**11**

**Trauma Theory Readings**

Daniel O’Connor

**Trauma Theory**

In a letter to his son, justifying his decision to publish his account of his relationship with Sylvia Plath in *Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes wrote of his need to resolve his feelings about his first marriage:

That was the big unmanageable event in my life, that had to be somehow managed – internally – by me. Somehow through my writing – because that’s the method I’ve developed to deal with myself. (*LTH*: 711)

Plath’s suicide, this ‘big unmanageable event’, is a trauma that haunts Hughes’s work. He goes on to state that he had begun to ‘deal’ with this trauma in Ireland in the mid-sixties when he was working on his translation of Seneca’s *Oedipus* and, more significantly, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*. *Crow* and *Birthday Letters* form two very different responses to this trauma. The ostensibly direct tone of *Birthday Letters* contrasts the more symbolic method of *Crow*. Hughes felt that the symbolic method was traditionally the most successful, but that this had been foreclosed by the scrutiny he considered applied to his work for signs of him discussing his relationship with Plath. *Crow*, which is in part a deeply concealed effort at discussing Plath’s death symbolically, is dedicated to the memory of Assia Wevill (Hughes’s partner) and their child Shura. The deaths of Assia and Shura in 1969 saw Hughes abandon his work on *Crow*. As we shall see, what is a personal trauma in *Birthday Letters* had already been explored as a global trauma in the symbolic shadow play of *Crow*; it was, however, an exploration that remained unfinished in *Crow*. Yet, even the foundational myth of Hughes’s career, the much-repeated ‘Burnt Fox’ dream, demonstrates signs of an underlying traumatic sensibility. Its formation of femininity shapes the way Hughes responds to traumatic female figures in his later work, particularly in the guise of the Goddess. The traumas of the ‘Burnt Fox’ dream and of *Crow* – war, the atomic bomb, the Holocaust and its whole horror show of the twentieth century – lead us towards trauma theory more generally, in particular the inability of language to express its subject.

In relation to literature, Trauma Theory revolves around the capacity of language to contain and resolve the traumatic event. At the heart of much work on Trauma Theory is the work of Sigmund Freud, especially in relation to his understanding of the repression of traumatic events and their unconscious return. The unconscious itself, in this regard, is traumatic. Freudian theorist Jacques Lacan specifically highlighted this relationship between trauma, the unconscious and language. Central to Lacan’s theories is the idea that our entry into language (the symbolic order) is itself traumatic, separating us from what he calls the Real. This is present in Hughes’s work as the divide between culture and nature, where culture has been traumatically separated from nature. Hughes, in a curious opposition of spirituality and science, repeatedly argues for man as having suffered a Fall from nature to the rational ego. His poetry (culture) attempts to bridge the gap and express nature. For Lacan, however, the unconscious is not simply ‘natural’ man - man as animal - but ‘is structured like a language’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek elucidates what Lacan meant by this notorious maxim, arguing that it is not the job of the ego to tame the ‘wild drives’ of the id, but to approach the unconscious as an ‘unbearable truth I have to live with’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Nonetheless, what Trauma Theory returns to repeatedly is the difficulty language has in expressing this ‘unbearable truth’.

