

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

24/1

EDITOR

prof. dr hab. Grażyna Bystydzieńska [g.bystydzienska@uw.edu.pl]

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

dr hab. Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż [m.a.sokolowska-paryz@uw.edu.pl]

dr Anna Wojtyś [a.wojtys@uw.edu.pl]

ADVISORY BOARD

Michael Bilynsky, University of Lviv, Ukraine
Andrzej Bogusławski, University of Warsaw, Poland
Miroslawa Buchholtz, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland
Xavier Dekeyser, University of Antwerp / KU Leuven, Belgium
Bernhard Diensberg, University of Bonn, Germany
Edwin Duncan, Towson University, Towson, MD, USA
Guðni Ellíson, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland
Jacek Fisiak, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland
Elzbieta Foeller-Pituch, Northwestern University, Evanston-Chicago, USA
Piotr Gąsiorowski, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland
Keith Hanley, Lancaster University, United Kingdom
Christopher Knight, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, USA
Marcin Krygier, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland
Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney, University of Łódź, Poland
Zbigniew Mazur, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland
Rafał Molencki, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec, Poland
John G. Newman, University of Texas at Brownsville, USA
Michał Jan Rozbicki, St. Louis University, USA
Jerzy Rubach, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA
Piotr Ruszkiewicz, Pedagogical University, Cracow, Poland
Hans Sauer, University of Munich, Germany
Merja Stenroos, University of Stavanger, Norway
Krystyna Stamirowska, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland
Anna Walczuk, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland
Jerzy Welna, University of Warsaw, Poland



UNIVERSITY
OF WARSAW

Wit Pietrzak
University of Łódź

Ted Hughes and Poetry as Spiritual Restitution

Abstract

The article explores Ted Hughes's poems and criticism with a view to demonstrating that his poetry represents a willing exposure to the greatest of traumas in order to recuperate from them a spiritual energy. It is argued here that since, according to Hughes, the modern world is a civilisation of repression, the poet's task is to alleviate this pain at the price of his own suffering. In this sense the poet plays the function of the shaman, who knows that his power derives from the pain he undergoes on behalf of his community. Rather than spirits, however, the poet-shaman in Hughes seeks the favour of what Robert Graves called the white goddess, who can bestow her blessing on the poet or mercilessly plunge him into ruin.

Few English poets in the twentieth century enjoyed such a sudden rise to fame as Ted Hughes. His debut *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), awarded the first prize in the Harper's publication contest judged by Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, became a landmark in the history of English poetry. The following volume *Lupercal* (1960) cemented Hughes's position as one of the leading poets of his generation side by side with Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn (see Lucie-Smith 143). Nevertheless, when in 1955 Larkin dismissed what T. S. Eliot denoted by the term "mythical method" as "a common myth-kitty" (79), Hughes manifestly focused on both English and foreign folklore and legend so that, infused with a Blakean visionary gleam, he might investigate the spiritual condition of modern man torn out of his natural habitat. Although it is his early verse that won him particular accolade, throughout his life Hughes kept returning to the idea that "myth is a collection of facts" or "psychological hard data" (2007, 609). Exploring mythical narratives, he claimed, the poet can discover the repressed traumas and desires that lie beneath the thin veneer of the everyday with a view to unleashing and, thereby, alleviating them. With that premise in mind, I propose to trace throughout Hughes's poetic and critical oeuvre the idea of poetry as spiritual restitution that seeks to turn both mental and physical anguish into a life-sustaining force.

Hughes's understanding of poetry and the poetic image as "a first-hand as-if-religious experience, or mystical revelation" (1992, 35) is inextricably linked to the mythical story of the white goddess. He first read of the figure in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, a sweeping narrative that he would call in a letter to Graves "the chief holy book of my poetic conscience" (2007, 273), but would soon come to develop his own vision of the rule and fall of the supreme female divinity. Most fully laid down in his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), the story of the goddess, as Hughes sees it, is an account of a betrayal (this aspect is also strongly emphasised by Graves) of the deity by what we have come to regard as Western rationalism. As Keith Sagar puts it:

The history of Western civilization has been the history of man's increasingly devastating crimes against Nature, Nature defined not only as the earth and its life forms, powers and processes, but also as the female in all its manifestations, and as the "natural man" within the individual psyche. It is the story of Man's mutilation of Nature in his attempt to make it conform to the procrustean bed of his own patriarchal, anthropocentric and rectilinear thinking. (2)

This Nature is the province of the goddess, who is ousted by the "rectilinear thinking" of Puritanism, which results in what Graves termed "cockney civilisation" (458). Among the direct effects of Puritanism on the human mind, as Hughes explains in his "Notes on Shakespeare," were "materialistic and democratising outlook and rational philosophy":

But the most important of these, as far as Shakespeare's poetry is concerned, was the drastic way the Queen of Heaven, who was the goddess of Catholicism, who was the goddess Medieval and Pre-Christian England, who was the divinity of the throne, who was the goddess of natural law and love, who was the goddess of all sensation and organic life – this overwhelmingly powerful, multiple, primeval being, was dragged into court by the young Puritan Jehovah [...] Throughout Shakespeare's lifetime, this was the Civil War in every citizen, as the two fought out [...] And Shakespeare's plays are the fullest record of the opening collisions. And just as fully they predict the close. (1994, 110)

Similarly to Graves, who sees parallel constructions of every myth, all the way from ancient Greece to the late Romanticism of Shelley and particularly Keats, Hughes emphasises that Shakespeare recorded the crucial conflict of allegiances in man. On the one hand there stand the forces of the Natural order, most aptly symbolised as Venus; on the other, there are the soul-tormenting imposers whose actions are driven by remorseless logic, the men of chaos: Richard III and Macbeth. What results from this clash is the collapse of the goddess

as supreme deity when she is cleft into the loathsome composite figure of the Weird Sisters and eventually Sycorax, who suffers defeat at the hand of the law-giver, Prospero. Hughes takes this story of the division of the goddess from Graves:

The Triple Muse, or the Three Muses, or the Ninefold Muse, or Cerridwen, or whatever else one may care to call her, is originally the Great Goddess in her poetic or incantatory character. She has a son who is also her lover and her victim, the Star-son, or Demon of the Waxing Year [...] Next, she is courted by the Thunder-god (a rebellious Star-son infected by Eastern patriarchalism) and has twins by him [...] She remains the Goddess of Incantation, but forfeits part of her sovereignty to the Thunder-god [...] Next, she divides the power of poetic enchantment between her twins [...] Next, she becomes enlarged in number, though reduced in power, to a bevy of nine little departmental goddesses of inspiration [...] Finally, the male twin, Apollo, proclaims himself the Eternal Sun, and the Nine Muses become his ladies-in-waiting. (Graves 392–393)

From the position of unequalled power, the goddess is slowly relegated to the role of an insignificant attendant muse. Based on this account, Hughes concludes his reading of “The Shakespearean fable” by stating that Shakespeare gives “the account of how, in the religious struggle that lasted from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth, England lost her soul” (1994, 119). For Hughes, T. S. Eliot’s idea of the “dissociation of sensibility” (288) is an understatement, for “it is to be taken simply as the resulting feature of a bad poem,” pointing to “the imbalance between the refinement of language and the degree of feeling” (Hanief 76). The fissure in English selfhood that took place more or less in the second half of the XVI century proved deadly not only to writers but to the core of the English soul.

In a letter to Peter Redgrove, Hughes further explains that Shakespeare’s conflict between the Natural religion and Puritan sensibility is susceptible of two interpretations. On the one hand, taking into account the final scenes of *The Tempest*, the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand represents “a glorious spiritual triumph” of “puritan ideals” (2007, 336). Graves points to a similar reading of the play, where Sycorax is in fact a goddess figure: “Shakespeare in the person of Prospero claims to have dominated her by his magic books, broken her power and enslaved her monstrous son – though not before extracting his secrets from him under colour of kindness” (426). On the other hand, for Hughes, the disregard of the family of Sycorax, the degenerate English in the speeches of Caliban point out to the degradation of nature:

So from this second point of view Shakespeare recorded, somewhat helplessly, what was actually going on in the English spirit, which was the defamation, subjection and eventual murder of what he first encountered as Venus [...] he recorded the most

horrible of all disasters – the declaration of war against the natural (real) world and natural fellowship with it and in it, by a pseudo intelligence which is now on the point of culminating its logics and natural bent in destruction of the world and all life. (2007, 336)

Thus the contemporary world, dominated by logic and science and ethos of diligent work, is a perversion of the true human condition, which is informed by mythical imagination and allegiance to the volatile goddess. What Hughes derived from Shakespeare was the story of man's second fall. This time the sin was long in the making, for it took centuries for the male god to subvert the goddess.

