss and the initial planning was conducted by letter. The Gestapo intercepted Strauss’s replies to Zweig and the criticism of Nazi antisemitism he expressed in his letters incurred the wrath of Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels, who had previously appointed the ambitious and accommodating Strauss to the important public role of Director of the Reichsmusikammer. The libretto was finally written by Clemens Krauss and the opera was premiered in Munich in 1942, the same year Zweig committed suicide with his wife. Strauss regarded *Capriccio* as the culmination of his career’s work, his artistic last will and testament, declaring that anything after *Capriccio* would be simple ‘*handgelenksübungen*’ (‘wrist exercises’).<sup>39</sup> Despite this, *Capriccio* was, ‘no big piece for the broad public’ but a piece for connoisseurs able to appreciate the issue of ‘Wort oder Ton’ and who wished to experience the words of the libretto in balance with the music and spectacle of the opera, ideally in an intimate arena.<sup>40</sup>

As with the connection to Goya’s *Los Caprichos*, the parallels between Strauss’s opera and the Hughes/Baskin *Capriccio* are clear. Both works represent unexpected changes of content and style by important artists discharging public roles and a shift to a more personal vision; both works might be seen as the culmination of careers (interpreting Hughes’s *Capriccio* as the first fruits of the ‘confessional’ voice of the *Capriccio-Birthday Letters-Howls and Whispers* trilogy, and the book itself as the high point of Hughes and Baskin’s fine press work); both have a beautiful cultured woman at the heart, with two artists competing for her

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<sup>38</sup> William Mann, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Study of the Operas* (London: Cassell, 1964), p. 374.

<sup>39</sup> Bryan Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 167.

<sup>40</sup> Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on the Life & Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 238.

favours (an echo of the David Wevill/Ted Hughes rivalry in the background of *Capriccio*); both were initially written and produced for a limited audience of cognoscenti. Furthermore, the Nazi context of Strauss's work and Zweig's flight from Germany and subsequent suicide is echoed in the Baskin/Hughes *Capriccio*'s characterisation of Assia Wevill as an émigré Jew who narrowly escaped being gassed and cremated in Hitler's death camps by fleeing Germany (with her family, in 1933) as a refugee, and who lived her subsequent life with a constant consciousness of her escape from the potential fate of 'the fire'. The horrible paradox of her ultimate fate – she gassed herself and Hughes had her cremated – haunted Hughes and is repeatedly alluded to or evoked in the *Capriccio* poems, including 'The Locket' (CP 783-4), 'Descent' (787), 'Folktale' (788), 'Snow' (789), 'Smell of Burning (792-3), 'Shibboleth' (794-5), 'The Roof' (795), 'The Error' (795-6), 'Opus 131' (796) and 'Familiar' (797-8).<sup>41</sup>

However, the most significant parallel with Strauss's *Capriccio* is the way in which the nature of Hughes's and Baskin's collaboration echoes Strauss's theme of 'Wort oder Ton', although in their case the question becomes 'Wort oder Kunst': 'the poems or the artwork?' Earlier, I described the symbiotic, dialectical nature of Hughes and Baskin's collaboration on *Capriccio*, and in this respect Baskin's artwork and Hughes's poetry form a unity similar to that of the words and music in an opera, creating and exploiting, in Hughes's words, a 'curious counterpoint'. As I have argued earlier, as well as inspiring and shaping Hughes's poems, Baskin's work responds to, augments and develops their content, sometimes critiquing and satirising the conduct of the protagonists or the assertions of the speaker. As we will now see, in so doing, Baskin's engravings provide the basis for an enriched interpretation of the book that is simply not available via the text-only versions in the *Collected Poems*.

### **Text and Image in *Capriccio***

The interpretive connection between text and image is clear, for example, in the engraving that accompanies 'Folktale' (CP 788; the pages of the Gehenna Press *Capriccio* are not numbered), a poem which describes the mutual 'ransacking' of each other which Hughes and Wevill conducted in the first flush of their infatuation, and which is accompanied by an image of a grotesque vegetable skull and some thistles.

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<sup>41</sup> 'Ashes', an unpublished poem in the Ted Hughes archive at the British Library, overtly characterises Wevill in this way, BL, Add MS 88918/1/17, f. 230.



'Folktale'

On the back of a draft of this etching in the archive of the Gehenna Press at the Bodleian Library, Baskin has written in pencil, 'die todt und die distel': 'the dead and the thistle'.<sup>42</sup> The etching thus can be seen to satirise Hughes's infatuation with Wevill as described in the poem through an allusion to the Dutch proverb, 'Give oats to an ass and he'll run after thistles', characterising Hughes as an ass and Wevill as the pernicious weed of the Parable of the Sower.<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, the skull would seem to represent the multiple deaths that flowed from Hughes's asinine behaviour in abandoning his wife, home, children and creative partner for 'such a woman'.<sup>44</sup>

Baskin's engraving illustrating 'Descent' (*CP* 787) is of a plump, crow-like raptor draped in a feathery blue cloak. The way in which the cloak is drawn suggests that the plumpness of the bird is due to multiple layers of clothing beneath the cloak.

<sup>42</sup> Bodleian, MS Gehenna Press a.7, f. 175.

<sup>43</sup> Jon R. Stone, *The Routledge Book of World Proverbs* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> In a planning notebook in the British Library, Hughes asserts his belief that his relationship with Wevill 'destroyed 4 lives, & probably five, yes probably 7'. The five are probably Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill, Shura Hughes, Edith Hughes & Lonya Gutmann; see BL Add MS 88918/1/17, f. 66.





'Descent'

In *Baskin: Sculptures & Prints*, Baskin writes that in his work 'predacious creatures symbolise their human counterparts' and that distortion (especially enlargement) suggests evil, monstrosity, vanity and pride; crows represent many things, but are admirable in their will to survive and sometimes stand for outcasts, including Jews.<sup>45</sup> Thus the engraving functions as a symbolic representation of the multiple identities which the ambitious, cosmopolitan and polyglot Assia Wevill adopted during the course of her life after she and her family fled from Germany.<sup>46</sup> Primarily, however, the blue cloak alludes to the Dutch proverb, 'she puts the blue cloak on her husband', meaning, 'she blinds him to her adulteries', a proverb famously illustrated in the centre of the composition of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *Netherlandish Proverbs*.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Leonard Baskin, *Baskin: Sculptures, Drawings & Prints* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p.16.

<sup>46</sup> See Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>47</sup> Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *Netherlandish Proverbs*.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/proverbs/gAF5UoqBDV3dMg>. [Accessed 16th August, 2019].



*Netherlandish Proverbs*

The suggestion of multiple layers of feathers in Baskin's crow engraving may allude to the multiple times Wevill has draped the blue cloak on her partners, and thus the raptor/crow becomes a dual symbol of Wevill and of the many men she has cuckolded. Of course, Baskin's satire applies equally as well to Hughes.

In a final example, the engraving paired with 'Fanaticism' (CP 788-9) (a poem which includes a representation of Wevill's habitual assertion that she would kill herself after the age of forty, at which age she anticipated that her beauty and attractiveness to men would have declined to a point at which she intuited her life would no longer be worth living) is a close-up portrait of a grotesque woman making a curious hand gesture.



‘Fanaticism’

There is a trace of a scar on the woman’s right cheek which may characterise her as *La Celestina*, a figure from Spanish literary and folk tradition represented in several of Goya’s *Los Caprichos*.<sup>48</sup> *La Celestina* first appears in Spanish literature in Fernando de Rojas’s 1499 novel *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*.<sup>49</sup> She is a pimp-slashed former prostitute and brothel-keeper, a procuress, poisoner and witch, trafficking in sex. Alluding to *Los Caprichos* and its theme of ‘the sleep of reason produces monsters’, Baskin here exposes what he sees as the monstrous ugliness underlying Wevill’s beauty and her capricious exploitation of it, along with Hughes’s eagerness to be seduced by it. The hand gesture seems to represent a spider, a more conventional representation of which is part of the book’s colophon. Some female spiders devour their mates after mating, and Wevill’s serial marriages,

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<sup>48</sup> For example, in *Caprichos* [2] ‘They say yes and give their hand to the first comer’ and [15] ‘Pretty teachings’.

<sup>49</sup> See Fernando de Rojas, *Celestina*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

sexually predatory nature and many affairs led some to characterise her as a ‘man-eater’.<sup>50</sup>

However, there may well be another, more autobiographical significance underlying Baskin’s deployment of spider imagery. In a notebook held in the British Library in which Hughes seems to be listing memories of key events in his relationship with Wevill in preparation for writing the *Capriccio* poems, he refers to the occasion of the visit of Assia and her husband David to Court Green in May 1962 (when the flirtation that led to the affair apparently began) in the following way: ‘The country visit — the dream of the fish, the knowledge, *the spider* [my italics] the smile too welcoming, the wife’.<sup>51</sup> It is not clear to what event this arachnid reference refers, an elision in the archival record which highlights a stumbling block in fully explicating the nature of the Hughes/Baskin *Capriccio* collaboration. Although it seems certain that the poet and the artist discussed the subject matter of *Capriccio*, and at least some of the biographical incidents that underpin the poems, any record of this is absent from their correspondence in the three major archives at the Bodleian Library, the British Library and at Emory University. It may be that these discussions were conducted orally, or that the relevant documentary material was weeded from archival material before deposit. However, one thing seems sure: in deploying the spider, the Yeshiva-educated Baskin was alluding to the following passage from the *Babylonian Talmud*:

[Rabbi] Assi stated, the Evil Inclination is at first like the thread of a spider, but ultimately becomes like cart ropes, as it is said, Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart-rope.<sup>52</sup>

In ‘Folktale’ Hughes writes that one of the things he wanted to find in Wevill was, ‘the thread-end of himself’ (*CP* 788). Pulling on that thread led to an appalling denouement, and by his cryptic allusion to Rabbi Assi’s teaching, Baskin provides a commentary that passes a proverbial judgement on both Hughes and Wevill from the Jewish tradition that both he and Assia were inheritors of, in the words of the latter’s virtual namesake.

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<sup>50</sup> For example, in his autobiography Al Alvarez characterises Assia as a woman ‘who made a pass at every man she met so automatically that it was hard to feel flattered’. *Where Did it All Go Right* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 100.

<sup>51</sup> ADD MS, 88918/1/17, f. 63.

<sup>52</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*. Mas. Sukkah 52a: 11-13.

<https://juchre.org/talmud/sukkah/sukkah3.htm#52a>, (accessed 16 July 2018).

## Combining the Mythic and Elegiac Modes

*Capriccio* is an important work in the context of Hughes's oeuvre for four main reasons. Firstly, it represents the high point of his work with Leonard Baskin – *Capriccio* is their most opulent and fully-realised fine book, a genuinely collaborative piece in which 'Kunst' is as important as 'Wort' and in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Secondly, with a focus on the 'Wort', it is the first of Hughes's published works that sustainedly and explicitly addresses his relationship with one of the women he loved and over whose death he felt such devastating grief and guilt, opening up the final great movement of his poetic career. Without the confidence Hughes gained from writing and publishing *Capriccio*, *Birthday Letters* may not have reached the form it did, or even have been published in Hughes's lifetime. Thirdly, archivally-informed close readings of some of the poems in *Capriccio* are able to provide the basis for intertextual readings of other poems in Hughes's oeuvre, revealing patterns of imagery and allusion that suggest very strongly that Hughes wrote about his relationship with Assia Wevill more frequently than has hitherto been understood.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, a critical turn towards *Capriccio* allows us to consider the problematic terms 'mythic' and 'elegiac' which have, in recent years, gained currency in Hughes studies as lenses through which to identify what are increasingly being seen as the two dominant modes in his poetry, and which I have reluctantly used as a convenient shorthand in this article. 'Mythic' tends to be the term used to describe Hughes's externally focused work, in which he is concerned to explore ideas or themes, or to assert an intellectual position, particularly when he transforms his subject matter by using symbols, metaphors and imagery drawn from myth, folklore, religion, philosophy, theology or Jungian psychology. The *Cave Birds* sequence, with its (imputedly) arcane alchemical preoccupations and schematic framework is often agreed to be the type-specimen of the mythic mode in Hughes's work, although more familiar and accessible works such as 'Pike', 'The Howling of Wolves' and, of course, *Crow*, can be seen as 'mythic' in these terms.<sup>54</sup> Hughes's 'elegiac' work is usually understood as constituting his more personal poetry, in which he writes intimately about people, places and landscapes he once

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<sup>53</sup> See Steve Ely, 'The Key of the Sycamore' in this issue of *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, pp. 42-64.

<sup>54</sup> The main argument of Jonathan Bate's *Ted Hughes; The Unauthorised Life* is structured around the mythic/elegiac binary, in which context he is particularly dismissive of *Cave Birds*, referring to it as 'provisional', 'fragmented' and 'doomed', using language which has 'all the agony and none of the ecstasy of the mythologised self' (323-4). In his review of Bate's book, Neil Roberts defends *Cave Birds* and points out the tendentious nature of Bate's animus towards the book, *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* 5.1 (2016), p. 76.

knew that have passed or are passing from his life — either physically, or because of temporal or experiential estrangement. *Birthday Letters* is of course the type-specimen for Hughes's elegiac mode, although many of his *Elmet* poems and a range of others, including 'On the Reservations', the poem he wrote about the decline of the South Yorkshire coalfield communities, can also be seen as 'elegiac'. However, these categories are critically problematic for the ways in which they can lead to a tendency to suggest that a binary is operative in Hughes's work and that any given poem is *either* mythic *or* elegiac. If this was the case, then *Capriccio* would inevitably be seen as an elegiac sequence — after all, it's a series of poems about Hughes's dead lover, the mother of his child and the woman whom he would refer to as his 'true wife'.<sup>55</sup> But to see the book simply as elegiac would be a mistake. Other elements also inform and underpin this exceedingly rich text and also need to be taken into account. Ann Skea (perhaps the only scholar to have *sustainedly* engaged with *Capriccio*) has outlined at length how the sequence draws extensively on the Cabala.<sup>56</sup> The sequence also draws on other mythological traditions, including Jewish folklore and mythology, Norse & Near-Eastern mythology, spiritualism and demonology, and literary sources including the Bible, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Turgenev's *First Love*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Hughes seizes on and transforms these elements to produce a highly subjective, teleological account of his relationship with Assia Wevill that is every bit as 'mythic' as *Crow* or *Cave Birds*. *Capriccio* combines both mythic and elegiac modes — perhaps, in the context of Hughes's work, paradigmatically so. It is this that makes the sequence—even stripped of the riches of Baskin's engravings—so compelling.

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<sup>55</sup> Ted Hughes, letter to Celia Chaikin, 14 April 1969, Emory MSS 1058 box 1, folder.2.

<sup>56</sup> Skea, 'Capriccio: The Way of the Sword'.

# Crow Zero: Leonard Baskin, Ted Hughes, and the Birth of a Legend

by Peter Fydler

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In Noel Chanan's 2009 short film *The Artist and The Poet*, which is essentially a conversation between Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin recorded in 1983, Ted Hughes clearly states that *Crow* is a 'story about a figure we assembled *together*'.<sup>1</sup> It will be the subject of this essay to try and substantiate this claim by looking at some of Leonard Baskin's very early Crow artworks, to reflect upon how these early iterations of Crow might influence our reading of the poems, and also to look at other (different) versions of this most perplexing of origination myths to see how they complement or contradict the claim made by Hughes in the film.