Equally, representations of trauma in Hughes’s work return to this same problem. He labelled the years of his lifetime as ‘Decades of calamity’, though it was his father’s experience in the First World War, before Hughes was born, that would come to typify his understanding of the relationship between trauma and language. Indeed, he even compared himself to veterans of the war, observing that his own struggle to write about Plath’s suicide ‘gagged my whole life, arrested me, essentially, right back there at that point. Like those first [sic] World War survivors who never climbed entirely out of the trench’ (*LTH*: 731). Unlike his uncles, Hughes’s father was notably reticent in speaking about his experiences in the war.In the poem ‘Dust As We Are’, a young Hughes learns about the war not from his father’s words but from tender physical contact, combing his father’s hair to ‘divine’: ‘The fragility of skull’, finding himself ‘filled / With his knowledge’ (*CP* 753-4). During research for a planned work on the war, Hughes’s various interviews with veterans led him to conclude that it was those who said the least that expressed the most, through ‘hesitating vague words’ and ‘half movements’ that ‘released a world of shocking force and vividness’ (*WP*: 123)**.** His reading of contemporary poets, who were attempting to cope with trauma of the Second World War and its aftermath in Eastern Europe in their work, confirmed his understanding of the First World War. The work of the Eastern European poets that he admired and promoted seemingly counters Theodor Adorno’s much-quoted assertion that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz.[[3]](#endnote-3) Hughes writes that the ‘silence of artistic integrity “after Auschwitz” is a real thing’, the consequence of which is to raise ‘the price of “truth” and “reality” and “understanding” beyond what common words seem to be able to pay’ – on the one hand making poetry more difficult, but on the other demanding its use as language refined beyond ‘common words’ (*WP*: 232). In his introduction to Vasko Popa’s *Collected Poems* he wrote of this group of Eastern European poets (Popa, Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert and Yehuda Amichai) that ‘Their poetry is a strategy of making audible meanings without disturbing the silence’ (*WP* 223).

Julia Kristeva argues that poetry is an appropriate language for trauma in that it is a form of language that plays with the boundaries of the ‘symbolic order’, in particular the want or lack at its heart: that it is ‘a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Indeed, the foundational myth of Ted Hughes’s poetic career is fundamentally traumatic. In his dream of ‘The Burnt Fox’ (*WP* 8-9), which Hughes felt was a kind of poetic initiation, we encounter an instance of what Kristeva terms the ‘abject’. The dream is simple: during his time as an undergraduate at Cambridge University, Hughes was struggling late into the night with his weekly essay (*WP* 8). He gives up and goes to sleep, where he dreams that he is still at his desk as a fox enters the room on its ‘hind legs […] Every inch was roasted, smouldering, black-charred, split and bleeding’ (*WP* 9). The fox walks over to his essay, places its bloody paw on his essay, and announces in whatever burnt-dream-foxes use for a voice: “Stop this – you are destroying us” (*WP* 9). The disfigured state of the fox is particularly important; ‘A wound with blood and pus,’ Kristeva writes, ‘does not signify death’, but ‘shows’ death:

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.[[5]](#endnote-5)

This burnt fox is what culture has cast off in order to become culture: not only the primordial, but also ‘what life withstands’: death. Accordingly, the burnt fox is ‘abject’ in that it belongs prior to the ‘symbolic order’ - it is a reminder of primordial nature.

However, it is also serving another, similar purpose. Through a careful reading of this account of the dream alongside two others (in a letter and a television appearance), we can see how the trauma of this dream sets the tone for Hughes’s later traumatic representations of woman. In a brief but cogent appraisal of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Žižek argues that the tendency to read the surface of the dream as inherently sexual is a misunderstanding of Freud. He insists that what Freud proposes in having the patient recount the dream a number of times places greater emphasis on the discrepancies between each version. This, he argues, is where we encounter ‘the difference between reality and the Real’, where ‘the “insignificant” omissions, or added details, allude to the Real of the dream’; it is not in the latent thought of the dream that we ought to find the unconscious desire, but in ‘the very distortion of the latent thought into the dream’s explicit texture’.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the case of Hughes’s dream of the burnt fox, the latent thought of the dream is, as he writes to Keith Sagar, the status of his poetic ability under the pressure of Cambridge English and its ‘social rancour on creative spirit’ (*LTH*: 423). Hughes, in short, interprets his dream as a warning of the dangers of rational intelligence to the ‘creative spirit’, and this interpretation frames his telling of the dream.