In the aftermath, the civilisation of man, built around puritan principles, has substituted science-biased culture for the natural religion. In a letter to his friend Moelwyn Merchant, Hughes argues that “once, by ego consciousness i.e. free intelligence, the ability to manipulate abstract ideas & direct our behaviour *against* instinct, we had lost the divine world, and internal identity with the divine self, culture appeared, as I say, a substitute for what we had lost – religion appeared as a technology to regain it” (2007, 581). Hughes disapproved of and disbelieved science from the very beginning, observing in a 1964 review of, among others, Louis MacNeice's *Astrology* that modern science is in no way more reliable when it comes to explaining such matters as the Creation than the broadly-conceived supernatural and “whether Gandhi's prayers affected European politics, whether Jehovah was or was not a highly irascible poltergeist laboriously constructed by the psychokinetic efforts of Moses and Aaron” remain a moot point (1994, 52). Discrediting the supernatural and challenging the existence of wonders, the civilisation of man has severed the link with its environment.

This severance is evoked throughout Hughes's oeuvre. In “The Bull Moses” (*Lupercal* [1960]), the speaker leans over “The upper edge of the high half-door / My left foot ledged on the hinge,” and looks “in at the byre's / Blaze of darkness” (2003, 74). Although judging by the cowboy-like posture that the speaker assumes it may seem he thinks himself superior to the animal held inside the byre, the unexpected implication of the supernatural “blaze of darkness” topples the initial hierarchy, which tips to the bull's favour in the next stanza:

[...] He would swing his muzzle at a fly
 But the square of sky where I hung, shouting, waving,
 Was nothing to him; nothing of our light
 Found any reflection in him. (2003, 74)

The bull's “blackness [...] beyond star” makes it resemble a demonic figure, the spirit-embodiment of nature that we like to believe we have tamed

but have done so only because our impositions appear so trivial for its grandiosity. Eventually, the speaker, ever more in awe of the animal and the projected spirit that appears before his mind's eye – the “creature within the head” (2007, 125) as Hughes called it, leads it back to the byre and its pen. There is an unmistakable air of relief in the speaker and pent-up power simmering in the bull at the end of the poem, “Closed [the door] behind him and pushed the bolt.”

The ponderousness of the bull belies its power similarly to the earlier “Jaguar” from *The Hawk in the Rain*. Hughes took the central image from “a particular Jaguar” that he tended to in Autumn of 1954 when he worked in Regent's Park Zoo (2007, 586–587) and it was in that year that he published the poem, which underwent serious revisions over the next two years before re-publication in *The Hawk in the Rain*. In the poem, the setting for the cage holding the jaguar is even more ridiculous than the bull's byre, “The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun. / The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut / Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut” (2003, 19). Against this background of humbled and stupefied animals there is the restless jaguar that “spins from the bars, but there is no cage to him / More than to the visionary his cell” (2003, 20). Again, what appears before the naked eye is only the outer veneer of the hidden power that simmers inside the jaguar. From a mere cat held captive the jaguar is elevated to the position of a visionary, whose bodily existence is only a shadow that hides his indomitable spirituality; after that, however, the vision leaps further as the cat is revealed to be the force behind the movement of the heavenly spheres: “His stride is wildernesses of freedom: / The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel. / Over the cage floor the horizon comes” (2003, 20).