There are, of course, as many versions of the genesis of the character Crow as there are of the book, *Crow: From The Life & Songs of the Crow*, itself but I shall restrict myself to four which, to make matters more complicated, do not map directly onto the four versions of the origination myth. The four key versions of the book are: the 1970 UK edition; the 1971 US edition which included seven new poems (and was very similar to the expanded UK edition); the 1973 Faber limited edition, which included three more poems and 12 drawings by Baskin; and, finally, as the fiftieth anniversary of its publication looms, my totally fictitious "Definitive 50th Anniversary Box Set" which, to serve my argument, would have to include around 100 poems, the 12 Baskin Drawings and, crucially and prominently, three artworks that I will discuss later...<sup>2</sup>

I have called the four versions of the "Story of Crow" (here listed in ever-expanding timelines) "The Woman of Complete Pain" (which starts with the suicide of Sylvia Plath in 1963 and ends with the suicide of Assia Wevill and the death of Shura Wevill in 1969), "The Great Shamanic Initiation Dream" (which starts with the dismemberment of 'Crow Wakes' [CP 258] in 1965 and ends with the transcendence of 'Bride and Groom Lay Hidden for Three Days' [CP 437] in 1975), "The Angel of Death" (which begins with a Baskin Exhibition in London in May

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Chanan, *The Artist and the Poet* (DVD), Self Published, 1983. My emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> *Editorial Note*: In recent weeks Faber and Faber have announced a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Crow* is forthcoming with a foreword by Marina Warner.

1962 and ends with *The Story of Vasco* in 1974) and, finally, “The Upstanding Trickster Crow” (which starts with Baskin’s first Anthropomorphic Crow artworks in 1960 and ends, a full 15 years later, with ‘Death-Stone Crow of Carrion’ (AKA ‘The Knight’) from *Cave Birds* in 1975 (CP 428). Of these four stories I shall start with the penultimate version, “The Angel of Death”, because I think it is the most interesting for present day scholars of Hughes, it is referenced obliquely in Noel Chanan’s film, and it highlights the difficulties both Hughes and his readership had in being able to let go of this most perplexing project.

In the introduction to the catalogue for Leonard Baskin’s ‘Woodcuts and Wood-Engraving Exhibition’, which was held in Conduit Street in London between the 1st and 26th of May 1962, Ted Hughes critiques Baskin’s Crow engravings by stating that “[e]very feather of the Crow is there and perfect, and the Crow is dead, yet this bird ... is the immortal Angel of Life. In the aspect of the Angel of Death”.<sup>3</sup> This is the first time that we hear Ted Hughes talk about Crow in a way that clearly prefigures the complex of ideas behind the book and makes me think that the famous conversation in a coffee shop in Upper Brook Street, only a few hundred yards from the Gallery, which is referenced in a letter to Hughes as the beginning of his collaboration with Baskin on Crow, may well have happened at the same time.<sup>4</sup> In fact, according to a letter Sylvia Plath wrote to her mother dated Monday 16th April 1962 (LSP II, 758), Ted Hughes met Leonard Baskin to discuss the exhibition in London the same day, so this may have been the exact date of the “Genesis of Crow”.

The Angel of Death, of course, takes many forms (angels are common in all Abrahamic religions and are not exclusively Judeo-Christian), but in this instance, which I will explain, it is undoubtedly the Destroying Angel of the Old Testament unleashed with impunity by Jehovah to kill the enemies of Israel. Baskin was well known for his obsession with Jewish myth (one of the stand-out engravings at the exhibition was called “The Strabismic Jew”) but also, in one of the many contradictory claims in our story, in the Noel Chanan film, Ted Hughes claims that Baskin wrote to him in 1965 with the outline of the Crow Character as a ‘grab bag of the whole underworld of Jewish mythology’. He then references the famous chapter in the Book of Isaiah in which, some 500 years before the birth of Christ, the Messiah is described, according to Hughes, as ‘this ugliest of men, this most despised of men, acquainted with sorrows’. He cites this as the inspiration for Crow; however, the passage actually reads ‘He was despised and forsaken of men, a man

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<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes, ‘Introduction’, *Leonard Baskin: Woodcuts and Engravings* (London: R.W.S. Galleries, 1962), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Baskin to Ted Hughes, 9 May 1968, See Tara Bergin, ‘Ted Hughes and the Literal’ PhD thesis, Newcastle University, 2013



of pain, and acquainted with grief' (*Isaiah* 53:3). It seems, as David Troupes has suggested, that Hughes may actually have had Friedrich Nietzsche's Ugliest of Men in mind here, rather than the Messiah, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* certainly reads like a prose version of *Crow* at times, especially in passages where he goes head-to-head with Christianity and most famously, with the help of the Ugliest of Men, murders God.<sup>5</sup>

Back to the Angel of Death, however; the year after the publication of the extended Faber & Faber limited edition of *Crow* in 1973 (and twelve years after the Baskin Exhibition) Oxford University Press published Ted Hughes's 'English Version' of George Schehadé's *The Story Of Vasco* which was used by Gordon Crosse as a Libretto for an opera of the same name.<sup>6</sup> In the 'Notes' at the beginning of the publication Crosse states that "about half the resulting text is pure Ted Hughes; noticeably blacker in both its lyricism and its humour than the original".<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it is the crows who get the darkest makeover; in the original story they constitute a fairly benign chorus; in Hughes's version they are accused at one point of having 'black hearts' and, one piece of dialogue which, in the original, reads 'Comme il est triste ton nom, soldat'? ['That's a sad name you've got, soldier'] becomes in Hughes's version: 'What a sad rainy name! September. Like the Angel of Death. Like a Crow!'.<sup>8</sup> The link between *Crow* and The Angel of Death from the Old Testament suggested by Baskin in 1962 and/or 1965 was therefore clearly still resonating nearly 10 years later. And looking at *Crow* as a visionary figure, quasi messiah, even as an Everyman, is something that is much easier to do in our contemporary age of plastic pollution and Chicken McNuggets; for *Crow* had a vision of the modern world's "excreta poisoning seas" (*CP* 226) and could, today, easily double as a bible-thumping spokesman for the eco movement.

"The Woman of Complete Pain", the second version of our story, is perhaps the most well known.<sup>9</sup> However, it is relevant here for what it is not; it is *not* an appropriated story of a "much older world", but a very personal contemporary tragedy which still weighs heavily on interpretations of *Crow* today. Leonard Scigaj,

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<sup>5</sup> David Troupes, *per. com.*

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Crosse and Ted Hughes, *The Story of Vasco: An Opera in Three Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). Interestingly, the full publication details on the title page include the information that the 'Music Department' of the OUP were based at 44 Conduit Street, London W1R 0DE, only nine doors down from the building that housed the Baskin exhibition 12 years earlier.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon Crosse, 'Notes', in Gordon Crosse and Ted Hughes, *The Story of Vasco: An Opera in Three Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. v.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Schehade, *Histoire de Vasco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 15; Georges Schehade, 'Vasco', in Robert Baldrick (ed.), *Theatre of War* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 16; Crosse and Hughes, *The Story of Vasco*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> There is no obvious Baskin artwork to illustrate this character but I always imagine something akin to Hughes's vision of the Shelagh-na-Gig as God's (or Gog's) Wife.

in his monumental 1986 monograph on Ted Hughes was the first to claim that the Crow project began three weeks after Sylvia Plath's death in 1963 when Baskin 'commissioned Hughes to write a poem entitled *Anatomy of a Crow* to be printed by Baskin and the Gehenna Press'.<sup>10</sup> In an earlier essay, Scigaj had given more detail, stating that Baskin had commissioned the 'modest poem' to rally him 'from despair to activity' and that Hughes had told him this in a letter from March 11th 1977.<sup>11</sup> This detailed biographical context clearly contradicts the testimony of Ted Hughes in *The Artist and The Poet*, but it renders the story no less compelling and, whether true or not, this supra textual background information is clearly unnecessary for readers to unearth the presence of a female force weighing heavily in the margins of the Crow project. Indeed Ekbert Faas, in his "Personal Pre-Preface" to *The Unaccommodated Universe* states that Hughes's 'interior saga', the thing that held his interest throughout the 1970s, was 'the story of a quester's descent to save his desecrated bride from the underworld through his self-sacrifice'.<sup>12</sup>

The tragedy of *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* is, of course, that the protagonist fails consistently to achieve this self-sacrifice. At times the book has the feel of a pantomime (appropriate to the black humour of the project) during which the reader is thinking, "She's behind you!" because the presence of the female figure, especially in poems like 'Dawn's Rose' and 'Crow's Undersong', is actually so very obvious. For example, in 'Crow's Undersong' we're told:

She brings a cloak of feathers an animal rainbow  
She brings her favourite furs and these are her speeches

She has come amorous it is all she has come for (CP 237)

The fact that these beautiful lines are unpunctuated almost suggests that Hughes is saying; "Here's the raw data; you fill in the blanks".

This inability of Crow to understand the solution to (or even be aware of) his problem prompted Nathalie Anderson to describe Crow as a 'feminist's nightmare'.<sup>13</sup> This gets to the heart of the problem with *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*: if the book is deeply personal then how much of the Crow

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<sup>10</sup> Like many writers on Hughes, Scigaj also restates that the project ended abruptly with the deaths of Shura and Assia Wevill in March 1969. See his *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), p. 157.

<sup>11</sup>L. M. Scigaj, 'Genetic Memory and the Three Traditions of "Crow".' *Perspectives in Contemporary Literature* 9 (1983): 83-91.

<sup>12</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Natalie Anderson, 'Ted Hughes and the Challenge of Gender', in Keith Sagar (ed.), *The Challenge of Ted Hughes* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), p. 101.

character is Hughes and/or how much of the Crow character is Hughes admitting he made mistakes (because he didn't listen)? In so much of what is written about Plath and Hughes it really comes down to what you want to believe. In one of the few books on the literary relationship of Sylvia Plath *and* Ted Hughes, Heather Clark's brilliant *The Grief of Influence*, Crow's inability to hear this female voice is cleverly interpreted as Hughes's attempt to reclaim language itself from Plath due to his 'anxiety of female influence'.<sup>14</sup>

The Woman of Complete Pain appears one last time in print on the liner notes to the 1973 LP of *Crow* where she is described as 'God's nameless hidden prisoner', clearly an allusion to Sycorax, Shakespeare's blue-eyed hag of *The Tempest* whose name in Greek, suggestively, means 'with crow'.<sup>15</sup> 1973 was, of course, a pivotal year for Hughes; he not only wrote his first Moortown poem when two Roe-deer 'happened into my dimension' ('Roe-deer', *CP* 513) two days after the tenth anniversary of Plath's death, but, if we are to believe the chronology of *Birthday Letters*, he was also "visited" by Plath when he had just reread her journals around the same time.<sup>16</sup>

The one piece of evidence that I have seen that does back up Leonard Scigaj's claim, and the notion that Baskin and Hughes discussed Crow specifically in 1962, but contradicts the evidence in the film, is a postcard sent by Ted Hughes to Leonard Baskin on the occasion of his 42nd Birthday on 15th August 1964, now in the British Library, which states 'The Book of Crow is in the Egg'.<sup>17</sup> (In the interests of full transparency I should point out that this is also the day that I was born.)<sup>18</sup>

Our penultimate version of this story, "The Great Shamanic Initiation Dream", is more of a literary whodunnit and therefore is not hampered by the inconsistencies imposed by middle-aged male memories. It begins in the pages of the CIA-funded *Encounter Magazine* in July 1965 with the poem 'X' (later renamed 'Crow Wakes', itself extracted from *Eat Crow*), which works as a cryptic overture to the Crow project and is packed with little hints and clues to the future. Most importantly it features a graphic dismemberment dream in which various body parts argue with each other and make ever more outlandish nightmare claims including And we were a stinking clot of ectoplasm that suffocated a nun ('Crow Wakes', *CP* 259)

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<sup>14</sup> Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 201-202.

<sup>15</sup> Ted Hughes, "Crow" read by Ted Hughes, Claddach Records, 1973.

<sup>16</sup> In the poem 'Visit' Hughes states "Ten years after your death I meet on a page of your journal ...' (*CP* 1048).

<sup>17</sup> BL Add. Ms.83684

<sup>18</sup> When I stumbled on this postcard at the British Library back in 2013 I actually got slightly spooked and started to look around me just in case it was a hoax and I was the subject of some corvid prank!

This story ends ten years later with ‘Bride and Groom Lay Hidden for Three Days’, first published in the back of Keith Sagar’s *The Art of Ted Hughes* in 1975 (having been premiered in May of that year at the Ilkley Literary Festival as part of *Cave Birds*, and later included in recordings and readings of *Crow*). In this version of the story, which is very similar to the classic Shamanic initiation dream from the Mircea Eliade book *Shamanism* that Hughes reviewed in August 1964 (when, as we saw, the ‘book of crow was in the egg’), the Crow story becomes a Shamanic ritual which starts with the dismemberment of the “ego-body” and ends with its reassembly and reintegration through grace and love to become the ‘servant of the spirit world’.<sup>19</sup>

These two poems are the foundation stones of a bridge that spans ten years of Crow poems as they start (with dismemberment) and finish (with re-integration) outside the published volumes, but book-end a far more developed sense of narrative completion by focusing on the Shaman rather than the Trickster, who is the undoubted hero of our final version of the story, “The Upstanding Trickster Crow”.

In Baskin’s own introduction to his *Sculpture Drawings Prints* in 1970 he states that he holds a ‘Cracked Mirror up to Man’ but in terms of his Crow artwork this perspective, in fact, first emerged (dramatically) in 1960 with the real hero of this essay: his pine statue ‘Standing Crow’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This phraseology comes from *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in a section in which Hughes is discussing Venus and Adonis as a version of the shamanic initiation dream (*SGCB* p, 87).

<sup>20</sup> Leonard Baskin, *Sculptures Drawings & Prints* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p. 15. Up to this date Baskin had created many crow engravings, but they were remarkable only in that they were not in the least bit anthropomorphic. They were just crows, albeit sometimes dead ones.



At nearly four foot high and made, remarkably, from a dozen wooden planks glued together, this staggeringly physical and imposing piece of art clearly pre-figures Baskin's famous cover drawing for the 1970 book of poems with the crucial difference that it lacks genitalia. (As David Lodge and others have pointed out, in the poems Crow 'is not portrayed as a sexual being at all' making the 1970 cover slightly misleading.)<sup>21</sup> Resembling in both its physical composition and artistic style something akin to a Native American totem, it does not take a huge leap of faith to see this beautiful, pompous, over bearing, over confident, creature as a close relative of the Winnebago Trickster.

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<sup>21</sup> David Lodge, 'Crow and the Cartoons', *Critical Quarterly* 13 (1971): 35); see also Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 42. The Crow who helps the recently bereaved father in Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, also bears a striking resemblance to Baskin's sexualised Crow (as opposed to Ted Hughes's Crow) with his 'football-sized testicle', Porter, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 7.

For me, this is the Crow of the forty-nine poems, from ‘Crow’s First Lesson’ to ‘The Truth Kills Everybody’, the Crow who is described as ‘a football, on two staggering bird-legs’ (‘Crow’s Account of St George’, *CP* 225) and who is, like the Trickster, completely indestructible, unchangeable, and impervious to experience. Just as there are forty-nine episodes in Paul Radin’s book *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956) so there are, in the definitive US edition of *Crow*, forty-nine episodes in which this huge character is our hero. He is Crow Tyrannosaurus, The Black Beast and, without a shadow of a doubt, Crowego.<sup>22</sup>

Jumping forward a year in real time but perhaps going backwards millennia in terms of style and execution, the next character in our corvid menagerie is a bronze relief from 1961 also called ‘Standing Crow’ (although this time, of course, “standing” is a verb rather than an adjective):



A tenth of the size, but no less powerful, this version of Crow was scraped out of clay in the most primitive of methods and, for me, clearly represents the birth of the Crow character as a part-human creature, the anthropomorphisation of Crow. He is the Crow of the first seven poems in the UK edition from ‘Two Legends’ to ‘A Childish Prank’; he is a “black doorway” (‘The Door’ *CP*, 220), “packed in furnace” (‘Two Legends’, *CP* 217), “trembling featherless elbows in the nest’s filth” (‘Lineage’, *CP* 218).