In the letter to Sagar, Hughes mentions a crucial detail excluded from two other versions of the dream (one given during a television appearance and the other, as we have seen, included in *Winter Pollen*).[[7]](#endnote-7) He was struggling with his weekly essay, which in all three accounts he indicates was a familiar experience during this period of his undergraduate years; only in the letter to Sagar does he reveal that he was writing about Samuel Johnson, ‘a personality I greatly liked’ (*LTH* 422). This significantly changes the complex of the dream. When reading these versions alongside each other, as the burnt fox walks in on its ‘hind legs’ (as he says in both the television appearance and in the *Winter Pollen* text, but crucially not in the letter), are we not reminded of Dr Johnson’s infamous misogynistic quip that a woman preaching is like a dog walking on its hind legs? The letter to Sagar ‘protects’ itself from this reading by omitting the phrase ‘hind legs’, whilst the public versions omit the reference to Samuel Johnson. The Real of Hughes’s dream, then, is the woman occupying the place of ‘traumatic Thing’, witnessing the primordial flesh ‘roasted, smouldering, black-charred, split and bleeding’ (*WP* 9). It is a representation of ‘abject’ femininity. The Lacanian ‘Thing’, which is the lack or hole at the heart of the Real, acts as an obstruction to pleasure – what Lacan would know as *jouissance* - in its traumatic guise. This trauma distinguishes Hughes’s representation of woman throughout his career – though, as we shall see, *Birthday Letters* finds an alternative.

**The ‘big unmanageable event’**

In *Crow*, Hughes begins to deal with the ‘big unmanageable event’ of Plath’s suicide through transference. The narrative frame for the collection pieced together from readings by Keith Sagar in his book *The Laughter of Foxes* opens with suicidal impetus: Man comes to God in a dream - God’s nightmare - asking him to take life back.[[8]](#endnote-8) Just as Freud’s ‘discovery’ of the unconscious proved traumatic, Hughes traumatises his God with an unconscious. The voice of God’s dream, mocking his prize creation Man as a failure, creates Crow as an attempt to ‘do better’. Accordingly, Crow is not only a product of the unconscious (God’s nightmare), but is also a response to the suicidal desires of Man. In other words, Crow is a symbolic response to the trauma of the ‘big unmanageable event’. In this regard, we can also see how Hughes’s whole effort to produce the ‘super-ugly’ language of *Crow*, and indeed Crow, is a ‘discourse of the unrepresentable’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Moreover, mourning instigates this requirement for a style of language that can cope with the demands of its subject. As Lacan argues in his seminar on *Hamlet*, the rites of mourning account for a hole created by the inadequacy of ‘signifying elements’ to cope with loss.[[10]](#endnote-10) As such, mourning requires a new symbolic register to deal with the loss – this is what Hughes is searching for through *Crow*.

Throughout *Crow* there are instances of previously successful poetic modes being cast off in favour of a new language to cope where the ‘old’ poetic language has failed. ‘Crow and the Birds’ moves from the erstwhile Hughesian idiom of ‘the eagle soared clear through a dawn distilling of emerald’ to a new Hughes: ‘Crow spraddled head-down in the beach-garbage, guzzling a dropped ice-cream’ (*CP* 210). Likewise, ‘Crow Goes Hunting’ (*CP* 236) mockingly subverts Hughes’s earlier technique of hunting animals with words. ‘Crow’s Tries the Media’ (*CP* 231-2), the most poignant of these linguistic failures, provides the template for Hughes’s attempts to deal with the ‘big unmanageable event’. Crow wants ‘to sing about her’ – an unspecified female figure - but finds the means insufficient, as all of the cultural accretions of what poetry is and how it can grasp its subject act as an obstruction to the subject itself. Crow rejects the modes of love poetry, denouncing ‘comparisons with the earth’ and later even words. Crow wants ‘to sing to her soul simply’, but in doing so finds that ‘her shaped dimmed’. There is, of course, no overt reference to Plath in this poem, (nor in the *Crow* volume); we could successfully read this poem (and in many ways ought to) without drawing any attention to Hughes’s biographical circumstances. The traumatic impetus behind the poem has driven Hughes to symbolism rather than direct address.