If the jaguar is the propelling force of the universe, it is also, as Hughes pointed out in an interview, a “demonic force” that may “destroy an impure nature” of a man and “serve a pure one” (Faas 199). This demonic nature with time becomes ever less understandable and more horrifying. In “Ghost Crabs” (*Wodwo* [1967]), written after Sylvia Plath's death, the speaker beholds the ghost crabs as they “Press through our nothingness where we sprawl on beds.” Although they seem mindless and hardly developed, the crabs “are the powers of this world” and “To them, our clattered countries are empty battleground,” while “We are their bacteria” (2003, 150). At later stages of his career, Hughes found this disproportion between the technology-obsessed world of man and the invisible realm of animals more and more palpable, to the degree that it showed to him how ridiculous people must seem to animals. In a weirdly funny “A Cormorant” (*River* [1983]), the speaker fully armed with latest fishing equipment, his “space-armor,” struggles in embarrassment to catch some fish, while a cormorant that “eyes me, beak uptilted, / Body snake-low – sea-serpentish,” simply dives:

Disappears from bird,
Dissolving himself

Into fish, so dissolving fish naturally
Into himself. Re-emerges, gorged,

Himself as he was, and escapes me. (2003, 651)

No technology can avail man in his quest for the domination of the planet, for all his efforts, Hughes suggests, are bound to prove futile against the perfect world of nature, a world that we understand less and less but should never stop dreading.

Throughout his poetry Hughes invokes images of man's inevitable inferiority to the violent world of nature. In the celebrated *From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970), the failure to regain the long-dormant contact with nature is shared by both man and God, the Christian Jehovah who, for Graves and Hughes alike, is to blame for subverting the goddess. In a letter to his brother, Hughes explained that:

My Crow has been created by God's nightmare (actually the voice of God's mother whom God has buried alive and forgotten). God's whole effort is to discourage Crow to the point of making him no longer want to live – but Crow is indestructible, and in an imbecile sort of way un-outwittable, and eventually he eats God (he is forced to eat him) and liberates God's mother in the form of God's mother's daughter i.e. the daughter not of God but of the Creation, the mother of all the gods, and her he marries. After his terrific experiences he is a half-man (no longer a Crow made of solid black). Though of course he is always a man as well. (2007, 296–297)

Throughout the volume Crow repeatedly outsmarts God, thwarting his attempts at teaching the black bird to say "Love" ("Crow's First Lesson" [2003, 211]) or breathing life into Adam and Eve ("A Childish Prank" [2003: 216]). Crow is capable of infinite malice coupled with a flair for saving God, even if always "in an imbecile sort of way," as in "A Horrible Religious Error" where he first redeems man and then eats him, "Crow only peered. / [...] / Grabbed this creature by the slackskin nape, / Beat the hell out of it, and ate it" (2003, 231). However, the planned sequence of songs, originally to be accompanied by prose, that was to see to the return of the goddess was never completed. Hughes did not find the strength to carry on his initial plan after the suicide of Assia Wevill, who also drugged to death her (and most likely Hughes's) daughter Shura. As it stands, Crow is a myth of an irrepressible will to live, the blackest of all Eroses, that does not bow before death even when Thanatos seems to have the upper hand in the end, as the last poem in the book, "Crow the Just," ends with an evocation of imminent end:

“This is how [Crow] kept his conscience so pure / He was black / (Blacker / Than the eyepupils / Of the gunbarrels.)” (2003, 272). Although Crow’s efforts, the pain he endures at the hands of God and his own volatility may be seen as an offering to revive her, the goddess seems to have been eradicated for good and man left at the mercy of the world that he is no longer a part of.

Still, Hughes would never accept the utter loss of the goddess, which for him would have meant loss of poetry as well. As man has forsaken the bond with the goddess, first embracing Jehovah and then, even more shamefully, technology, it is now the lyricist’s responsibility to regain the lost link. Therefore the modern poet necessarily undertakes the task traditionally vested in the shaman, “a mystic who engaged in [...] ecstatic journeys [...] a kind of spirit-medium who interacts with the ‘spirit world’ on behalf of his community” (Morris 17). According to Hughes, heavily influenced by Mircea Eliade, “the shamans seem to undergo, at will and at phenomenal intensity, and with practical results, one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event” (1994, 58). The poet-shaman, in lieu of contacting spirits, invokes the goddess to ask boons of her for the sake of the entire community, who may not understand his sacrifice, in fact, they may even mock it for its presumable superstition. The poet-shaman thus exposes himself to grave risk because, as Graves repeatedly asserts, the goddess is by no means a willing servant of the poet. When consorting with the lyricist, she more frequently assumes the role of the hag, whose treacherousness was memorably depicted by Keats in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” in which the knight-at-arms sees “pale kings and princes too, / Pale warriors, death-pale were they all; / They cried – ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in thrall!’” (351). Faced with the beguiling and wilful seductress, the poet finds himself in a precarious position in that his task is to summon up the goddess in order to regenerate his community’s often unacknowledged decrepitude but healing comes at the price of excruciating pain that he is bound to have to endure.