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<sup>22</sup> There are also forty-nine stages in the journey from death to rebirth in the *Bardo Thodol*. See C.G. Jung, ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Psychological Commentary’ in W.Y. Evans-Wentz (ed.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. xxxv.

I encountered this image on-line many years ago because it was, and still is, for sale at Rich Michelson's wonderful Baskin Gallery in Northampton at a bargain price of \$6000.<sup>23</sup> At the time it was undated but after many hours of pondering about what looks like a mysterious hieroglyph at the top of the relief Rich and I suddenly realised that it was actually just *LB 1961* backwards; this obviously happened because the original was scraped out of clay and the copy, made of Bronze, is a mirror image.

Finally, the Crow who emerges after the destruction of the bombastic Trickster Crow in 'Truth Kills Everybody' (the last of the forty-nine episodes which famously ends with an almighty BANG!) but is '*only just born*' ('Crow and Stone', *CP 253*) is the slightly surreal 'Predatory Crow' (1960):



Here we have a much more modern work of art (taking us forward in terms of style if not in date of composition) which is just as imposing as the pine statue at forty inches high and bears a remarkable resemblance to the drawing Baskin did ten

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.rmichelson.com/artists/leonard-baskin/relief-sculpture/standingcrow/> [accessed 28/04/2020].

years later to accompany ‘King of Carrion’ the last, and least Crow-like, image in the 1973 Faber limited edition.<sup>24</sup>

This is the Crow of the last nine or ten (depending on the edition) poems of *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* in which the character himself, after being reborn in ‘Crow and Stone’, only appears fleetingly in ‘Glimpse’. Neil Roberts has pointed out that ‘there is disagreement about whether Trickster is a static or developing figure’, but the very fact that he is almost totally absent from the last series of poems, which have a more reconciliatory, almost humble, tone suggests that we have a Crow who is at least now *trying* to commune with nature.<sup>25</sup>

Crucially, ‘Predatory Crow’ has no entrails and is almost translucent. A vital ingredient of the Trickster crow is his unstoppable appetite, which we can now assume has gone and, of course, the word crow itself, in the expression “eat crow”, means innards or leftovers, which have now disappeared, emasculating our hero. The Christ-like pose of both ‘Predatory Crow’ and ‘King of Carrion’ speak for themselves. And the fact that it’s a predatory Crow suggests to me an evolutionary leap as crows are, of course, carrion eaters.

I really don’t think I’m reading too much into this to also point out that this has the appearance of a *watercolour* and, for me, embodies the crow who emerges blissfully from the river having successfully answered the hag’s seventh question which transforms her into a “beautiful maiden” in the final 1997 audio version of *Crow*.<sup>26</sup>

As with all other versions of our story, however, there is an epilogue. One of the last Crow drawings that Baskin did for Hughes was entitled ‘Death-Stone Crow of Carrion’ for which the accompanying poem (‘The Knight’) is, according to Hughes’s commentary, one in which “he dedicates himself to whatever shall be required of him”<sup>27</sup>. This Crow – now pictured as a skeleton, humbled and at peace in death – is as far removed from the egocentric bombast of ‘Standing Crow’ from 15 years earlier as it is possible to imagine: ‘His sacrifice is perfect’ (CP 426). Depending on your perspective Crow has either devolved back to his distant cousin of 15 years earlier or has finally reached the very end of his journey.

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<sup>24</sup> Ted Hughes, “Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow” with twelve drawings by Leonard Baskin (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry*, (London: Longman, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ted Hughes, *Crow* (London: Faber/Penguin Audiobooks, 1997) According to Keith Sagar, in this recording “Hughes... gives a fuller account of the origin of Crow than anywhere else”... including his “marriage with his former victim”, see “Ted Hughes: A Bibliographical Supplement 1996-2013”, (<http://www.keithsagar.co.uk/Downloads/Hughes/Supplement.pdf>) [accessed 27/04/2020].

<sup>27</sup> Ted Hughes, *Poet & Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes & Keith Sagar*, ed. Keith Sagar (London: The British Library, 2012), p. 294.



Ekbert Faas, in his introduction to *The Unaccommodated Universe* predicted that *Crow*, like *The Waste Land*, ‘is bound to send critics on a wild goose chase after Crows and the Holy Grail!’.<sup>28</sup> Well, in a warehouse in Boston nearly four years ago (on what would have been Sylvia Plath’s 84<sup>th</sup> birthday) I found both; a ‘Standing Crow’ which, for me, represented the Holy Grail, especially when reunited with his two corvid contemporaries. Whether they represent a wild goose chase is up to you. However, I think they reinforce, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the statement that *Crow* was ‘assembled together’ by Leonard Baskin and Ted Hughes and establish that *Crow* was not one character or style but many. *Crow* was not, as Anne Sexton apparently stated, simply all *persona*, but all *personae*, and the three that are at the beating heart of this epic adventure were created by the visionary artist Leonard Baskin between 1960 and 1961, at least a year before Ted Hughes began to even *think* about his era-defining *Crow* poems.<sup>29</sup>

As usual though, there’s a further epilogue, this time from the introduction to the *Crow* audiobook from 1997 (possibly Ted Hughes’s last word on *Crow*) where he states: ‘Nobody was quite sure how *Crow* was born. Different stories were told.’

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<sup>28</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> On Sexton’s response to *Crow* see Bergin, ‘Ted Hughes and the Literal’.

# The Key of the Sycamore

by Steve Ely

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In the summer of 2017, in my role as the Director of the newly-established Ted Hughes Network at the University of Huddersfield, I was working on two projects that led to me develop an interest in Ted Hughes's poetry about Assia Wevill, the woman for whom Hughes left Sylvia Plath in the autumn of 1962, and who would remain his partner until 23 March 1969, the day of her death. The first project involved developing a range of public engagement activities - workshops, talks, the provision of discounted and free tickets to students and community groups - related to the Obra Theatre Company's staging of Hughes's long narrative poem *Gaudete* at the Lawrence Batley Theatre in Huddersfield.<sup>1</sup> The second was beginning of the Network's attempt to acquire a comprehensive collection of Hughes's small press and limited edition work for the University's archive at Heritage Quay. In preparing for these projects, I re-acquainted myself with *Gaudete*, encountered the Gehenna Press *Capriccio* for the first time, refreshed my knowledge of the relevant scholarly literature and conducted research in the Ted Hughes archives at the British Library and Emory University, and in the archive of the Gehenna Press at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.<sup>2</sup>

In the process I became aware of Wevill's role in the early development of the main narrative of *Gaudete* and of two poems in the 'Epilogue' that seemed to be about her (see below), but had not previously been recognised as such by scholarship.<sup>3</sup> In the *Capriccio* planning materials in the British Library, I encountered some fragmentary, journal-style entries that had affinities with and to some extent shared the distinctive imagery of the 'Epilogue' poems I had identified as being about Wevill. That imagery was also present in some of the *Capriccio*

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<sup>1</sup>The performances took place on 14 & 15 March 2017. The poem was adapted for the stage by Kate and Oliviero Papi.

<sup>2</sup>See Steve Ely, 'Prologue to *Capriccio*' in this issue of *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, pp. 12-15.

<sup>3</sup>A number of letters from Hughes to Wevill in the Ted Hughes Archive at Emory University indicate that the film script that became *Gaudete* was informed by Wevill's ideas, and that he consulted closely with her as he drafted. In a letter dated 3 January 1964 he refers to the work as 'our saga' and in another letter, sent on 5 January, he comments, 'What do you think, Assia, your ideas are so good and real, how shall we work all this up?', Ted Hughes, letters to Assia Wevill, Emory MSS 1058, Box 1, ff. 9, 11.

poems. Read intertextually with the poems, these fragments revealed a wholly unexpected biographical dimension of the Hughes/Wevill relationship: the previously unknown location where Hughes secretly disposed of the ashes of Assia and their daughter Shura in the autumn of 1969.<sup>4</sup> The disposal site is located in a landscape very closely associated with Hughes. It is also a landscape I know well, and by subsequently field-walking in the area, I was able to identify the precise site where the ashes were buried. The identification of the site enabled the combination of the three broad research methods outlined above – intertextual readings of Hughes’s poems, archival research, and research in ‘the living archive’ of a landscape closely associated with Hughes – to coalesce more certainly in a mutually informing triangulation that provides not only the methodological basis for the arguments and conclusions of this paper, but the means for the identification of further poems that allude to Wevill in Hughes’s wider oeuvre.<sup>5</sup>

### **Assia Wevill**

Assia Wevill was born in Germany in 1927, the daughter of Lonya Gutmann, a cultivated Jewish doctor of Russian descent and his wife Elisabetha, a nurse from a Lutheran background in Saxony.<sup>6</sup> In 1933, she became a refugee when her family fled from their home in Berlin to Tel Aviv in British Mandate Palestine after the Nuremburg Laws made it impossible for Dr Gutmann to practice, and the prospect of intensified Nazi persecution of Jews seemed imminent and inevitable. However, dissatisfied with the prospect of life – for themselves and their daughters (Wevill had a younger sister, Celia) – in a place they saw as a cultural backwater, the aspirational Gutmanns sent Wevill to the Anglophone Tabeetha private school near Tel Aviv, where they intended for her to learn the manners, accent and deportment of an upper class English lady, with the ultimate aim of giving her the wherewithal to find a well-to-do English husband and thus a passport back into cultured, metropolitan society, for herself and the whole family.

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<sup>4</sup>Although Alexandra Tatiana Elise ‘Shura’ Wevill took her mother’s married surname, Hughes is named as her father on her birth certificate, Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*. (London: William Collins, 2015), p. 240.

<sup>5</sup>The ‘living archive’ is a term developed by Gail Crowther & Peter K. Steinberg in the context of their researches into the work and life of Sylvia Plath. It refers to the landscapes, places, buildings and artefacts once associated with the subject of study, knowledge of which has the potential to inform research. See Gail Crowther & Peter K. Steinberg, *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath* (Stroud: Fonthill Media, 2017), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> The biographical summary given here draws on a range of sources, but predominantly Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Death of Assia Wevill, Ted Hughes’s Doomed Love* (London: Robson Books, 2006). Born Assia Gutmann, and successively taking the surnames of her three husbands (Steele, Lipsey and Wevill), I will refer to Assia as ‘Wevill’, her surname during the period of her relationship with Hughes.

By her mid-teens Wevill had become a strikingly beautiful young woman (as an adult she would be compared to Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor) and she attracted many suitors, including John Steele, a banker's son from Bromley, who had been posted to Palestine with the R.A.F. during World War Two. Steele first met Assia in 1943 when she was fifteen years-old and he was twenty-one. He was immediately smitten and began to court her. Elisabetha Gutmann saw in Steele a potential husband for her daughter and in 1946, when Steele was demobbed to the UK, she despatched her daughter to London so that she might re-contact him. Wevill did so, and in 1947 she and Steele were married. Wevill was dazzled and enthralled by London (even in the austerity of the immediate post-war period) and she threw herself into its social, artistic and cultural whirl, eager to meet new people, extend her range of experience and make the most of life. Wherever she went, her beauty drew male attention, causing Steele constant pangs of jealousy. In 1948, unable to make a satisfactory living in London, Steele was persuaded by his father to try his luck in Canada, and Wevill reluctantly accompanied him to Vancouver, then another cultural backwater, where she helped to make ends meet by working in a succession of unsatisfactory jobs - chambermaid, hat-check girl, fish gutter in a salmon cannery, typist and secretary.

By 1949 the differences in temperament and ambition between the staid, suburban and reserved husband and the vivacious, cosmopolitan and outgoing wife had resulted in the collapse of the marriage and Wevill conducted several affairs before marrying the bohemian young economist Richard Lipsey in 1952. The two moved to London in 1954 and lived in a loose commune in Bayswater with other intellectuals, during which period Wevill developed her literary, cultural and artistic interests, refined her self-presentation as an upper class English lady and calibrated what Hughes would refer to in his poem 'Dreamers' as her 'Kensington jeweller's elocution' (CP 1145). In 1956 Wevill fell in love with the young Canadian poet David Wevill and began a passionate affair with him that ultimately led to her second divorce. In 1959 she moved with David to Burma when he took up a post at the University of Mandalay. In Burma they married, and for a time Assia lived the life of a colonial *memsahib* and presided over a social circle that was something of an expatriate artistic salon. Returning to London with David in 1960, she worked as an advertising copywriter – a career she would work in, with some success, for the rest of her life – and once again took her place at the heart of a fashionable, bohemian and literary set where she developed a reputation as a great beauty, *bon vivant* and *femme fatale*.

It is generally asserted that Hughes first met Assia Wevill in the summer of 1961. He and his first wife Sylvia Plath were seeking to sublet their North London

flat preparatory to their imminent move to a new home at Court Green in the Devonshire village of North Tawton, and the Wevills arrived for a viewing. The narrative of this event is usually presented – for example, in Cohen and Negev’s biography of Wevill – as their first meeting.<sup>7</sup> However, a document in the *Capriccio* materials held at the British Library seems to refer to a prior meeting between the two. The document is a numbered list of Hughes’s early encounters with Wevill that seems to be placed in chronological order. It begins with Hughes recalling that he and she had exchanged ‘a glance in the office’ (possibly at Notley Advertising, where Assia worked for two periods, 1957-59 and 1960-61, alongside Edward Lucie-Smith, Peter Porter and Peter Redgrove, Hughes’s friends from ‘the Group’).<sup>8</sup> Hughes goes on to note that during the viewing of the flat, that glance led to, ‘gradually recognition’, and implies that it was this unstated frisson of attraction that led him to take the initiative in the ‘desperate manoeuvres’ Hughes and Plath subsequently undertook to ensure the flat was sublet to the Wevills, even though Hughes and Plath had already accepted a deposit cheque from another potential sub-lettee.<sup>9</sup>

These ‘manoeuvres’ suggest that a seed of attraction between Hughes and Wevill had begun to germinate as early as the summer of 1961, and indeed, point four in the list: ‘Sherry – the broken bed – the thick waist, relieved that there was an argument to defend his escape’, may indicate in its sequencing (placed before the visit to Court Green) that he and Wevill met for an assignation earlier than is usually asserted, before he and Plath moved to Devonshire.<sup>10</sup> Whether this is the case or not, the two couples became friends, and Hughes and Plath met socially with the Wevills ‘about half a dozen times’ during the following weeks.<sup>11</sup> After their move to Devonshire, the Hugheses extended to the Wevills an invitation to visit them at their new home. The Wevills arrived for a weekend on Friday 18 May 1962, and during the course of that visit, the attraction between Hughes & Assia developed further, over the summer becoming a passionate affair.<sup>12</sup> For several months Hughes moved between London and Devon, carrying on the affair more-or-less openly. His decisive break with Plath came on 11 October 1962, when, at Plath’s

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<sup>7</sup> Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>8</sup> BL, Add Ms, 88918/1/17, f. 163. ‘The Group’ was a regular meeting of poets, originally established at Cambridge by Philip Hobsbaum and Peter Redgrove, but which continued in London from the mid-1950s to the early 60s, (from 1959 under the convenorship of Edward Lucie-Smith). Hughes was an irregular attendee at meetings until late 1957, the year in which Assia and David Wevill also began to attend; see Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, pp. 65-68. I am not aware of any evidence that suggests that the Wevills and Hughes actually met at any meeting of the Group.