In Hughes’s attempt to deal with the ‘big unmanageable event’, *Crow* is ultimately a failure, an incomplete masterpiece. This is due in no small part to the deaths of his partner Assia Wevill, her child Shura, and his mother, Edith, in 1969 (the year in which Hughes’s abandoned *Crow*). It was after this second loss that Hughes began work on *Orghast*, inventing a language in response to his feeling that, ‘At every point, a man’s deeper sufferings and experiences are almost impossible for him to express by any deliberate means’(*WP*: 123). Hughes, of course, returns to English after *Orghast*, and ‘Crow Tries the Media’ sets the tone for what follows. In his later attempts at dealing with the ‘big unmanageable event’ symbolically, Hughes undertakes what Neil Roberts describes as the ‘sublimation’ of women he had known into the Goddess of the poems, usually referred to as ‘her’ and more often than not represented as unrepresentable: ‘She reveals herself, and is veiled’ (*CP* 364).[[11]](#endnote-11)

However, there is a notable difference between the ‘her’ of *Crow* and the Goddess figures of Hughes’s poetry from the seventies: where *Crow* is largely mournful the Goddess poems are melancholic. Freud’s theory of melancholia, as taken up by Lacan, asserts that the melancholic subject does not accept the loss of the loved object, allowing for the liberation and transference of desire, but incorporates it into his or her ego, accusing his- or her-self from the lost object’s point of view. Freud writes that ‘In mourning it is the world that has become empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself’.[[12]](#endnote-12) The melancholic subject ‘reproaches himself, vilifies himself, and expects to be cast out and punished’, which is exactly the position of Hughes’s male protagonists in the mythical poetic sequences (*Prometheus on His Crag*, *Gaudete*, *Cave Birds*).[[13]](#endnote-13) Interestingly, we can see how this melancholia found an early, symbolic cure in *Crow* with Crow’s eating: Freud notes that the melancholia is recognisable in a ‘refusal to take nourishment’. In this regard, Crow’s search for ‘something to eat’ is a significant epiphany in ‘That Moment’, as it is a return, rather than a melancholic objection to, ‘the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Where the Goddess is involved the poetry reverts to this melancholic role, admonishing the masculine ego. Heather Clark even argues that some of the more accusatory poems of *Cave Birds* are ‘deliberately written in Plath’s voice to suggest that she is the plaintiff and he is the defendant in the ongoing public trial of their marriage’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Similarly, the way in which Hughes adapts the myth of Actaeon in *Gaudete*, for instance, recalls Plath’s speaker in ‘Lady Lazarus’ - ‘I eat mean like air’ (*SPCP*: 244-7) - with its frequent references to devouring, such as: ‘She fell into the earth / And I was devoured’ (*CP* 361), ‘the maneater / On your leash’ (*CP* 362), ‘Where one who would have devoured me is driven off’ (*CP* 366); and most clearly in relation to the myth of Diana and Acteaon where we find the speaker hunting himself, ‘The one / I shall rend to pieces’ (*CP* 363).

***Birthday Letters***

Whilst Hughes’s published work was becoming increasingly mystical during the seventies, ever more occupied with union with (and chastisement from) the Goddess, he was intermittently working on the direct poems that would eventually appear towards the end of his life in *Birthday Letters*. It seems safe to presume that insufficiencies of the method of his published work demanded the private, personal address of *Birthday Letters*. However, it remains surprising that Hughes should abandon the symbolic method altogether and attempt to deal with this trauma directly (contravening near enough everything that trauma theory tells us about how trauma is dealt with, let alone his own thoughts about poetry). Yet, at the core of *Birthday Letters* remains a kind of silence, or a quietness at least, that sets about doing the real work of dealing with the trauma.