Hughes discusses the poet-shaman’s mixed blessing of consort with the goddess in an essay on Leonard Baskin’s *Complete Prints*. He associates the pain depicted in Baskin’s “The Hanged Man” with the ancient notion of *mana*, or spiritual power:

Mana comes to the sufferer, it is said. Maybe *mana* is the body’s natural response to grave hurt – a healing. Which would make it, more than metaphorically, redemption incarnate. And all historical cultures agree, it is purchased by suffering. And it has to be paid for [...] The sufferer suffers till *mana* can’t hold off any longer – and so surrenders and heals the sufferer – and remains, it seems, at his, or her, disposal. (1994, 93)

The poet, just like the shaman, may attain the goddess’s blessing, and thereby the ability to heal the wound left on his community by the sharp repression of

nature, only by means of undergoing an intense pain. Hughes mulled over this premise for years and again it was in Shakespeare that he found a completion of the image of “The Hanged Man.” Focusing on the ending of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Hughes asserts:

What now remains, for this Osirian Antony, is for him to free himself, wholly and finally, from that obsolete Herculean Roman Antony, and emerge as his true self, the universal love god, consort of the Goddess of Complete Being, in so far as that can be incarnated in the body of the middle-aged Roman warrior, lover of a middle-aged, reckless, fearful queen. [...] While the drama portrays the self-destruction of the great Roman Antony on the tragic plane, it becomes, on the transcendental plane, a theophany, the liberation of Antony’s Osirian Divine Love nature, under the “magical” influence of the completeness of Cleopatra’s. The play [...] begins with the love god fully formed but unacknowledged, trapped within the self-ignorant, military Herculean *bon viveur*, who is still confidently wrestling for political control of the Roman world. It ends with the crushed, empty armour of the former Herculean warrior, like an empty chrysalis, while the liberated love god, like an iridescent new winged being, lies in the lap of the Goddess, his love “total and unconditional,” reunited beyond life and death (in the high tomb) with the adoring Goddess. (1992, 316–317)

The fall of the Herculean Antony, the pain of his defeat, leads to the production of the spiritual energy, the *mana* won at the price of suffering, which allows him to become the goddess’s consort. Antony re-establishes the bond with the female divinity on the spiritual plane and, where he a shamanic figure, he would now be able to invoke the goddess’s aid in healing the civilizational wound, which for Shakespeare would have been the fading of the temporarily re-invented cult of the goddess as Queen Elizabeth I (possibly a model for some actions of Cleopatra [see Muir 236–237]) passed away. It may be noted that Antony’s example illustrates the process of shedding the cultural bondage in order to regain the link with the natural religion in the spiritual realm. Antony ceases to be the “military Herculean *bon viveur*” who plays a vital role in the society and attains the privileged position in the eternal world.

Keith Sagar sees this process of spiritual redemption in Hughes’s *Prometheus on his Crag* (1973), *Cave Birds* (1978) and particularly *Gaudete* (1977), in which “Lumb’s agonies finally earn him the right to redeem a ‘horrible world’” (Sagar 25): “Horrible world / Where I let in again – / As if for the first time – / The untouched joy” (Hughes 2003, 371). When Hughes’s *Collected Poems* is viewed as whole, as indeed it should be, *Gaudete* and the poems written in the 1970s may be regarded as a transition from the hurtful and futile attempts to seal the dehiscence left by forsaking the goddess that are thematized in the first four collections to the meditative achievement of spiritual equipoise in *Remains of Elmet* (1979), *Moor-town Diary* (1979) and *River* (1983). In these volumes Hughes appears to have

achieved the stability of rapport with the natural world that he can both enjoy and accept. Even if it resurfaces, the pain is more an embarrassment at his own ineffectuality compared with the cormorant's stealth and hawk-like perfection than the actual torment at being torn out of nature. In "Salmon-taking Times" (*River*), the speaker witnesses a fleetingly fragile moment of epiphany of the spiritual depth in the natural world when he touches "the primroses, a gauze" that "Struggles tenderly in the delighted current":

so delicate
 I touch it and its beauty-frailty crumples
 To a smear of wet, a strengthless wreckage
 Of dissolving membranes – and the air is ringing.