<sup>9</sup> BL, Add Ms, 88918/1/17, f. 163.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> See Bate, *The Unauthorized Life*, pp. 185-187.

insistence, he left the marital home for good.<sup>13</sup> He moved to London and continued his relationship with Wevill. In November of that year, Plath also moved to London and on 11 February 11 1963, in circumstances that are too well-known to repeat, gassed herself in the Fitzroy Road flat she was renting. Hughes and Assia continued their relationship after Plath's death, sometimes cohabiting and sometimes living apart.

On 3 March 3 1965, their daughter Shura was born and for a time it seemed that the couple might develop a sustainable ménage, first at Cashel in Ireland and latterly at Court Green. However, the hostility of Hughes's parents (and other members of his extended family) to Assia, combined with Hughes's (and sometimes Assia's) indecision, prevented them from settling down, and they began to live separately once more, although they still saw themselves as a couple and went house-hunting together even in the last week of Assia's life. By 1967 Assia was becoming increasingly conscious that her commitment to Hughes was greater than his to her. She was also aware that Brenda Hedden, a woman in her twenties with whom Hughes had become acquainted in Devonshire, had become a rival for his affections. On 23 March 1969, increasingly despairing of Hughes's commitment to her, conscious of her declining physical allure and dreading the prospect of the much reduced life she feared was her inevitable fate as an aging single mother, Assia gassed herself and Shura in their South London flat in a way calculated to both emulate and 'surpass' Plath's suicide (Plath did not murder her children when she took her own life, even though the late poem 'Edge' seems to indicate she had imagined the possibility). Assia's suicide-murder was an act at least partially intended to strike a horrible and despairing blow at Hughes, who she deeply resented, blaming him for the straits she felt herself in.<sup>14</sup>

### **Assia Wevill in the *Gaudete* 'Epilogue' Poems & *Capriccio***

During the 1970s and for most of the 1980s Wevill's role in the life of Hughes was almost totally ignored in critical, biographical and even journalistic writing about him. This was a consequence of a combination of the poet's private nature and his concerns for his reputation and the well-being of his family and children led him to discourage any reference to the marital and extra-marital scandals of the 1960s and the chaos and deaths that followed in their wakes. Accordingly, until the late 1980s, when more informed biographical works about Plath began to be published, the story of Wevill's relationship with Hughes was known only to a relatively small

<sup>13</sup> Sylvia Plath, Letter to Aurelia Schober Plath, Friday 12 October 1962 (*LSP2*, 855).

<sup>14</sup> In a will Assia wrote in 1968 she bequeathed to Ted Hughes, 'my no doubt welcome absence and my bitter contempt', Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 178.

circle of cognoscenti. However, as indicated earlier, Hughes had begun writing poems about Wevill as early as the 1970s, at least two of which he published in the 'Epilogue' to his 1977 collection *Gaudete*, although their gnomic opacity has caused many readers, even today, to overlook the possibility that they are about her. The Gehenna Press *Capriccio* also seemed to avoid any significant biographically focused critical scrutiny on its publication in 1990. Publicity materials for the book avoided mentioning Wevill, and the very limited print run was also prohibitively expensive (\$9,000 for a standard copy, \$14,000 for a special edition).<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, *Capriccio* concealed even as it revealed, just as the Wevill-focused 'Epilogue' poems had done previously.

The formal conceit of the *Gaudete* 'Epilogue' poems is that they are the utterance of the main character in the wider work, the Reverend Nicholas Lumb. However, it is easily seen that the Lumb of the 'Epilogue' poems is at least partly a persona for Hughes - a device that allows him to write personally and autobiographically without fully exposing himself to biographical scrutiny. Hughes's model for the 'Epilogue' poems was the South Indian *vacana* tradition he first encountered in A.J. Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva*.<sup>16</sup> *Vacanas* are poems which directly or indirectly address a deity - in the case of Ramanujan's translations, the god Siva. They adopt a simple, spontaneous manner and do not shrink from the expression of feeling and emotion. They are personal, open, and fundamentally devotional lyrics. Ann Skea characterised the form as,

A form of worship in which the devotee speaks directly and truthfully to the god as an ordinary man or woman might speak to a particularly demanding husband or wife, using natural, colloquial language to express their love and devotion, but also to vent their anger, puzzlement and despair.<sup>17</sup>

Hughes was particularly influenced by Ramanujan's versions of the twelfth-century saint-poet Basavanna. Basavanna addressed his *vacanas* to an avatar of Siva worshipped in the area around his natal Kudalasangama. He refers to this manifestation of Siva as the 'Lord of the Meeting Rivers' - the rivers in question being the Krishna and its tributary the Malaprabha, which joins the larger river near Kudalasangama. Basavanna regarded Siva as the embodiment of 'the Divine Creative Source' - with which, by his devotions, he sought to achieve mystic unity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the Gehenna press edition of *Capriccio* see, 'Prologue to *Capriccio*', p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> A.J. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes' *Vacanas*: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom', in Terry Gifford, Neil Roberts and Mark Wormald (eds.), *Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to Collected*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 82-95. My understanding of the relationship of the *Gaudete* 'Epilogue' poems to Ramanujan's translations is much indebted to Skea's research.

<sup>18</sup> Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*. pp. 62-63

For the muse-poet Hughes, Robert Graves's 'White Goddess', was the Divine Creative Source and adapting Basavanna's example, he addressed his *vacanas* to her in the form of the 'Lady of the Hill'.<sup>19</sup> Like Basavanna, Hughes chose a local topographical feature to personify the avatar to whom he would address his poems, and the hill in question is the one visible from his home in North Tawton and which he once pointed out to Marina Warner, informing her it had formerly been the site of a grove sacred to the goddess 'Nymet', which he understood to be an alternative name of the Celtic goddess Nematona, 'she of the sacred grove'.<sup>20</sup> In the *vacanas* selected for publication in the *Gaudete* 'Epilogue', explicit references to the 'Lady of the Hill' were edited out in the drafting and revision process, although several survive in the materials held in the Ted Hughes Archive at Emory University.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, at their most fundamental level, the poems of the 'Epilogue' are devotional poems to 'the goddess' in which the speaker assumes the role of the 'spiritual bridegroom of his Lady of the Hill' - that is, one who has submitted to and is in service of the goddess.<sup>22</sup>

Although Hughes's expression in the 'Epilogue' poems is wrapped up in this mythic concept, he saw the goddess as manifest in every woman, and every woman as partaking of the nature of the goddess. In the notebook in which he drafted his *vacanas*, he wrote, 'It has taken every living woman/To make a body for you to live in'.<sup>23</sup> Hughes confirmed the autobiographical basis of some of the 'Epilogue' poems in a letter to Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, indicating that 'I know well' is about his friend and former lover Susan Alliston, and various critics have noted that 'Once I said lightly' is about Sylvia Plath.<sup>24</sup> In 1998 Hughes told Ann Skea that 'Waving goodbye from your banked hospital bed' is about Edith Hughes, his mother.<sup>25</sup> Given that Hughes seems to have incorporated poems about his mother, Sylvia Plath and Susan Alliston into his address to the 'Lady of the Hill' in the 'Epilogue' poems, it seems reasonable to assume that he also included at least one poem about Wevill in the sequence, and the poem beginning 'The grass-blade is not without' (*CP* 367) now seems a blatant reference to the exchange of messages that, in June 1962, effectively began their affair, and to which he also alludes in the *Capriccio* poem 'Chlorophyll' (*CP* 799). Initiating the affair, Hughes visited Wevill at work and

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<sup>19</sup> Skea, 'Ted Hughes's *Vacanas*', p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> Marina Warner, unpublished after dinner talk at the Elmet Trust's Ted Hughes Anniversary Dinner, 17 August 2016.

<sup>21</sup> For example, 'O lady of the hill/Stop correcting the world to fit my wrongness/Correct me'. Ted Hughes, Notebook 17 fragment, before 1977. Emory MSS 644 box 57, folder 16, f. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Skea, 'Ted Hughes's *Vacanas*', p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Skea, 'Ted Hughes's *Vacanas*', pp. 92-93.

<sup>25</sup> Skea, 'Ted Hughes's *Vacanas*', p. 93.



finding her at lunch, left a message, 'I have come to see you, despite all marriages'.<sup>26</sup> Wevill responded by mailing him an envelope that contained a single blade of grass.<sup>27</sup>

In the 'Epilogue' poem, Hughes describes the grass-blade as being 'not without/The loyalty that was never beheld.' In this sentiment there may be an echo of Hughes's later characterisation of Wevill, in a letter to her sister Celia Chaikin, as his 'true wife and the best friend I ever had' (*LTH* 290), and perhaps a recognition of the faith in the future of their relationship she sought to maintain, increasingly against the odds, right up until her suicide. However, the primary and paradoxical 'loyalty' to which the poem refers is to the powerful *eros* that drew Hughes and Wevill together - the spontaneous, instinctual and carnal attraction that overwhelmed them and led them to embark on the affair regardless of the consequences. 'Dream of A', a rough, unpublished poem held at the British Library, is a paean to Wevill's beauty, her ability to provoke desire, and the lovemaking she and Hughes shared, which is variously described as an, 'inexplicable miracle of light and matter,' 'some masterpiece/Translated from the language of the extinct people,' 'the eternal thing,' the 'Song of Songs' and 'the offering of so much wild beauty [...] earth could not tolerate it'.<sup>28</sup> Although the affair began in betrayal, was characterised by turbulence and was the ultimate cause, as Hughes believed, of at least five deaths, in the paradoxical use of the term 'loyalty' Hughes affirms the relationship and the decision to begin the affair.<sup>29</sup>

For both Hughes and Wevill, disloyalty was to be found in self-betrayal: the denial of the promptings of the inner life and in the repression of carnality, instinct and feeling. True loyalty lies in honouring the wholeness of the self and giving expression to those things. 'The grass blade is not without' acknowledges that living naturally and spontaneously in this way brings risk as well as pleasure. The blackbird in the second stanza of the poem lives moment-by-moment on the edge of 'terror and exultation' and the price the 'badger' of stanza three pays for living its instinctual life is to have to fight to the death against the brutal diggers who ultimately kill with a spade. For Hughes there is something sacramental in this struggle for life on the threshold of death and he sees wild animals as 'warriors' of the goddess, enacting her grace by simply living in obedience to their natures, negotiating potentially lethal hazards as a routine and inevitable part of life. Hughes

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<sup>26</sup> Bate, *The Unauthorized Life*, p. 188.

<sup>27</sup> In her corrections of the typescript of Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband*, Olwyn Hughes states that Hughes and Wevill both independently confirmed to her the truth of the sometimes disputed 'grass blade' story. Emory MSS 980 Olwyn Hughes Papers, box 2, folder 20, f. 167.

<sup>28</sup> BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, ff. 167-168.

<sup>29</sup> For more on Hughes's belief see 'Prologue to *Capriccio*', pp. 12-30.

refuses to regret his affair with Wevill despite its consequences; that would be the ultimate disloyalty – to her memory, their relationship and the exhilarating vitality of the natural world as embodied in the goddess. Rather, he identifies his relationship with Wevill with the exemplary lives and deaths of the blackbird and badger, culminating in a note of extraordinary defiance: ‘Me too/Let me be one of your warriors’ (*CP* 367).

Another ‘Epilogue’ poem also seems to be about Wevill. ‘Looking for her form’ (*CP* 369-70) is a cryptic and opaque poem consistent with the method of ‘concealing while revealing’ which Hughes adopts in this sequence. However, intertextual readings of the poem alongside ‘Folktale’, ‘The Coat’, ‘The Error’ and ‘Chlorophyll’ (*CP* 788-9, 792, 795-6, 799) from *Capriccio*, and some related drafts and documents in the British Library, illuminate not only the meaning of ‘Looking for her form’, but provide the key that reveals the location where Hughes disposed of Wevill and Shura’s ashes. The poem opens by describing the speaker’s unsuccessful search for a woman:

Looking for her form  
I find only a fern.

Where she should be waiting in the flesh  
Stands a sycamore with weeping letters. (*CP* 369)

Alerted to Wevill’s possible presence in the ‘Epilogue’ poems, the reader might see in the words ‘form’ and ‘flesh’ a reference to the physical beauty that defined her and ‘fern’ as an alternative representation of the ‘grass-blade’ discussed above. The ‘weeping letters’ of the sycamore are a fluid and elegiac description of the autumnal fall of keys from the tree.<sup>30</sup> This may be a representation of grief, but may also allude to the ‘signed piece of paper’ Wevill found in her flat after her last meeting with Hughes and which he identifies in drafts of the *Capriccio* poem ‘Flame’ (*CP* 798-9) as the proximate cause of her suicide: the letter notifying her of the finalisation of her divorce from David Wevill.<sup>31</sup> In the fifth line of ‘Looking for her form’, the speaker moves from consideration of the woman to consideration of himself, asserting, ‘I have a memorial *too* [my italics]’, indicating that the place of ferns and sycamores in which the speaker looks for the woman is somehow also a ‘memorial’ (*CP* 370).

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<sup>30</sup> The winged fruits of the Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplanatus*) are known as ‘keys’. In autumn they spiral to earth, dispersing by drifting on the breeze.

<sup>31</sup> In the draft Hughes refers to the ‘signed piece of paper’ as ‘the last signature of divorce’ and a ‘sealed contract’, BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 142. In a draft of the *Capriccio* poem ‘Descent’ (*CP* 787) in the same folder, the signed piece of paper is referred to as a ‘solicitor’s envelope, a black flame that left you in flames’. BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 80.

The same lovely image of falling sycamore keys found in ‘Looking for her form’ recurs in ‘Chlorophyll’, the final poem of *Capriccio*.

She sent him a blade of grass, but no word.  
 Inside it  
 The witchy doll, soaked in Dior.  
 Inside it [...] (CP 799)

The poem is structured like a Russian matryoshka doll. It begins by rooting the deaths of Plath, Wevill and Shura in the fatal attraction symbolised by the grass-blade. ‘Inside’ the grass-blade is Wevill, the ‘witchy doll’; inside Wevill, is Plath’s ‘gravestone’; inside Plath’s gravestone are Wevill’s ‘ashes’; inside Wevill’s ashes is Shura’s ‘smile’; inside Shura’s smile are ‘the keys of a sycamore’, which in turn contain other keys, ‘falling ... falling and turning in air’. The sycamore is somehow a terminus, a symbol of the end of the lives of Assia and Shura and of the end of Hughes’s relationship with Assia. The phrase, ‘the keys of the sycamore’, is repeated three times in the final eight lines of this short poem. Hughes is too good a poet to step out of the concrete image, and the keys he describes remain the tumbling winged fruits of an actual autumnal sycamore tree. However, the curious and emphatically repeated line-breaks in the last eight lines have the effect of separating ‘keys’ from ‘sycamore’, stressing the discrete importance of both. Hughes seems to be signalling that the ‘key’ to something undefined is contained in the ‘sycamore’. Ann Skea asserts that the significance of the sycamore in ‘Chlorophyll’ is related to its status as the ‘tree of Osiris’ in Egyptian mythology, and thus the tumbling keys, which contain the germ of future life, symbolise Wevill’s passing into the immortality of the afterlife.<sup>32</sup> However, the related content of ‘Looking for her form’ and its reference to a ‘memorial’ enables the development of a supplementary hypothesis: that the sycamore is connected to the location of Wevill’s memorial, the place where Hughes disposed of her ashes (and those of Shura), and where her journey on this earth came to an end. It is at this point where archival material and knowledge of the landscape – ‘the living archive’ – can be deployed to identify the location of that ‘memorial’.