Although we ought to be cautious about directly equating the Plath of *Birthday Letters* with the Goddess of his prior work, there is a significant change in tone in Hughes’s relationship with the female protagonist of his poems. Where the Goddess poems of the seventies are distinguished by melancholia, *Birthday Letters* is less marked by this melancholic self-reproach. Indeed, in this respect, the collection is less ‘confessional’. The Ted Hughes of *Birthday Letters* resembles Crow in that he tends towards bemusement at the circumstances in which he locates himself. Just as Crow finds himself as ‘what his brain could make nothing of’ (*CP* 240), Ted Hughes in *Birthday Letters* is similarly a placed: ‘the gnat in the ear of the wounded / Elephant of my own / Incomprehension’ (*CP* 1070). Much of the collection finds him trying to locate a place for himself in Plath’s story. He tries on numerous costumes, from being another of Plath’s false gods and the wrong ‘witchdoctor’ (*CP* 1052-3), through his role as the ‘stone man’ husband of ‘Fever’ (1073), to the ‘husband / Performing the part of your father’ of ‘Suttee’ (*CP* 1140) - the latter a role he performs in many of these poems. Plath’s life is mythologised as an ill-fated attempt at finding and destroying the ‘minotaur’ of her relationship with her father; but the Hughes of *Birthday Letters* lacks this defined role: ‘I woke up on the empty stage with the props, / The paltry painted masks. And the script / Ripped up and scattered, its code scrambled’ (*CP* 1133). ‘Sebetos’ likewise plays upon this trope of incoherence, mixing up ripped scripts, where their restaging of *The Tempest* in the roles of Miranda (Plath) and Ferdinand (Hughes) finds Otto not as Prospero but King Minos, with the Minotaur interrupting the scene. Bewildered, Hughes asks: ‘Which play / were we in?’; and as the whole scene crumbles in the antithesis of the denouement of *The Tempest*, Hughes’s Ferdinand crawls back ‘Under a gabardine’, redolent of Caliban but now in the shape of Actaeon (again), ‘hearing the cry / Now of hounds’ (*CP* 1129).

What is perhaps most surprising about *Birthday Letters* is that, unlike his prior prose on Plath and her work, which repeatedly stresses how her poetry was leading to a sense of rebirth rather than death, her death is heavily fated in these poems. *Birthday Letters* offers a somewhat ambiguous representation of Plath, obsessed with her own ‘abject’ self. ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ ends with the suggestion that in the snares she hated she actually found ‘Your doomed self, your tortured, crying, / Suffocating self’, with her poems like the ‘smoking entrails’ of dead rabbits (*CP* 1138). Not only had Hughes regarded her suicide as avoidable prior to *Birthday Letters*, but also that it had distorted readings of her work: ‘The real question is – what would be the interpretation of those poems [Plath’s posthumous collection *Ariel*] if she hadn’t died, if she’d gone on to write something marvellous in a different way […] They could only be read as the scenes of a victorious battle for so-called “self-integration”’ (*LTH*: 446). Yet, in *Birthday Letters* we find a ‘Fate’ that is almost the complete opposite to that of *Crow*. Where Crow faces death as his fate, ‘Slowly rending the vital fibres’ (*CP* 222), by virtue of his very existence he is also found to be ‘stronger than death’ in ‘Examination at the Womb-Door’ (*CP* 219). Where *Birthday Letters* echoes the structure of ‘Examination at the Womb-Door’ (‘Who owns these unspeakable guts? *Death*.’), it is not so defiant (*CP* 218).‘9 Willow Street’ takes an ominous incident of Hughes being bitten by a potentially rabid bat whilst trying save it and responds to the earlier *Crow* poem: ‘It confirmed / The myth we had sleepwalked into: death. / This was the bat-light we were living in: death’ (*CP* 1090). We could argue reasonably that Hughes had no choice – he could hardly alter the story so that Plath survives – but the change in tone (and tense) between these two collections, which are to some extent dealing with the same material, is significant. The overriding sentiment of *Birthday Letters* is of a fated resignation that contrasts unfavourably against the verve of *Crow*.