It is like a religious moment, slightly dazing.

It is like a shower of petals of eglantine. (2003, 649)

This is poles apart from the evocations of deadly power of nature whose "manners are tearing off heads – / the allotment of death" (2003, 69). The emphatically delicate speakers of "Salmon-taking Times" and numerous other poems in *Moortown Diary* and *River*, even when they witness death, behold a transformation of pain into a ritual of redemption. In "The Morning before Christmas," the fish caught in the river "Employ eight grown men and keep them solemn" as they perform "lovingly, the rinsings, / The lavings, the drainings, the rewashings" (2003, 640). It would seem that after almost two decades of excruciating endeavours to struggle out of the agony of death and repression, Hughes succeeds in reaching the safety of co-existence with nature and the goddess.

However, the shamanic struggle to gather *mana* by undergoing suffering returns in *Capriccio* (1990) that traces Hughes's short-lived relationship with Assia Wevill and more importantly in the bestselling *Birthday Letters* (1998). What began as a series of poetic conversations with Plath that was never meant to be published lived to become a literary sensation. In a way the story of the volume is encoded in one of its poems, appropriately dealing with divination, "Ouija," Hughes asks, "Shall we be famous?" assuming this will pander to Plath's insatiable ambition but the answer he elicits bewilders him: "Why should you want to be famous? / Don't you see – fame will ruin everything" (2003, 1078). He realises towards the end of the poem that "when it comes / You will have paid for it with your happiness, / Your husband and your life" (2003, 1078–1079). Like Plath, who died before she could see her poems reach the acclaim she had always hankered after, Hughes did not live to witness the incredible success of *Birthday Letters*, his last shamanic flight to the realm of pain so as to heal the untreatable wound. In a letter to Seamus Heaney, who was among the first people to see the

entire bulk of the poems that would comprise *Birthday Letters*, Hughes admitted that releasing the poems had become inevitable, “Given the funny old physical corner I’ve got myself into, and the mysterious role in my life that SP’s posthumous life has played – and that our posthumous marriage has played – publication came to seem not altogether a literary matter, more a physical operation that just might change the psychic odds crucially for me, and clear a route” (2007, 703). More than just a volume of poetry, *Birthday Letters* from the beginning appeared to Hughes to be an attempt at reworking the torment he had been going through for thirty five years into the rejuvenating *mana*.

As the poems are arranged chronologically, closely following the story of Hughes and Plath’s marriage, break-up and her suicidal death, it would seem that the first lyrics would seek to conjure up the bliss that surrounded their first months together. When after their marriage Sylvia returned to Cambridge for her final year and Hughes stayed with his parents in Yorkshire, he wrote a series of letters to her, at one point admitting, “I’m unrecognisable and look like a strange beast unless you’re with me” (L 58). This image of being a stranger to himself returns in “Wodwo,” written after Plath’s death: “What am I” asks the speaker and “Do these weeds / know me and name me to each other have they / seen me before, do I fit in their world?” (2003, 183). In those letters he wrote her in late 1956, Hughes comes across as uprooted when Plath is away. Yet, the complete unity that Hughes and Plath seem to have enjoyed at the beginning of their marriage, though apparent in *Birthday Letters* in places such as the ecstatic ending of “18 Rugby Street”: “You were a new world. My new world. / So this is America, I marvelled. / Beautiful, beautiful America” (2003, 1058), never comes without a hint that they embarked on a path to destruction. “18 Rugby Street” is followed by “The Machine,” in which Plath’s defeatism becomes apparent:

The dark ate at you. And the fear
Of being crushed. “A huge dark machine,”
“The grinding indifferent
Millstone of circumstance.” After
Watching the orange sunset, these were the words
You put on a page. They had come to you [...] (2003, 1058)