### **‘The Living Archive’: Lumb Bank**

In the summer of 1963, Hughes resolved to move to Yorkshire with Wevill, and put Court Green up for sale. A buyer was found, and he and Assia viewed a number of Yorkshire properties, including Lumb Bank, a substantial former mill owner’s home located in Colden Clough (also known as Colden Valley, or Lumb Valley) below

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<sup>32</sup> Ann Skea, *Capriccio: The Path of the Sword* (5): ‘Opus 131’, ‘Familiar’, ‘Flame’, ‘Chlorophyll’ (2007), <http://ann.skea.com/Capriccio5.htm>. Retrieved 29 January 2020.

Heptonstall, only a quarter-of-a-mile from ‘The Beacon’, the home of Hughes’s parents. The imposing stone-built house, bounded by substantial, high stone walls, is set on a steep, wooded slope looking down the valley towards Mytholm. A terrace overlooks two meadows before the slope drops even more precipitously down a wooded canyon to the Colden river. Wevill loved the house and its dramatic location and Hughes made an offer. This was not the first time Hughes had considered buying Lumb Bank, and it would not be the last. (He eventually acquired the property in May 1969, two months after Wevill’s death, and lived there with Brenda Hedden and their respective children in the autumn of 1969, before abandoning the Yorkshire experiment and returning to live at Court Green in December of that year.)<sup>33</sup>

The *Birthday Letters* poem ‘Stubbing Wharfe’ and associated archival materials indicate that, on their return from America in late 1959, Hughes tried to convince Plath that they ought to acquire Lumb Bank and make it their home:

[...] ‘These side valleys,’ I whispered,  
 ‘Are full of the most fantastic houses,  
 Elizabethan, marvellous, little kingdoms,  
 Going for next to nothing. For instance  
 Up there opposite – up that valley.’ (CP 1111-1113).

The Stubbing Wharf pub is located at the mouth of Colden Clough. Lumb Bank is a fifteen-minute walk up the Clough, and Hughes and Plath would almost certainly have walked past it on their journeys to and from the Beacon. An early draft of ‘Stubbing Wharfe’ was actually entitled ‘LB’ and in it Hughes writes how he suggested to Plath, that ‘we could live up there’, but Plath could not ‘get excited about that future’.<sup>34</sup> There is little doubt that Lumb Bank is the house Hughes describes in this poem.

Hughes’s intended 1963 purchase of the house collapsed on the day of completion due to problems with the sale of Court Green and a last minute increase in the price of Lumb Bank.<sup>35</sup> Hughes had already packed-up the Devon house and he and Wevill – sleeping in separate bedrooms, at the insistence of Hughes’s parents – and Hughes’s children had been staying at the Beacon for weeks in preparation for the move. Echoes of this period can be found in archival materials held in the British Library and at Emory. In the *Capriccio* planning notebook, Hughes seems to be listing fragments of memories that might serve as the basis for poems. On the second page he remembers ‘A’ at his parents’ home, being harangued by his Aunt Hilda in the presence of ‘her enemies’ – Hughes’s parents, who could

<sup>33</sup> Ted Hughes, undated (Aug/Sept 1989) letter to Leonard Scigaj. Emory MSS 644 box 53, folder 4.

<sup>34</sup> BL, Add Ms. 88918/1/7, f. 229.

<sup>35</sup> Bate, *The Unauthorized Life*, p. 224.

see Wevill only as the triply-married scarlet woman who had shamelessly seduced their son, caused the suicide of his wife, orphaned his children and brought scandal that risked his reputation and career.<sup>36</sup> This memory is succeeded by a second note recounting a memory of 'A' at Lumb Bank from the period, recounting the destabilising effect Wevill's glamour had on a local farmer as she and Hughes viewed the property, flustering him out of his usual register into pompously describing the house's impressive boundary stonework as a 'Noble wall!'.<sup>37</sup> The 'noble wall' motif is echoed in *Capriccio's* 'Folktale':

She wanted the silent heraldry  
Of the purple beech by the noble wall.  
He wanted the Cabala the ghetto demon  
With its polythene bag full of ashes. (*CP* 788)

In the planning notebook Hughes speculates about Wevill's feelings about Lumb Bank, summarising her ambivalence in the words 'longing' and 'horror' - her aspirational longing for the upwardly mobile arriviste's dream - the 'silent heraldry' of an English country house, balanced by her horror at the prospect of isolation from metropolitan life in the constant, hostile and suffocating presence of the close-knit Hughes family.<sup>38</sup> In a diary entry from this period Wevill characterised her stay at the Beacon as like being locked in a 'cage with six macaws wearing each other out with noises enough to occupy a whole street'.<sup>39</sup> However, it is telling that 'Folktale's' evocation of Wevill at Lumb Bank in 1963 is immediately followed by a reference to Wevill at Lumb Bank in 1969 - reduced to ashes in the polythene bag. Brenda Hedden confirmed to Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev that Hughes told her that he kept Assia and Shura's ashes in their bedroom at Lumb Bank, although she claims not to have been aware of the 'casket' as the bedroom was so cluttered with 'his things'.<sup>40</sup>

An unpublished poem in the *Capriccio* planning materials at the British Library puns on the similarity of the words 'ashes' and 'Assia' to identify Wevill with her fate and to exploit the horrible irony inherent in her life and the manner of her death - although she was able to escape Nazi Germany and thus death in the gas chambers and reduction to ashes in the death camp crematoria, she ultimately died by gas poisoning and was subsequently cremated. 'Ashes' begins in Hughes's bedroom at Lumb Bank, 'So there were your ashes, plump in the polythene bag,' in

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<sup>36</sup> BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 213.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Assia Wevill, Journal entry Monday 8 April 1963 to Monday 30 May 1963, Emory MSS 1058 Box 2/2, Emory.

<sup>40</sup> Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 220.

a 'freezer bag, in a little oaken casket', on 'a bookshelf, in my bedroom./So there were what Hitler was looking for/And I had found.' The poem goes on to give a summary of Wevill's life and a sense of her personality, referring, among other things, to her life in Canada, her second husband, 'Dickie' Lipsey and characterising her as someone who lived for 'love and laughter'. The poem moves to a culmination with the birth of Shura: 'Ashes had a child', but 'in the end they gathered her: your ashes/Infected her with ashes.' The final lines return to the image with which the poem began - 'Ashes [...] overtaken/By the end of the world. There in the plastic bag.'<sup>41</sup>

A complex of imagery including ashes, slopes, sycamores, paths, ferns, rocks, stones and walls recurs in several *Capriccio* and *Gaudete* 'Epilogue' poems, suggestive of a Lumb Bank setting. In 'The Coat' Hughes projects the ferocity of his passion for Wevill onto Assia herself by describing her as a tigress that gripped him 'by the broken small of the back' and forced him 'through the brambles', leaving him imprinted with her perfume like the 'Noon-stench of a discovered corpse.' This reference to death is immediately followed by,

[...] Nobody  
 Can deter what saunters  
 Up the ferny path between  
 The cool, well-ironed sheets, or what spoor  
 Smudges the signature of the contract. (*CP* 792)

The 'ferny path' between the sheets is, of course, an allusion to Ophelia's admonishment of her brother in *Hamlet*:

Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,  
 Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven;  
 Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,  
 Himself the *primrose path* [my italics] of dalliance treads,  
 And recks not his own rede.<sup>42</sup>

Although the allusion to Hughes and Wevill's own fatal 'dalliance' seems clear, a more direct source of the phrase is found in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. In the closing pages of the book, Orlando walks up a winding 'ferny path' to a hilltop on which stands the tree that inspired his/her book-length poem, *The Oak Tree*, a laureate-like pastoral vision of England, with the intention of burying the notebook that contained the work under the tree that inspired it.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, F. 230.

<sup>42</sup> *Hamlet*, 1:3, l. 47-51.

<sup>43</sup> *The Oak Tree* is a fictionalised representation of Vita-Sackville-West's book-length poem, *The Land*, a pastoral paean to an idealised England seen through the prism of her family estate. Sackville-West and Woolf were lovers and Woolf wrote *Orlando*, 'a phantasmagoria of Vita's life

The ‘ferny path’ is therefore a dual symbol of the fierce and reckless passion that possessed Hughes and Wevill and led them to embark upon their affair fully aware of the fact that this would almost certainly wreck their respective marriages (‘smudge[s] the signature of the contract’), and of the necessity for the muse-poet to nevertheless unhesitatingly embrace his passions for his life and poetry’s sake, echoing the sentiments of ‘The grass blade is not without’. More literally the ‘ferny path’ is also the steep, rocky and fern-infested path under the ‘noble wall’ at Lumb Bank that leads to the wood where Hughes buried Wevill and Shura’s ashes under a sycamore in the same way as Orlando intended to bury *The Oak Tree* under the hill-top oak. The *Capriccio* planning materials in the British Library include a note rhetorically addressed to the (deceased) Wevill, referring to their viewing and abortive purchase of Lumb Bank in 1963. Hughes writes:

You thought you would live in these rooms, looking over these fields - [illegible] in the [illegible] walk down that stony fery path under the sycamores behind this great wall - happiness for a while [illegible] in the [illegible] of it. You did not think you would lie under the sycamores, or be drunk by ferns – that just have a view of the terrace wall & the barn, as the only state forever - happy or unhappy. That only two people in the whole world would know where to look for you, or where to send their thoughts to you, however useless.<sup>44</sup>

The wood to which the note refers is about two hundred yards distant from Lumb Bank, visible from the terrace (looking down to the left, across a meadow, behind a low stone wall). Although the wood is mixed and contains beech and oak among other species (and a profusion of ferns) the edges of the wood and the path leading down to it are dominated by sycamores. The revelation that Wevill and Shura’s ashes are buried in the wood is confirmed by another archival note drawing on memories on Hughes and Wevill’s 1963 visits to Lumb Bank, in which Hughes speculates whether at that time Wevill could have divined,

[...] that her ashes would reside there, down there, down that path, in that wood, with Shura, who at that time, was not yet born. Yet no image. Only LB & the knowledge that she surveyed it all - as if it were hers.<sup>45</sup>

Drafts contained in the British Library reveal that the *Capriccio* poem ‘The Error’ was, throughout the drafting process, entitled ‘The Grey Cairn’.<sup>46</sup> The poem

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spread over three centuries’, for her. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, ed. Merry. M. Pawlowski, (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), p. vii.

<sup>44</sup> BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 166.

<sup>45</sup> BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 213.

<sup>46</sup> BL Add. MS 88918/1/17. ff. 85-86.

speculates about why Wevill did not simply leave Hughes ('why didn't you just fly?') when the chaos and controversies attendant on the suicide of Sylvia Plath engulfed her, before returning once more to the notion of Wevill as 'ashes', this time 'incinerating' herself in the 'shrine' of Plath's death. Echoing the unpublished 'Ashes', 'The Error' presents a fatalistic understanding of Assia's whole life as a process of, 'Waiting for your ashes/To be complete and cool' and ends with the line, 'Finally they made a small cairn' (CP 795-6). It seems likely that this line alludes to the final disposal of the ashes of Wevill and her daughter, when Hughes emptied them from their caskets, and buried them beneath a sycamore at the edge of the wood (from where there is a view of the 'terrace wall' and 'barn'), under an autumnal rain of tumbling sycamore keys.<sup>47</sup>

The echoes of *Orlando* in 'Folktale' and other resonances Woolf's novel has with aspects of Hughes's relationship with Wevill suggests the possibility that date of the interment was on (Saturday) the eleventh of October, the seventh anniversary of the day he finally left Sylvia Plath to begin his new life with Wevill, but also the date on which Orlando walked up the 'ferny path' to bury *The Oak Tree* and is reunited with her beloved husband Shelmardine.<sup>48</sup> Of course, earlier in the novel, as a man, Orlando falls deeply in love with Sasha, a beautiful, sophisticated and capricious Russian princess who is nevertheless destined to become unwieldy and lethargic 'at 40', the age at which Wevill intuited her looks would begin to fade and at which age she would 'end it' (she was actually 42 when she killed herself).<sup>49</sup> *Orlando* contains many other affinities with *Capriccio* and aspects of Hughes's relationship with Wevill, strongly suggesting that the book was at least at the back of his mind as he wrote. Passionate and scandalous love affairs between well-known literary figures provide the biographical background to both works, and Orlando is a poet who throughout his/her life considers the nature of poetry and the poetic vocation, throws him/herself into passionate love affairs, in those contexts considering questions such as, 'Which is the greater ecstasy, the man's or the woman's?' and expressing sentiments such as 'Life! A Lover!' and 'was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?'.<sup>50</sup> This is not the place to leap off into another article altogether, but the parallels with Hughes's own life, writings and artistic interests - particularly as expressed in his writings about Wevill - are immediately clear. Although *Orlando* is not listed as being among the works

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<sup>47</sup> Perhaps with another person - the 'they' in the final line of 'The Error' is ambiguous and the archival source quoted above (BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, f. 166), indicates that 'two' people know 'where to look for you'. The ambiguity leaves open the possibility that the 'small cairn' of ashes may have been marked by a 'small cairn' of rocks.

<sup>48</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 162.

<sup>49</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, pp. 6, 120, 160.



in Hughes's personal library (now held at Emory), there is no doubt that he had read the book or that he had once owned a copy. In her journals, Sylvia Plath writes, somewhat contemptuously, that in January of 1962 Hughes wanted to give a copy of *Orlando* to Nicola Tyrer, the precocious teenage daughter of the North Tawton bank manager, who Hughes was helping with her English Literature 'O' level studies. Plath saw the teenager as disingenuously coquettish and ingratiating and was suspicious of what she saw as Hughes's indulgence of her (*JSP* 632).

It seems that it was always Hughes's intention to bury the ashes, rather than scatter them. At the funeral lunch after Wevill and Shura's cremations, Hughes noticed an exquisite ring on the finger of the jeweller Pat Tormey. He impulsively asked Tormey to give it him, 'because it is more like her [Wevill] than anything I ever bought her', and outlined his intention to, 'bury it with her ashes'.<sup>51</sup> Tormey complied and Hughes presumably carried out his intention. Hughes's decision to bury rather than scatter the ashes may have been related to the feelings of guilt that plagued him about his decision to have Wevill and Shura cremated rather than buried. In her will, Wevill had instructed that her 'cadaver' should be buried in 'any rural churchyard' that would have her (as a potential suicide she anticipated that few Church of England vicars would be prepared to allow her interment in hallowed ground, hence her willingness to accept burial in 'any' churchyard).<sup>52</sup> It is unlikely that Hughes ever saw the will, or that he was aware of Wevill's wishes in this matter. This notwithstanding, his decision to cremate Wevill and their daughter subsequently troubled him enormously. In a letter to his brother Gerald dated 19 August 1969, he writes about the deaths of Assia and his mother (in May, 1969):

Assia's death completely shattered me for some time. Ma's death I seemed hardly able to respond to. The day of Assia and Shura's cremation was certainly the most horrible day of my life, and I shall never forgive myself for letting it happen, after everything else. Ma was going to be cremated too but Olwyn stopped that - I might well have let that happen too. People at funerals are so stunned anybody's suggestion is swallowed, everybody seems helpless.<sup>53</sup>

Hughes seems to account for his decision to cremate Wevill and Shura by alluding to a state of suggestible passivity that descended upon him in the shock of his grief; 'someone' suggested cremation and he went along with it, a process that was almost repeated with his mother. He clearly bitterly regretted the decision, but the regret did not stem from not following Wevill's wishes, but from a combination of other factors. Wevill's Jewishness was in many way more important to Hughes than it was

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<sup>51</sup> Letter from Ted Hughes to Patricia Tormey, Spring, 1969. Emory MSS 644, box 182, folder 49.