Such an ineluctable end, cemented by the passage of over thirty years between Plath’s death and the publication of *Birthday Letters*, changes the way in which the poems come to terms with the trauma of this ‘big unmanageable event’. The ‘free energy’ and ‘release’ that Hughes felt in finalising *Birthday Letters* extends to the language employed in the collection.[[16]](#endnote-16) The untroubled language of the poems seems to deny any hint of what Lacan refers to as the ‘inadequacy of signifying elements’ engendered as a consequence of mourning.[[17]](#endnote-17) However, the way in which the *Birthday Letters* poems relate to his prior poetry through the establishment of ‘Ted Hughes’ as a character works to destabilise the *Birthday Letters* poems to the benefit of his earlier work.[[18]](#endnote-18) This doubling is evident almost immediately in the collection. The opening poem, ‘Fulbright Scholars’ (*CP* 1045), finds the ‘Ted Hughes’ of the poems (that of his fallible memory) behaving without knowledge of the wider significance of his actions, a significance afforded by the Ted Hughes who writes the poems. What is just the new experience of a peach in austerity Britain for the ‘Ted Hughes’ of the poem, represents the arrival glamorous American Sylvia Plath and everything that follows. Hughes holds his historical self at a distance, keeps him ignorant, and yet arrives at him in the poems with the wonder of a discovery. Where Plath intervenes there is a doubling of the lens: here we find Hughes observing Plath observing Hughes. In other words, he sees himself through his idea of Plath. ‘Ted Hughes’ in ‘The Shot’, for instance, is portrayed as the unwitting target of Plath’s retributive anger towards her father (as he is in most of the collection): ‘your real target / Hid behind me. Your Daddy, […] I did not even know / I had been hit’ (*CP* 1053), recalling Plath’s lines in ‘Daddy’: ‘If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two – / The vampire who said he was you’ (*SPCP* 222-4). This represents a significant shift from the Goddess poems. Whereas the self-criticism in the Goddess poems is measured through a fantasy ideal of the female (an ideal that the poem doesn’t appear to realise is of its own creation), in *Birthday Letters* Hughes looks back at himself knowingly through his own idea of Plath. We can see this in two poems in particular: ‘Black Coat’, which leans back on his earlier work, and ‘Red’ (with a little help from ‘St Botolph’s’) which demonstrates that silence remains effective in *Birthday Letters* as a work of mourning.

‘Black Coat’ recounts an occasion when Hughes visits the sea for a sense of isolation, only to find that he is being observed by Plath. Her gaze is possessed with an ‘inbuilt double exposure’ that sees her father’s ghost behind a ‘blurred see-through’ Hughes; the poems ends, ‘I did not feel / How, as your lenses tightened, / He slid into me’ (*CP* 1109). Accordingly, the Hughes as speaker of ‘Black Coat’ observes Plath observing Hughes as protagonist. Much has been made of the intertextuality between Plath’s poems and *Birthday Letters*; less so of the collection’s concern with Hughes’s own work.[[19]](#endnote-19) Two poems are most obviously present in ‘Black Coat’: ‘Ghost Crabs’ from *Wodwo* and ‘Crow on the Beach’, but I will restrict this discussion to ‘Ghost Crabs’. In ‘Black Coat’ Otto, Plath’s father, emerges like the ‘Ghost Crabs’ of the earlier poem: ‘that freezing sea / From which your dead father had just crawled’ (*CP* 1109). The poet of ‘Ghost Crabs’ receives with interest his image of these crabs: ‘An invisible disgorging of the sea’s cold / Over the man who strolls along the sands’ (*CP* 149). ‘Black Coat’, in this sense, translates the symbolism of ‘Ghost Crabs’ back into the ‘realism’ of *Birthday Letters*. Just as Otto slides into the Hughes of the poem, the ‘Ghost Crabs’ ‘Press through our nothingness where we sprawl on beds’ (*CP* 150). Their symbolism, where ‘We are their bacteria, / Dying their lives and living their deaths’, is likewise contained in the figure of Otto: Hughes sees himself in ‘Black Coat’ as the living manifestation of Plath’s dead father, suffering her figurative attempt to kill him. The role of the ‘Ghost Crabs’ is largely similar to that of Otto in *Birthday Letters*: Otto is, like them, ‘the turmoil of history, the convulsion / In the roots of blood, in the cycles of concurrence’. ‘Black Coat’ is conscious of how Hughes had already dictated his own mythology in prior poems; he is remembering this incident through the lens of ‘Ghost Crabs’. In the lines quoted above the first line break on the awkward phrasing of ‘I did not feel / How, as your lenses tightened, / He slid into me’ creates enough of a pause (with that lumbering, necessary stress on ‘How’) to nudge out the implication that though he ‘did not feel’, he does now.