Apart from the surprising depressive streak, Plath feels that the joyous relationship with Hughes is tinged with a shadow of some menace, the name of her husband being implied in the adjective: “*huge* dark machine.” This sudden realisation of peril underlying an arguably innocuous evocation of landscape indicates that death was always on Plath’s mind and her fate was decided on by none other than the goddess herself:

It was a visit from the goddess, the beauty
 Who was poetry's sister – she had come
 To tell poetry she was spoiling us.
 Poetry listened, maybe, but we heard nothing
 And poetry did not tell us. And we
 Did what poetry told us to do. (2003, 1085)

Hughes implies that the tragic end of their marriage, the painful final years, the betrayal, the suicide – all those were part of the scenario written out by the goddess, with poetry being implicit in the vindictive drama. Sagar asserts that in *Birthday Letters* “we find that the lower level, the pattern of tragedy, takes over almost exclusively” and leads “to the same inexorable finale, the same triumph of death (in the person of the dead father) over everything that can be set against it” (70). Leonard M. Scigaj observes that “the central structural design of *Birthday Letters* concerns an obsessive equation of Otto and Sylvia Plath with King Minos and the Minotaur of Cretan mythology” and “in her self-destructive indulgence in anger and emotional tirades, Plath apes her father as she becomes the Minotaur” (2). For both critics, Plath's suicide seems to have been etched on her.

In his prose, however, Hughes took pains to dispel the idea that in her poems Plath, even if unconsciously, encoded her desire to die. In an essay on her *Journals*, Hughes observes, “The subject matter [of *Ariel*] didn't alarm her. Why should it, when *Ariel* was doing the very thing it had been created to and liberated to do? In each poem, the terror is encountered head on, and the angel is mastered and brought to terms” (1994, 188). Yet, in *Birthday Letters* he tells a different story, repeatedly coming back to the conclusion, noted also by Scigaj, that along with her father's death, Sylvia's life was forfeit. Partly, as it seems, this death-wish is triggered by the goddess:

The great goddess in person
 Had put on your body, waxing full,
 Using your strainings
 Like a surgical glove, to create with,
 Like a soft mask to triumph and be grotesque in
 On the bed of birth. (2003, 1115)

Sylvia is shown to be possessed. Between her father and the enraged goddess-as-hag, Plath becomes a tragic figure that cannot elude her fate. Hughes's speaker in *Birthday Letters* is painfully at a loss to understand his wife's unexpected bouts of sadness but Hughes the poet sees that he “was being auditioned / For the male lead in her drama” (2003, 1048). In “Setebos,” Hughes identifies himself with *The Tempest's* Ferdinand, while Sylvia is Miranda, and realises that “the script

overtook us. Caliban / Reverted to type”; in lieu of the nuptials, at the end all nightmares return:

[...] I heard the Minotaur
 Coming down its tunnel-groove
 Of old faults deep and bitter. King Minos,
 Alias Otto – his bellow
 Winding into murderous music. [...] (2003, 1129)

This makes the speaker wonder, “Which play / Were we in?” as it seems that this is an altered version of Shakespeare’s story, one in which it is Sycorax who triumphs over Prospero. Instead of the story of the fall of the goddess, here she smites her enemies into ruin as she flares up in her most demonic aspect, “The laughter / Of Sycorax was thunder and lightning / And black downpour” (Hughes 2003, 1129). It seems that Hughes is writing the myth of the return of the goddess, which he failed to do in his earlier volumes. The impetuous force of the vengeful goddess strikes at the illusion that he had entertained; he thought that he could lead a normal happy life with Sylvia but no true poet is meant to enjoy such simple pleasures, for his love must be directed solely to his muse, the beautiful lady without mercy.

Writing *Birthday Letters* Hughes did not spare himself the pain that such mercilessly candid recounting of the story of his marriage must have caused him. Some of the poems seem to perversely play with the hope that the fatal end could be averted. In “The Inscription,” Hughes recounts his meeting with Sylvia at his place in Soho.