<sup>52</sup> Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 178.

<sup>53</sup> Ted Hughes to Gerald Hughes, Emory MSS 854, Gerald Hughes Papers, box 1.

to her and he would certainly have known that orthodox Judaism forbids cremation because the belief in the resurrection of the dead requires the revitalisation of the Ezekiel's 'dry bones'.<sup>54</sup> There is also a sense in which cremation, particularly if the following disposal of the ashes is not physically commemorated by a public memorial or ceremony, represents not only the erasure of the physical remains of the body, but also of the life - it is as though the dead person had never existed. This was particularly so in the case of Wevill, who at the time of her death had few close friends, whose few remaining family members lived thousands of miles away, and who was secretly interred in a private 'ceremony' to which neither friends or family were invited and which took place in a location that none of them would ever be aware of. She simply disappeared and was almost forgotten.<sup>55</sup> Given the scandal attached to Hughes's relationship with Wevill, and the attitudes of many of his family and former friends towards her - they blamed her for Plath's suicide and expressed the desire that she had never come into his life - it might have subsequently occurred to him that the decisions to cremate Wevill and to dispose of her remains in the way he did amounted to a form of acquiescence to the wishes of her 'enemies', effectively erasing any trace of her from his life, as well as from her own.

However, the main source of Hughes's sense of guilt was related to the role his decision to cremate Wevill played in the grotesque, domestic parody of the Nazi extermination process that ended her life and destroyed her body. A rough,

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<sup>54</sup> Ezekiel 37:1-14. Wevill was Jewish only on her Father, Lonya Gutmann's, side. In Germany, the secularised Gutmann considered himself a 'Russian in exile' and was 'devastated' to be classified as a 'Jew' by the Nuremberg Laws. The family's flight to Palestine was borne out of an attempt to escape Nazi persecution, and did not represent a commitment to Zionism or Judaism on Gutmann, or his wife's part. Although Wevill did not disavow her Jewishness, she was not practising, and it is not clear that any consciousness of her Jewishness played a *major* role in her day-to-day life or in the identity she created for herself in England, although she spoke Hebrew and was clearly marked by both family and personal experiences of antisemitism and by her time in Palestine. See Koren and Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, pp. 11, 185-186.

<sup>55</sup> Of course, Hughes did dedicate *Crow* (1970) to Wevill and their daughter. However, the dedication - 'In Memory of Assia and Shura' - seems to have generated little critical or popular curiosity and neither Assia or Shura were mentioned in the two most influential early monographs about Hughes's work, Keith Sagar's *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1975) and Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts's *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1981). Of course, Hughes may have discouraged any inquiries about, or references to, his dedicatees. The effacement of Assia and Shura in writing about Hughes is perhaps evidenced by the fact that when I first acquired a copy of *Crow* (in 1985), I found it impossible to identify the dedicatees by reviewing the then extant literature. It was only with the publication of Linda W. Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988) and subsequently Ann Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* (London: Viking, 1989) that the identities and roles of Assia and Shura in the life of Hughes become widely known. Although it is now established in scholarship that Assia's death marked the end of the *Crow* project, this view didn't really begin to develop until the publication of *LTH* in 2007 and Hughes's letter to Keith Sagar of 18 July 1998, in which he explains that Assia's death, combined with the death of his mother, 'knocked *Crow* off his perch' and that he wrote the last *Crow* poem 'a week before A's death'. *LTH* p. 719.

unfinished draft of a poem in the British Library seems to reimagine the day of Wevill and Shura's cremation. Although Hughes's handwriting is difficult to decipher, the self-flagellating sense of horror is palpable:

[...] Black black black  
 But it all went into the fire  
 Fire opened its doors  
 Fire hovered over its wealth took the coat – the skin – the flesh-  
the bone  
 Smoke mixed itself with bird's wings  
 [...] Rain fell with horrible faceless particles  
 Of ashes [...]
 Onto the London pavements snowed [...]  
 [...]
 It did I walked in it<sup>56</sup>

This appalling image of the bereaved and grieving Hughes walking away from the crematorium in a sooty rain partially comprised of the ashes of his lover and daughter shows why he described *this* day – not the day he became aware of their deaths, or the day of the death of Sylvia Plath – as the most horrible of his life. Having escaped the gas chambers and crematoria of the Third Reich by fleeing Germany in 1933, Assia's relationship with Hughes led to her death by gassing, and her incineration by his agency. The 'ashes' that 'snowed' on 'the London pavements' evoke not only the grim descriptions given by death camp survivors of the fall-out from the crematoria chimneys at Birkenau or Treblinka, but the *Capriccio* poem, 'Snow', an account of one of the last experiences Hughes and Wevill shared together (a walk down the cobbled main street of the Brontes' Haworth during a heavy snow shower on the evening of Thursday 20 March, only three days before Wevill's death).

In her journal, Wevill recalls how the previous evening she and Hughes had 'a terrible talk', in which he seems to have told her that they would never form a sustainable relationship because of the shadow cast by their roles in the death of Sylvia Plath – "It's Sylvia – it's because of her". Wevill's devastated response to this bombshell was, 'I can't answer that. No more than if it were a court-sentence. It says die, die soon. But execute yourself and your little self, efficiently.'<sup>57</sup> Reading her diaries after her death, Hughes must have realised that as they walked down the hill on that Thursday evening, Wevill had already resolved to kill herself and Shura, and his reimaging of the memory is shadowed with a prefiguration of her death and cremation. The effortlessly precise evocation of Wevill walking down the hill,

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<sup>56</sup> BL, Add. MS 88918/1/17, f. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Assia Wevill, *Journals of Assia Wevill*, entry for 20 March 1969. Emory MSS 1058, box 2.

with ‘snowflakes melting’ in the ‘sparkly black fox fur’ of her hat, gradually disappearing from his sight in the blizzard, is haunted by sustained imagery of dissolution, fire and burning that suggests both the Holocaust and Hughes’s experience of the cremation. Wevill’s walk down the hill is described as, ‘An unending/Walk down the cobbled hill into the oven/Of empty fire’. Under the thick flakes of settling snow, her ‘life is burning out in air’, between ‘char-black buildings [...] through Judaeen thorns’, with the flakes of snow clinging to her ‘charcoal crimped black ponyskin/Coat’. The poem closes with a mortuary image of total erasure - the snow ‘drawing its white sheet over everything/Closing the air’ behind her (CP 789-80). ‘Snow’ is the most moving of all the *Capriccio* poems, and one of Hughes’s most tender elegies.<sup>58</sup> Yet even this beautifully crafted and tender poem is infected with his horror at Assia and Shura’s fate, and his role in it.

### **Other Poems Alluding to Wevill**

The patternings of Lumb Bank-related imagery noted above also occur in other poems in Hughes’s oeuvre, some of which may now be presumptively regarded as incorporating allusions to Wevill. ‘Lumb Chimneys’ from *Remains of Elmet* describes the wider Colden Clough landscape, probably as seen from the terrace at Lumb Bank. The line ‘Brave dreams and their mortgaged walls are let rot in the rain’ stands primarily as a metonym for the historic futility of human effort in the valley. But it is difficult not to see references to Hughes’s abortive attempts to make a home at Lumb Bank with Wevill, Brenda Hedden and even Sylvia Plath in these lines. Similarly, the line, ‘Heirloom bones are dumped into wet holes’ alludes in general to the graveyards and cemeteries of the valley, but surely contains within it allusions to the interments of not only Assia and Shura, but of Plath, buried in Heptonstall cemetery only a short walk from Lumb Bank, alongside Hughes’s parents and members of his extended family. In the context of this landscape, the reference in this poem to a ‘baby burrowing into the breast’ in association with ‘the sycamore, cut through at the neck’, with ‘five or six heads, depraved with life’ is easily interpreted as a cryptic reference to both Shura and her many-married mother, whose lust for life was ultimately as futile as the endeavour of the mill owners who erected the chimneys that are the ostensible subject of the poem and whose fate is to ‘fall into the only future, into earth’, as both Assia and Shura have already done (CP 456-7).

The phallic chimneys of Colden Clough seem to have been the inspiration behind Hughes’s naming of the equally phallic protagonist of *Gaudete*, Nicholas

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<sup>58</sup> *Editorial Note*: ‘Snow’ was also one of the only *Capriccio* poems Hughes is known to have read in public, during his reading at the Hay Festival, 30 May 1996.

Lumb, and the three poem sequence ‘Astrological Conundrums’ (CP 747-749) has affinities in language, content and mood with that work, especially the second poem, ‘Nearly Awake’, with its visceral bull imagery.<sup>59</sup> However, it is the first poem of the sequence, ‘The Fool’s Evil Dream’ (CP 747-748), that contains the patternings of imagery that evoke Wevill via her association in Hughes’s mind with Lumb Bank and her ‘memorial’ in the wood there. The poem’s speaker recounts a dream in which he encounters a ‘glowing beast - a tigress’ in a landscape of trees, ferns and ‘rocks sticking through their moss jerseys’. As in ‘The Coat’, Wevill is often described as a tiger or associated with tiger imagery in Hughes’s work. This probably arises from Assia’s dressed-to-kill appearance during her 18 May 18 1962, visit to Court Green, elements of which are described in the *Birthday Letters* poem ‘Dreamers’ (CP 1145-6) - ‘flame-orange silks’, ‘soot-wet mascara’, ‘black Mongolian hair’ and ‘tiger-painted nails’. An unpublished poem in the British Library, ‘The Were Tiger’, is set during this visit, and characterises Wevill as a demonic, sexually-predatory tigress who calls to him as he weeds the bean rows.<sup>60</sup>

The bean/tiger imagery of this poem is echoed in the *Wodwo* poem ‘The Green Wolf’ - ‘Worst of all the beanflower/Badged with jet like the ear of the tiger’ (CP 159-160). Originally entitled ‘Dark Women’, ‘The Green Wolf’ is a highly cryptic poem – another example of the ‘concealing while revealing’ mode Hughes often adopted when writing about his personal life – concerning the advent of Wevill into his life and the rebirth that he anticipated would flow from it, contrasting this with what he saw as the deathly paralysis of his later years with Plath, articulated in the poem via the metaphor of the debilitating stroke suffered by his elderly neighbour, Percy Key.<sup>61</sup> In a letter to his sister Olwyn, explaining the origin of ‘Dark Women’, he writes, ‘It began as a poem about the old man, then it turned into a poem about Assia’.<sup>62</sup> In ‘The Fool’s Evil Dream’, Wevill is portrayed as a ‘glowing’ spirit tiger, still smelling of the nurturing earth her ashes have been dissipating into for so long - ‘flower smells, wet-root smells,/Fish-still-alive-from-their-weed-river-smells’ yet still possessing ‘eyes that hurt me with her beauty’. The Fool accepts the invitation of the tigress to ‘play’. He lies with her and becomes ‘folded/In the fur of a tiger’ as the two fly to the tigress’s ‘cave’, ‘an escape route from death/[...] into a timeless land’. The Fool then experiences a version of the shamanic call, as the tigress, now clearly a representative of the goddess, tells him the story of a ‘very holy man’ who

<sup>59</sup> The original ‘Astrological Conundrums’, published in *Wolfwatching*, contained only two poems, ‘The Fool’s Evil Dream’ and ‘Tell’. ‘Nearly Awake’ was added in the 1995 *New Selected Poems*.

<sup>60</sup> British Library, Add MS 88948/1/17, ff. 16-17.

<sup>61</sup> Sylvia Plath wrote about Percy Key’s stroke, recovery and funeral in two poems, ‘Among the Narcissi’ and ‘Berck-Plage’. *Collected Poems*, 190 & 196-21.

<sup>62</sup> BL, Add Ms 88918/1/17, ff. 16-17.

fed himself to a tigress ‘because hunger had dried up her milk’ and thus became ‘the never-dying god who gives everything/Which he had always wanted to be’. The Fool is invited to sacrifice himself in the service of the goddess in sentiments very similar to ‘The grass-blade is not without’: ‘Me too,/Let me be one of your warriors’ (*CP* 367).

The Fool is ‘dissolved’ into the ‘internal powers of tiger’ and becomes an unborn child, ‘swinging under her backbone’ until the cry of an infant, the sudden cry of his ‘fear’ – which is also the imagined death cry of Shura – breaks the reverie and the Fool wakes up, ‘Wet and alone/Among starry rocks’, the ‘bright spirit’ having left him, ‘weeping’. The Fool’s deep fear of becoming ‘the never-dying god who gives everything’ has led him to respond inadequately to the tigress’s call - he is unable to abandon his ego and offer the required total submission, trust and commitment, just as the Reverend Nicholas Lumb failed in *Gaudete* - and just as Ted Hughes believed he had failed in his relationship with Wevill, a failure described in this poem, which is difficult to read in any other way but as an allegorical account of Hughes’s relationship with her as the inadequate bridegroom to Wevill transfigured as a theriomorphic goddess. That the poem is about Wevill may be confirmed by the poem’s affinity with an unpublished and untitled poem in the *Capriccio* planning materials, which seems to anticipate Wevill’s death and interment in the wood below Lumb Bank from the perspective of the first night she and Hughes spent together, in a London hotel:

The Fool  
 Does not know what  
 Unthinkable dying  
 What stonewall funerals have to be got through  
 What alternative corpses have to get through  
 [...]  
 Unthinkable horrible dying  
 That body on the bed has to get through  
 [...]  
 What funerals have to repeat  
 And deepen the grave, putting the body  
 Back in & again back in deeper  
 To ashes and again back in  
 And still not shift from that hotel bed.  
 To drain that glass?’<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> BL, Add Ms, 88918/1/17, f. 53.

## Reflections & Memorials: Assia Wevill in the Poetry of Ted Hughes

The utility of this research is that the triangulation of methods that inform it – intertextual readings of relevant texts, combined with research in ‘traditional’ and ‘living’ archives – has enabled new and enriched interpretations of several of Hughes’s poems. The research has also revealed a hitherto unknown biographical dimension of Hughes’s life. These outcomes underline the importance of Assia Wevill to the work of Ted Hughes and, along with the tripartite method, provide the means for the identification of further poems that may allude to her within Hughes’s published oeuvre and in archival material. However, I anticipate that some might disapprove of my decision to reveal the site where Hughes disposed of Wevill and their daughter’s ashes, seeing it as an egregious or even ghoulish intrusion into their post-mortem privacy, a betrayal of Hughes’s apparent intention to keep the site secret, and a de-facto invitation to peanut-crunching literary tourists to trespass on the site of a ‘private’ memorial. The proximity of Sylvia Plath’s grave at nearby Heptonstall cemetery, with its steady stream of visitors – not all respectful – is a precedent that some might not want to see repeated in the woods below Lumb Bank. In response to these anticipated objections, it is important to note that the site where Hughes chose to scatter the ashes is emphatically *not* a private place. It lies adjacent to a public footpath in a place frequented by dog walkers, mountain bikers, creative writers, tourists and hikers. Children play across the site and families picnic close by. Further, when anyone makes the decision to inter the ashes or bodies of their loved ones in a place to which the public has access – whether that place be a graveyard, the grounds of a crematorium, a football pitch, a park, a woodland or any peaceful rural setting – they inevitably give up the right to exclusive privacy. In a graveyard, anyone may pay their respects or stand before a memorial of any other person at any time, and the same principle applies to less formal interments.