‘Black Coat’ works to confirm the earlier symbolic and indirect rendering of the experience in ‘Ghost Crabs’. In doing so, it resolves the work of mourning by confirming that the prior symbolic language is equitable to the loss. This comes about where Hughes occupies Plath’s absence: her gaze is actually his. Hughes reconsiders his own poem through Plath’s viewpoint, watching ‘Ted Hughes’ becoming Otto, but also ‘Ted Hughes’ becoming Ted Hughes: ‘He slid into me’. This ‘He’ stands for both ‘Ted Hughes’ and Otto in that Hughes willingly adopts the Plath mythology of himself as Otto; he therefore occupies Plath’s position in witnessing both ‘Ted Hughes’ and Otto Plath. As a result, the biography of ‘Black Coat’ seeks to confirm the symbolic accuracy of ‘Ghost Crabs’ by validating it through Plath’s disembodied, perhaps even metaphysical, viewpoint: her ‘tightened’ lenses. It is almost as if Hughes is confirming the efficacy of his poetry with the supernatural agency of Plath’s afterlife. This ‘afterlife’, however, occurs only where Hughes occupies the place left by her absence.

Just as he ‘did not feel’, the ‘Ted Hughes’ of ‘Black Coat’ had ‘No idea / How that double image, / Your eye’s inbuilt double exposure / [...] Came into single focus’; the Hughes who writes ‘Black Coat’ seemingly knows. This transition is prefigured in the phrase ‘potato crisps’ (in a reference to a photograph that intrudes upon the poem for no obvious reason): a peculiar Anglo-American compound of ‘potato chips’ and ‘crisps’, a kind of coming together of Plath’s American nationality and Hughes’s Englishness. As with all the *Birthday Letters* poems, Hughes performs the roles of both himself and Plath. The ‘double exposure’ is not Plath’s, but Hughes’s, coming into ‘single focus’ where Hughes sees through his poems to himself. As such, Hughes does not just simply occupy Plath’s absence, but sees himself occupying Plath’s absence: it is not Plath but Ted Hughes that is ‘Looking towards me. Watching me’ (*CP* 1109). And he is looking at ‘Ted Hughes’. As Hughes finds himself occupying the absent position of Plath, *Birthday Letters* finds a method of mourning that is not fraught with the melancholia of the mythical sequences. However, we could still argue that this is a traumatic representation of Plath, whose role in the poem includes chastising Hughes even as he adopts her voice and suggests its fallibility.

However, in a sleight of hand between ‘St Botolph’s’ and ‘Red’ there lies a more positive representation of Plath and femininity, suggesting an alternative to Hughes’s norm of the traumatic woman. ‘Red’ provides the enigmatic final line of the collection: ‘But the jewel you lost was blue’ (*CP* 1170). This indirectly recalls an incident early on in the collection, in ‘St Botolph’s’, which recounts the launch party of the magazine, *St Botolph’s Review*, that Hughes started with his university friends. It was at this party that Hughes and Plath first met, and the poem tells from his side the now famous encounter whereby he stole her headscarf and earrings whilst she bit his face. Plath’s account of this meeting is published in her journals and was heavily redacted on its first publication. The earrings are tellingly absent from the poem, leaving all emphasis on the headscarf. After Plath has left his company, the poem states that he remembers nothing else, other than his girlfriend’s ‘hissing rage’:

And my stupefied interrogation

Of your blue headscarf from my pocket

And the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks

That was to brand my face for the next month.

The me beneath it for good. (*CP* 1052)

The ‘blue headscarf’ appears to have been something of an after-thought, showing up as a marginal insertion into a draft of the poem, changing the syntax of these final lines in order that the ‘stupefied interrogation’ does not simply pertain to the bite on his cheek.[[20]](#endnote-20) There are many such occasions where Hughes is left with a physical remainder of Plath’s absence. In the next poem in the sequence, ‘The Shot’, he manages to catch of her ‘flight’ just ‘A wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your nightgown’ (*CP* 1053). Such things are always insufficient, unable to atone for her absence; they are symbolic reminders of her absence. The ‘blue headscarf’ of the poem undergoes that symbolic transformation before our eyes: to the ‘Ted Hughes’ of ‘St Botolph’s’ it is a kind of stain under his ‘stupefied interrogation’. It cannot be assimilated in much the same way that Crow is unable to understand the sea, for instance. Except, it is already serving a symbolic purpose in the poem, symbolising Plath’s absence and all that Hughes would be able to retain of her. (The positioning of this poem next to ‘The Shot’, where he saves those sundry items, is surely no accident.) This takes on an added significance in the final line of ‘Red’.