She wanted his assurance, weeping she begged
 For assurance that he had faith in her. Yes, yes. Tell me
 We shall sit together this summer
 Under the laburnum. Yes, he said, yes yes yes.
 [...]
 What kind of faith did she mean? Yes, he had faith.
 He had promised her everything she had asked for [...] (2003, 1154)

As this charged conversation seems to be steering towards a reconciliation, redemptive for them both, she “saw his Shakespeare. The red Oxford Shakespeare / That she had ripped to rags when happiness / Was invulnerable.” The apparently destroyed volume, now miraculously returned, seems a token of good luck and it is precisely at this moment of heightened expectation that all will turn out fine that “She opened it. She read the inscription. She closed it” (2003, 1155). When it appears that re-uniting might be an actual possibility, the ghost of Asia intervenes and shatters all hope. Hughes comes to suggest that it is the god-

ness that, through Assia, trundles over Sylvia and the disappointment is all the more painful if we remember that Hughes's friend "Lucas Myers has always been of the opinion that Ted would probably have been back with Sylvia within a week if she had not killed herself" (Feinstein 143). For a firm believer in fate like Hughes, there can be no accident in Sylvia's timing, for "the real, perpetually obsessed Muse-poet distinguishes between the Goddess as manifest in the supreme power, glory, wisdom and love of woman, and the individual woman whom the Goddess may make her instrument for a month, a year, seven years, or even more. The Goddess abides" (Graves 490) and will harbour no contender.

Therefore *Birthday Letters* may be seen as Hughes's last masochistic plunge into the nethermost and darkest abyss of his selfhood. He inspects moment after moment of the harrowing experience in an attempt to gather the pain and, in a final effort of poetic will, to transform it into the spiritual energy with which this suffering could be alleviated, as much for himself as, arguably, for his children whom he had tried to unswervingly protect from the drama. This transformation is the theme of "Red," the closing poem in *Birthday Letters*. Hughes once more asserts that Sylvia was destined to die tragically, "Everything you painted you painted white / Then splashed it with red roses, defeated it" (2003, 1170). In the poem, Sylvia's life is spread between hospital whiteness and suicidal redness, "painted" differing from "pained" by only one letter. The speaker plays witness to a drama and tragedy that he cannot forestall, nor even fully understand. Her pain becomes his, as he enumerates her red garments, poppies outside the house and "lips a dipped, deep crimson" (2003, 1170). Hughes's shamanic flight to the core of Plath's aching self is, however, not only an excruciating investigation of his past but also a search for a glimmer of possibility that *mana* can be distilled from that white-red landscape. More than just a promise of hope exudes from the closing lines of the poem: "In the pit of red / You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness. // But the jewel you lost was blue" (2003, 1170). Sylvia was not born into the drama, she started on the path to self-immolation and lost the chance at a normal life. But Hughes partially reinstates the lost jewel and those "Kingfisher blue silks from San Francisco" that "Folded your pregnancy / In crucible caresses" (2003, 1170). He musters his energy to rework the pain into a spiritual promise, the last instalment of the myth forty years in the making, that life will not be quenched even in the greatest of traumas that the goddess may send; the blue jewel may lie buried "full fathom five" under the civilizational debris of individual repressions and collective traumas, but it is the poet in whom the task of retrieving it is forever vested.

References

- Eliot, T. S. 1999. *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Faas, Ekbert. 1980. *The Unaccommodated Universe*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.
- Feinstein, Elaine. 2001. *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Graves, Robert. 1981. *The White Goddess*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hanief, Mohammad. 2000. *The Dynamics of Criticism in T. S. Eliot*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Hughes, Ted. 1992. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1994. *Winter Pollen. Occasional Prose*. Ed. William Scammel. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 2003. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Paul Keegan. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2007. *Letters of Ted Hughes*. Ed. Christopher Reid. London: Faber and Faber.
- Keats, John. 1973. *Poetical Works*. Ed. H. W. Garrod. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larkin, Philip. 1973. *Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Lucie-Smith, Edward (ed.). 1970. *British Poetry since 1945*. London: Penguin.
- Morris, Brian. 2006. *Religion and Anthropology. A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Muir, Kenneth. 1977. *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*. London: Methuen.
- Sagar, Keith. 2000. *The Laughter of Foxes. A Study of Ted Hughes*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Scigaj, Leonard M. 2005. "The Deterministic Ghost in the Machine of *Birthday Letters*." *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons*. Ed. Joanny Moulin. London: Routledge. 1–13.