As we have seen, Wevill left instructions that her body should be buried in a rural graveyard.<sup>64</sup> Her desire was for a memorial in a tranquil and beautiful *public* place where she imagined that she and her daughter might be at peace together, and where friends, family and others might visit and pay their respects. The fact that Wevill specified in her will that her gravestone should carry the flamboyant,

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<sup>64</sup> In *Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and the Literary Imagination* (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 2019), p. 157, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick indicates that the U.K. website Find-a-Grave has listings for both Assia and Shura Wevill, which assert that their ashes are scattered in St. Mary the Virgin Church in Ashford, Kent. This identification is presumably based on Brenda Hedden’s report to Koren and Negev that Hughes told her that he intended to dispose of the ashes ‘over a churchyard in Kent’, subsequently ‘disappearing’ before sending her a postcard postmarked ‘Ashford’. Neither Hughes or Wevill had any connection to ‘Ashford’ and this anecdote can only be seen as disinformation – and a bad-taste joke at Hedden’s expense. See *A Lover of Unreason*, pp. 219-220.

knowing, gently self-deprecating and subtly accusatory epitaph, ‘Here lies a dreamer and a lover of unreason’, implies that she envisaged (or hoped) that not only friends and family would visit her grave, but a wider public.<sup>65</sup> It is difficult to see such self-definition as anything other than an attempt to frame the post-mortem reception of her life, perhaps knowing that she would be posthumously recognised as an important character in the biography of a famous poet, if not for her own achievements. The location of Assia and Shura’s memorial in the wood below Lumb Bank is certainly a beautiful and often tranquil place, but the location has only ever been known to two people: Ted Hughes and one, unknown other, and now at least one of those people is dead. Others, including family and friends, have never been able to pay their respects, or remember Assia and Shura at their final resting place. They will now be able to do so.

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<sup>65</sup> Koren & Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 178.



## Reviews

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***Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination***, by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 2019, xii + 218 pp., US\$45.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8071-7056-4

There is a remarkable scene in *Gaudete* titled ‘The scherzo’ in which a father’s dream of beautiful daughters has become a ‘reality [that]/Is beyond him. Unmanageable and frightening./Like leopard cubs suddenly full grown, come into their adult power and burdened with it’ (41). Burdened with it? Is this the male perception, or the daughter’s personal feeling? Before we know that the father is watching his daughter we have been introduced to twenty-two year old Jennifer at the opening of this passage playing Beethoven’s piano sonata Opus 109: ‘She is oppressed/By the fullness of her breasts, and the weight of flame in her face./She leans her trouble to the keyboard’ (41). So it is actually the male gaze of the writer that is evoking a female sense of the burden of beauty that he cannot possibly know. Some feminist readers would dismiss the legitimacy of such a gaze immediately. Yet Hughes has seen this ‘weight of flame’ in a female face and the writers’ job is to try to empathise into the experience of others, male and female, that is not their own.

It seems that Assia Wevill was burdened by her famous beauty, in particular the fear of its loss, telling her sister ‘I’ll kill myself at forty-two’ (143). Her insecurity and vulnerability are countered in Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick’s account by claims for her ‘important artistic and literary contributions in all their complexity’ (55). The complexity of her artistic contribution rests upon her writing the script for ‘Lost Island’, a 1965 ninety-second film advertisement for Sea Witch hair colour in which seven men attempt to steal the hair dye of three witches - ‘a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead’ (139) – only to die like the thousands before them, except for the one who escapes with a box to place on the counter of a pharmacy stating their price. It’s a mock epic that ‘mirrors symbolically Assia’s own situation. On one hand, she appears empowered; for a time, she thrived professionally and personally. On the other hand, she needed a man to feel fulfilled, and she has become the beautiful monster in the Plath-Hughes mythology’ (141). This study sees Assia as a victim of a patriarchal view of women which she has accepted as personally empowering, but becomes ultimately a tragic entrapment. She is a societally ‘disadvantaged’ woman

when she finally concludes that Hughes will ‘not commit to her romantically and set up a home with her and Shura’ which results in her suicide. Goodspeed-Chadwick’s stance on Assia’s decision to kill herself and Shura is breathtaking: ‘From my perspective, I view this shortcoming as a structural and gendered one, not a personal fault of Assia’ (137). It is hard to see how this particular feminist logic is supportive of female readers facing hard personal decisions when structural- and gender-induced suicide and murder are a fault-free option. Isn’t this the very ‘injurious language’ that creates the conditions for interpolating the actions of women (and men) ‘in deleterious ways’ that this book seeks to expose (62)?

Assia’s life, like that of any person, is deserving of thoughtful consideration in the context of the social and gendered pressures and assumptions surrounding their personal decision making. Of course, the reason why Assia Wevill is the subject of this study is because she became mutually obsessed with Ted Hughes and was therefore represented in the work of both Plath and Hughes, work which is discussed in great detail in separate chapters. The aim here is to complicate the stereotype of Assia as *femme fatale*, ‘selfish and excessive’, and ultimately the loser. This is certainly an impression to be derived from the poetry about her and it is true that, apart from her aura, her attraction, her charm, there is little positive in presentations of her in the poetry. But poets work from associations and it does the case for Assia little service to point out that technically she was not a Jew because her German mother was a Christian and the line is matrilineal. Her Jewish father took the family from Germany to Israel where Assia learned to read and write Hebrew, assimilating Jewish culture. This enabled her to make her second significant literary contribution by translating the Hebrew poetry of Yehuda Amichai. These translations are discussed in detail under the heading ‘Assia as Author’ as ‘Assia-Amichai poems’, although at present we cannot know how much of Hughes is in them. In a BBC Radio 3 broadcast of 12 December 1968 ‘Assia is credited with translating and introducing the poems in the typescript of the programme, and Hughes is credited with reading the poems [...] Assia likely wrote the portions of the typescript that she read on air, rendering her the poetry expert of the programme’ (124). Well, I hope that their collaboration was, indeed, as clear cut as that.

The third contribution claimed for Assia to the American and British literary imagination is as ‘muse’ for the poetry of Plath and Hughes. There are nine entries under this heading in the Index. It is difficult to follow the argument that is an achievement in itself since the very notion of muse is, quite rightly, associated with victimhood and negativity in the discussion of the poems themselves. This study intends to correct ‘how women are made to disappear or be subjected to abuse and

denigration under the guises of scholarship, teaching, entertainment and the arts more generally' (177). It is 'establishing Assia's significance in poetry and according her a more proper place in the American and British literary imaginations' (56). But the positive claim for the term 'muse' for Assia's contribution surely undermines these intentions.

Finally, *Reclaiming Assia Wevill* makes four omissions in telling the story of this complex and tragic tangle of relationships. First, the archive of unpublished poems, journal notes and drafts in the British Library have not been consulted, unlike those at Emory. The poem 'Last Letter' that 'surfaced' in 2010 had been available for years to scholars visiting the British Library. Second, the phrase 'he was the instigator of the affair' (96) omits the reports of Assia's hints to a friend and a colleague that she would seduce Ted Hughes (Feinstein 122; Bate 186). Third, 'Ted's promises went unfulfilled [...] a spacious home for Hughes, Assia, and the three children was not rented or purchased' (71) omits the intention in the spring of 1966 of moving permanently to Connemara. Indeed, Hughes tried to buy the house on which he had a six months lease, Doonreagan, but it was not for sale. You would not guess from her book that Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick had actually visited this house, although she does devote eight pages to critiquing Ann Henning Jocelyn's play *Doonreagan* for its 'scapegoating' of Assia 'as a conniving femme fatale' in a play that is said to be 'reductive, false, and damaging' in its treatment of Assia (166, 159). Fourthly, Shura's paternity is assumed to be Hughes, although Assia was still sleeping with David Wevill who only found out about the affair from Plath and was not told by Assia that their marriage was over until 1966. Assia's early unwillingness to commit to Hughes is ignored in favour of an emphasis on his later apparent reluctance to commit to her.

This book has attempted a challenging and complex task and it succeeds in raising questions about the representation of a woman making a life for herself in pre-feminist conditions, as Fay Weldon put it. But if many Hughes scholars have deplored the fatalism of *Capriccio* and *Birthday Letters*, as Goodspeed-Chadwick does here, her feminist readers must surely also deplore the fatalistic representation of the murder of Shura as a 'structural and gendered' inevitability and 'not a personal fault' of her mother. Sympathy for Assia does not require an amoral stance towards her suicide and murder as a 'shortcoming'. This would be the opposite of empowering Goodspeed-Chadwick's women readers.

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***The Last Days of Sylvia Plath***, by Carl Rollyson, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2020, US \$25.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4968-2122-5

Carl Rollyson intends to do for feminist readers of Ted Hughes what Kate Millett did for feminist readers of D. H. Lawrence. His first paragraph reads: ‘In her last days Sylvia Plath attempted to break out of a tightening *cordon sanitaire* that formed around the towering figure of her husband Ted Hughes. In the antique mythology of his retinue she had become the gorgon threatening to bring down the House of Hughes’ (5). This is a curious way to begin a serious biographical work, unless, of course, the writer is a CUNY professor emeritus of journalism. This book is a work of polemical journalism that sets out its stall in the discourse of that opening paragraph: ‘towering’, ‘antique mythology’ (a strangely ‘antique’ *cordon* that is still, today, actively tightening against a break out), ‘gorgon’ and a royal ‘retinue’ of some feudal clan, also apparently antique, called the ‘House of Hughes’. Should anyone read any further? The outcome of the biographical work is determined and the finger is firmly pointed by the defender of the ‘gorgon’. The language declares that this writer wants to be vicious. And he is. This is an unpleasant book apparently fuelled by an unrestrained hatred of the so-called ‘House of Hughes’.

Fortunately, slightly more nuanced writing, that deserves the name of scholarship rather than journalism, has emerged from feminists interested in the work of Plath to contribute to Hughes studies in recent years. Senior Plath scholars, such as the biographer Heather Clark, have presented papers at Hughes conferences and Hughes scholars have presented papers at the recent Plath conference in Belfast. Feminist scholars such as Tracy Brain, Jo Gill, Janne Stigen Drangsholt and Laura Blomvall have written book chapters on Hughes. Sadly, Rollyson’s second book on Plath carries dust-jacket endorsements from Peter K. Steinberg and Gail Crowther. (Rollyson’s *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* was reviewed for this *Journal* by Carol Bere in Vol IV no 1, 2014.) Steinberg also contributes photographs of empty rooms in 3 Chalcot Square and Crowther seems to think that extended discussion of Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s accurately titled novel *Poison* (2006) offers new insights into the marriage of Plath and Hughes. Steinberg’s and Crowther’s enthusiasm for this project – both consulted ‘at every phase of this work’ the Acknowledgments tell us (217) – is surprising given its vindictive tone. Plath ‘was the one who built up this wayward amateur into a prize-winning professional, who no longer dithered around Cambridge or employed

himself as a dilatory script reader at J. Arthur Rank' (54). This would be amusing if it were not so persistently pernicious, including towards the living. Carol Hughes is 'the stay-at-home wife' (78), or 'the "doll-wife"' (90), or a 'siding' in a 'half-marriage' 'that he could put back on the main track when he wished' (179). There are references to 'Olwyn's witchery' and 'Ted, the warlock' (101).

These latter terms, apparently taken seriously by Rollyson, derive from Plath's psychiatrist, Ruth Barnhouse, who wrote in a letter of 1976, 'Unfortunately, as I may have told you, she married into a family of witches and warlocks, and I am convinced that there were uncanny influences at work in the precipitation of her final depression' (100). It seems that Hughes was right to be suspicious of Barnhouse's influence in Plath's final depression. Rollyson's quotations from Barnhouse's writings reveal that her relationship with Plath had gone beyond a professional one and that Barnhouse seems to have been using Plath's anxieties to deal with her own marriage break-up. In 1980 Barnhouse gave a public lecture in which she reflected upon the case of Plath. Of Hughes she says that 'he came from a long family of Welsh people with a history of witchcraft and second sight' (107). Rollyson draws attention to Barnhouse's comment that the psychiatric literature is full of accounts of women seeking husbands to father them, but those seeking husbands to mother them were rare. This leads Rollyson to link Hughes's caring for Plath when she was recovering from the removal of her appendix to 'Plath's conflicted feelings about her mother' (110). So even when Hughes is 'fully participating in child care', cooking and 'assuming all domestic duties during Plath's hospital stay', Rollyson finds a way of rendering Hughes's positive behaviour as negative to Plath.

The case for Plath's defence is relentless. She was never given a chance to accept the fox cub in Hughes's poem 'Epiphany', which Rollyson misnames 'Epitaph': 'What he could not know, writing after her death, is if she would have failed the test too, if he had brought the fox home' (70). Richard Murphy was under no illusions as to the meaning of Plath's under the table tap at his house in Ireland since he named his autobiography *The Kick*. Rollyson cannot comprehend this: 'Why he made so much of this act – was it even intentional – is mystifying' (97). Rollyson himself is rather free with his journalistic kicks: 'So often friends like the Merwins had provided [Hughes] with whatever he needed, whether that might be a woman or a crib' (172). But, of course, the central literary concern of those making the case for the Plath defence is Hughes's publication of *Ariel*. Those, like Rollyson, who believe that the manuscript folder Plath left, *Ariel and other poems*, was completed by her for publication and that it was 'a testament that [Hughes] transmuted into a Ted Hughes production' (191) conveniently reject the idea that

Hughes was faced with a dilemma, given his high valuation of those late poems and his desire for her first posthumous volume to represent her best work. There is no doubt that *Ariel and other poems*, which is published in *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004), is a remarkable and rather moving collection. Rollyson's scholarship does not extend to even discussing Hughes's writing about his dilemma. However, Rollyson's literary scholarship does extend to a comment on Hughes's 'unresolved emotional issues that led to all those question marks in *Birthday Letters*'. Rollyson's explanation is representative of his book's achievement: Hughes 'was a man who worried that even a sore throat might presage cancer, which finally did attack his colon, an organ, he had to know, associated with the retention of dark secrets' (176).

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***Sylvia Plath in Context***, edited by Tracy Brain, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, xxvii + 420 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-108-47013-1

Cultural conceptions of Sylvia Plath often revolve around a popular vision of her as a confessional poet, a poet giving voice to what Macha Rosenthal's 1959 review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* called 'the soul's therapy', but that was never the whole story: Hughes claimed Plath was a 'mystical' poet (*LTH* 258) more than a confessional poet, and *Sylvia Plath in Context* gives us another view of Plath. The chapters collected here show us that whatever confessionalism drives Plath's work also renders that work the mouthpiece for an era and for two nations. These poems are dispatches from the cultures that spawned them as much as they are dispatches from a single poet's life. One of the defining characteristics of Plath's artistic sensibility was the ability to absorb and re-shape vast stores of cultural and literary observations: this collection gives us both a record of Plath's cultural contexts and also a window into the processes through which she transformed those contexts into poetry.

In 'Plath and the American Poetry Scene', Jonathan Ellis documents Plath's wide web of American poetic influences and her voracious reading, but he also shows us that one of her roles in Britain was to serve as a professional as well as personal ambassador for that tradition: she edited a pamphlet about American poetry for *Critical Quarterly*. Her notes about which selections to include,

preserved on the verso of 'Mirror', remind us that she was reading and thinking about James Merrill and Gregory Corso. Her notes about including Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'Large Bad Picture' remind us that Plath's own ekphrastic poetry traced its origins to her interests in literary as well as visual culture. Ellis notes, too, the limitations of Plath's own poetic focus: she includes only white poets in that pamphlet even though the American literary scene for which she was serving as emissary was filled with powerful, innovative African-American poets who were re-making the American literary tradition itself.

Eleanor Spencer in 'The Dominant Trends in British Poetry of the 1950s and Early 1960s' elegantly articulates one of the misconceptions that has dogged cultural conceptions of Plath: 'critics and readers alike have tended to extricate her from her literary context, or to focus myopically on the creative relationship between Plath and Hughes, rather than to look more broadly at her influences and stimuli during the 1950s and early 1960s' (23). Spencer's chapter is a useful tonic to that problem and points out, for example, the similarity between Plath and Peter Redgrove, Ted Hughes's Cambridge contemporary. Spencer points out that an 'urgent ransacking of the "myth kitty"' (31) characterises both poets.

One of the most revelatory chapters in the collection is Holly Ranger's deft and thoroughly convincing chapter, 'Plath and the Classics'. This chapter is of particular interest to Hughes scholars, too, because it establishes the fact that Hughes's own interest in the classics was an interest he shared with Plath. His own *Tales from Ovid* (1997), published one year before *Birthday Letters* (1998), itself, can be read as a response to his artistic life with Plath, as Ranger has demonstrated in her article 'Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes' (*Ted Hughes Society Journal VII.2*, 2018). This chapter provides a welcome corollary to those earlier arguments. Ranger's observations about the relationships between Virgil's *Georgics* and Plath's poetry about bees show how Plath melded literary inheritance with personal observation. Ranger outlines Plath's robust classical education, but also describes Plath's ambivalence to the classics; it was a tradition belonging to men, an observation which, itself, makes Plath's engagement with this tradition all the more important in our own understanding of classical influences on twentieth-century poetry. Ranger's chapter includes a litany of phrases from Plath's letters and journals in which Plath figures herself as a female version of classical figures. Ranger argues that, even writing about the bees, Plath simultaneously imitates and subverts the *Georgics*, suggesting, for example, that the male idyll is dependent on female labour.

*Sylvia Plath in Context* also offers many new archival contexts for Plath's work; several chapters draw on new, robust, and revelatory archival research. For

example, Peter Steinberg's chapter "Sincerely Yours": Plath and *The New Yorker*' is an in-depth study of Plath's letters to *The New Yorker* held at the New York Public Library. The chapter is a window into lost literary world in which the editors of poetry journals offered robust critiques and suggestions along with acceptances or rejections. Recovering this cultural context allows us better to understand Plath's engagement with something as nebulous as prevailing cultural poetic tastes mediated, in this case, through editorial sensibilities.

One of this collection's most important achievements is the multi-faceted depiction of how Plath both inherited and renovated literary and cultural traditions. In 'Plath and the Pastoral', Iain Twiddy analyses images of the countryside embedded in Plath's poetry. He demonstrates that both the simplicity of Plath's style and the ramifying complexity encoded into those simple images have their roots in much older and broader poetic traditions. He puts Plath in the context of the principles Empson articulates when he argues that the pastoral allows a writer to put 'the complex into the simple' (105). Twiddy enriches our understanding of Plath's imagery when he writes that, 'Pastoral is a mediation, rather than a permanently lived state, a perspective that enables a traversing of terrain, a simple guiding idea that may make sense of complexity beyond' (105). Twiddy suggests that Plath both opens the borders of the pastoral space, but also 'vandalises' (108) it in poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Medusa'. Such vandalism is in service of reaching 'the more moderate assessments of relationships, grief and selfhood intrinsic to natural pastoral elegy' (108), he argues.

The collection also shows that aspects of Plath's daily life—her engagement with food and television, for example—have become, for us as readers in 2020, cultural contexts to which we need a guide. These chapters are especially valuable for Hughes scholars, too, because these contexts were Hughes's own contexts, as well.

In 'Plath and Food', Gerard Woodward documents Plath's exuberant engagement with food. It includes a description of the food both Plath and Hughes enjoyed at Yaddo: 'We have elegant dinners here: sweetbreads, sausages, bacon, mushrooms; ham and mealy orange sweet potatoes; chicken and garden beans' (123). Expressing a sentiment that many university students before and after her have shared, Plath writes to her mother from Cambridge, telling her that 'I would welcome any cookies [...] to remind me of home' (121). Woodward shows that details about food were meticulously recorded in Plath's journals, but he demonstrates, too, how Plath's relationship with food fluctuated, reflecting her own mental state, embodying her painful oscillations between health and depression.



In ‘Plath and Television’, Nicola Presley shows how Plath’s focus on the television in ‘The Wishing Box’ unfolds in the context of the newness of that invention. Plath’s literary engagement with the television is freighted with cultural associations that were only just beginning to come into being. In popular culture, the television was figured as something occupying a space between conscious and subconscious thought: engagement with television allowed people to half focus on one thing, half on another, a split in attention that was markedly new and markedly modern. Addressing Plath’s Smith College graduating class in 1955, Adlai Stevenson urged them to not to be frustrated that their creative energies would now be channelled into ‘laundry lists’ rather than ‘poetry’ (151). He suggested that, ‘If you’re really clever, maybe you’ll even practice your saving arts on the unsuspecting man while he’s watching television’ (152). What becomes painfully clear as we read Presley’s excerpts from that graduation address is how vividly it embodies the commandment given to women in the 1950s: any achievements they made should appear unintentional and effortless. This prescribed divide between appearance and reality was to inscribe Plath’s own attitudes to effort and achievement for the rest of her life. Presley also argues that the cultural focus on the effect of television’s images on children influenced Plath’s own conception of how important the images children see really are: ‘Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing./I want to fill it with color and ducks’ (155 and *CP* 265).

But this collection demonstrates that Plath wrote with an awareness of American subculture as well. In “‘Minor Scandal’: Lesbian Writing Contexts for *The Bell Jar*”, Beatrice Hitchman states that *Bell Jar* was unusual, for its time, for having a lesbian character, Joan Gilling. Hitchman uncovers similarities between the 1950s language used to describe lesbian secret networks and contemporaneous descriptions of communism. She also identifies the connection between ECT therapy and conversion therapy. She argues that Plath’s depiction of a lesbian character should be placed into conversation with Alfred Kinsey’s ground-breaking research which argued that sexuality was a spectrum and that the ubiquity of same-sex attraction proved ‘lesbianism could not be dismissed as an unusual psychiatric disorder’ (172). Hitchman suggests, too, that the plot-line of Joan’s suicide not only allows Plath to create a narrative double for Esther, but also reflects knowledge of the plot arcs of 1950s’ pulp fiction: in order to avoid censorship, ‘the stories should underline the tragic consequences of living outside heterosexuality’ (176).

Kate Harding’s chapter “‘Women-haters Were Like Gods’: *The Bell Jar* and Violence Against Women in 1950s America’ is one of the most trenchant and timely chapters. It concerns the representations of sexual assault and sexual harassment in *The Bell Jar* and places them within the broader context of mid-century attitudes

towards sexual violence. In order to understand the power and intelligence of Plath's work, Harding argues that we have to understand that sexual violence carries with it the dual and paradoxical role of 'both punishing and inscribing femininity' (181). Harding owes that conceptualisation to Sharon Marcus, but the way she applies that conceptual framework to *The Bell Jar* meaningfully deepens our understanding of Plath's nuanced and keen-eyed cultural commentary.

Amanda Golden's chapter 'Plath's Teaching and the Shaping of Her Work' is another example of the rich archival contexts this collection brings to light. It is well documented that Plath often found the pressures of teaching at Smith overwhelming, but Golden excavates what that teaching actually entailed and, in the process, reveals a fascinating intellectual backdrop for Plath's own creative work. Golden compares, for example, Plath's own annotations in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with the lecture notes of Plath's former teacher, Elizabeth Drew. In so doing Golden allows us, as readers, to enter into Plath's own reading process as Plath both mirrors her teacher's ideas and finds her own interpretations.

*Sylvia Plath in Context* is also punctuated by various elegant close readings. It demonstrates, thus, that Plath's cultural, geographic, and literary contexts shaped her poetics themselves. In "'A Certain Minor Light": Plath in Brontë Country', Sarah Corbett argues that 'Plath's practised, close-crafted poetics seems particularly suited to this landscape, the words as masterfully knocked and tapped into place as a dry-stone wall' (298). But Yorkshire provoked a broader trajectory of poetic development as Corbett also traces the development of even more vital and, finally, defining aspects of Plath's technique. Yorkshire was a place, she argues, where Plath 'assimilates an external landscape with an inner "psychic landscape", into a place from where the *Ariel* poems can themselves emerge' (304). She argues, too, that, after visiting Hughes's family in Yorkshire, Plath begins to use what Corbett calls 'an emerging Yorkshire word-hoard', full of words such as 'skinflint', 'dour', and 'foist', a word-hoard dominated by 'shortened northern vowels' (300). I found this claim that Plath's diction changed intriguing, but I also had questions: 'dour', for example, is a word I associate with the Massachusetts word-hoard of my own grandparents, but Corbett's observation is an invitation to think more about how Plath's geographic moves impacted her diction.

Of particular interest to Hughes scholars is how these close readings help us to understand better not only Hughes's own poetic development but also his perennial indebtedness to Plath. We can see how poetics of landscape came to be a shared poetic fascination as both Plath and Hughes sought to write poetry that not

only describes landscapes but also viscerally embodies the physical realities of those landscapes.

But Yorkshire was not the only place that shaped Plath's work: in 'Plath in Devon: Growing Words Out of Isolation' Maeve O'Brien places Plath's isolation in Devon in the context of American transcendentalists and Plath's own appreciation, forged in New England, for the generative powers of solitude. That appreciation, as O'Brien shows, owed something, too, to Virginia Woolf's famous insistence that every woman needs a room of her own in order to write. O'Brien traces, too, the connections between Plath's poems and the notes about Devon recorded in her journal. These connections enhance our appreciation of the process by which Plath transmuted observation into poetry. But that chapter documents, too, how such productive isolation turned into 'excruciating isolation' (322) when Plath's marriage collapsed. The creative triumphs wrung from that isolation are a tribute to what O'Brien calls the 'energy that allowed her to confront her artistry in its most naked and ambitious form' (324).

Elaine Feinstein documents another painful geography in 'Plath in London'. The chapter compares various accounts (including Hughes's own, preserved in a manuscript in the British Library: Add. MS 88918/129) with the aim of piecing together the chronology of Plath's last weeks alive. As Feinstein does so, London's geography itself becomes inscribed with the progression of the illness that took Plath's life.

Finally, *Sylvia Plath in Context* shows us that Plath's contexts are not simply those that shaped her but also the poetic context she created for both contemporaneous and subsequent poets. In 'After Plath: The Legacy of Influence', Heather Clark argues with convincing clarity, as she does elsewhere, that Plath's 'poetic legacy' starts with Hughes (353). She argues that 'The clenched poetics of *Crow* [...] are all phrasal line-breaks yet undiscursive, image-led diction: straight out of late Plath poems like "Child" or "Paralytic"' (353). Clark succinctly traces the development of Plath's influence on poetry in the latter decades of the twentieth-century, but she also makes an even more arresting claim: 'Plath's influence has passed into the vocabulary of the poetically possible' (357).

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***Annotating Modernism: Marginalia and Pedagogy from Virginia Woolf to the Confessional Poets***, by Amanda Golden, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020, 242 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4724-1076-4

Amanda Golden's long-awaited book does not disappoint. It uncovers a neglected aspect of Hughes's work as a university teacher in America and offers a telling comparison with Sylvia Plath's simultaneous pedagogy. In the generously illustrated *Annotating Modernism* Golden considers the marginal notes in texts being prepared for teaching by Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton. From this and other archival evidence, she analyses their teaching strategies and the ways they read modernists like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, and W. B. Yeats. Something of the reception of modernism in the classroom and in the thinking of three poets is thus revealed. At the same time Golden shows how the development of each poet is related to the different kind of relationship each poet had to academia, Plath revisiting her own student experience to replicate it, Berryman's broad Humanities course facilitating a wide range of reference, and Sexton's close reading practice resembling a poetry workshop on her own work in her 'Anne on Anne' course of 1972. The case of Ted Hughes's 1958 Great Books course at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, is considered as a Coda to *Annotating Modernism*, partly because he was an outsider to the American academy, but also because he and Plath shared the same teaching texts, his annotations commenting on hers.

Golden's chapter on Hughes is a greatly extended revision of her essay 'Ted Hughes and the Midcentury American Academy' in *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Vol 3 (2013) which contained some errors that are now corrected. On p. 49 of the *Journal* Golden had misread Hughes's writing of 'effect' as 'effort' in the margin of Plath's copy of *Crime and Punishment*. This is written underneath Plath's annotations 'crowded' and 'isolation' against a description of Raskolnikov's home. The 'effect' of the text on readers was important to Hughes's teaching of the text. Golden writes in *Annotating Modernism*, 'Their shared copy of *Crime and Punishment* and the books that Hughes subsequently annotated—Molière's *The School for Wives* and *Walden*—reflect the extent to which Hughes learned from Plath's reading and annotating strategies and brought his own techniques to them' (179). Golden's observations on the implications of those techniques that emerge from her analysis of the details offer further insights into Hughes's reading values. These, in turn, have implications for his own writings. An all too brief section on *Birthday Letters* explores some of the tropes from Plath's teaching notes and experience in academia that Hughes represents there. Golden finally concludes

that, ‘while Hughes’s library has been underexplored, its contents open new directions for understanding not just his navigation of words and pages, but also his sense of texts over time’ (188). In the practice of New Historicism, *Annotating Modernism* makes an innovative contribution to the study of the mediation of modernism through university pedagogical strategies in America by significant poets. It is the result of twenty years’ detailed study in the archives and offers a model for further work in the ‘underexplored libraries’ of great modern poets. For both Hughes and Plath studies it is an invaluable trailblazer.

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***Global Perspectives on Eco-Aesthetics and Eco-Ethics: A Green Critique***, ed. by Krishanu Maiti and Soumyadeep Chakroborty, London: Lexington Books, 2020, xiii + 274 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4985-9822-4

Chapter Five of this book is an essay by Ann Skea titled ‘Ted Hughes, Ecology and the Arts’ which, at only ten pages long, manages to give a coherent overview of Hughes’s collaborative work with visual artists by discussing the healing process of alchemy in ‘his negotiations with the Triple Goddess who is Nature and the Goddess of Complete Being’ (73). Necessarily condensed, this chapter offers an introductory linkage between poetry as a magical practice, channelling natural energies, shamanic narratives of renewal, and direct addresses to the Goddess in the largely unpublished and under-studied *vacanas*. Skea makes the case that ‘Ultimately Hughes links our spiritual welfare with the ecological health of our world and this mystical element runs through his work, being expressed most strongly in his negotiations with Nature as the Goddess of Complete Being’ (76). It is good to see Ted Hughes take his global place in this wide-ranging collection of essays from the Environmental Humanities, especially one that originates from India addressing the Anthropocene.

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## Contributors

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**Steve Ely** lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Huddersfield where he is Director of the Ted Hughes Network. He has published several books of poetry, including *Incendium Amoris* (2017) and *I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heauen* (2019). Two further collections will be published within the next year. *The European Eel* will be published by Longbarrow Press in October 2020, with art work by Ruth Palmer. *Lectio Violant* will be published by Shearsman in March 2021. He is the author of *Ted Hughes's South Yorkshire: Made in Mexborough* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

**Peter Fydler** recently retired from a career in Film & TV Marketing and hopes to spend more time reading, and writing about, twentieth-century prose and poetry. He has published articles on Ted Hughes and presented papers on Hughes and Sylvia Plath at various international conferences. He graduated from the University of London in 1987 having completed a dissertation on the White Goddess Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes from 1967. He also likes to do a bit of cycling and skiing every now and again.

**Mark Wormald** is Fellow, College Lecturer and Director of Studies in English at Pembroke College, Cambridge. He is co-editor, with Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, of *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* (2013) and *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture* (2018) and edited *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* from 2015 until 2019. Mark's book *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* is long overdue.