The poem opens with the suggestion that ‘Red was your colour’, as well as white, before recounting various reds and whites associated with Plath: her choice of bedroom decoration, a red skirt, poppies. This ‘red’ Plath is a condensed portrait of the ‘abject’, suicidal Plath we have encountered throughout *Birthday Letters*: traumatic, with roses not symbolising love but ‘the heart’s last gouts’. However, amongst her blood-red and bone-white painting, she would occasionally add a ‘bluebird’; ‘Blue was better’ for her, as a ‘kindly spirit’. Even though the final line is prefigured a little by blue being ‘better’, representing wings, enfolding pregnancy, being a ‘kindly spirit’, this ending remains somewhat enigmatic. If we are to take ‘the jewel’ as life, then surely red and white, though figured corporeally as both life and death in ‘Red’, represent an equal loss; they are, after all, supposed to be ‘her’ colours and are therefore tokens of her life. This blue jewel, in that it exists independent of the body as a ‘kindly spirit’, poses a problem: it is a remainder, and has survived Plath, who has ‘lost’ it in committing suicide.

The ‘blue headscarf’ of ‘St Botolph’s’ returns here as the blue jewel, and it is not Plath’s at all, but Hughes’s: the subject of his ‘stupefied interrogation’. In her journals, Plath recorded that the headscarf she was wearing on the evening of her first meeting with Hughes was actually her treasured red headscarf (red, after all, being her favourite colour).[[21]](#endnote-21) Hughes’s misremembering, whether deliberate or otherwise, takes on a quiet significance.[[22]](#endnote-22) ‘St Botolph’s’ lays the seeds of the ‘blue’ Plath of ‘Red’, not the ‘abject’, traumatic Plath of the remainder of the collection, but a tender version of her. Accordingly, the ‘blue jewel’ at the end of ‘Red’ is not her loss but his. If Plath’s ‘abject’ red is what life withstands, then her blue is life itself: it ‘folded your pregnancy’ (*CP* 1170). It is in having survived Plath’s death that it becomes a manifestation of Hughes’s loss. Just like his ‘stupefied interrogation’ of the blue headscarf, this blue jewel remains somewhat enigmatic: nonetheless, it represents a symbolic closure, healing the traumatic, ‘abject’ representation of woman that haunted Hughes’s career.

1. See Jacques Lacan, ‘The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud’, in *Écrits: A selection* (London: Routledge, 1995): 161-197. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton): 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This is, in fact, a widely used misquotation; Adorno actually writes: ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983): 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Leon S. Roudiez (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982): 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*: 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*  (London: Verso, 2011): 192, 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The television appearance, from Thames Television 1988, can be accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuY-7AA1ebY> [accessed 19 March 2012]. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. James Berger, ‘Trauma and Literary Theory’ in *Contemporary Literature*, 38(3) (Autumn 1997): 573. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jacques Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller and James Hulbert, ‘Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*’ in *Yale French Studies*, 55/56, Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977): 38. Accessed at [http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930434 [16](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930434%20%5b16) August 2011]. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ [1917] in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, James Strachey (ed.) (London: Vintage, 2001): 237-258, 245. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ibid.: 245. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ibid.: 245. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 209. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Following the publication of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes wrote that his ‘feeling of release is marvellous’ (*LTH*: 731). This release extended to his poetry: ‘Once I’d determined to [publish *Birthday Letters*] […] & started repairing them wherever I could, & writing the last few ones, I suddenly had free energy I hadn’t known since Crow’ (*LTH*: 720). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jacques Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller and James Hulbert, ‘Desire and the Interpretation’: 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Janet Malcolm makes a similar observation (prior to the publication of *Birthday Letters*) in relation to Hughes’s introductions to Plath’s work: ‘Hughes can no longer sustain the fiction – on which all autobiographical writing is poised – that the person writing and the person being written about are a single seamless entity. In his second foreword Hughes needs to spell out his awareness of the discontinuity between the observing and observed self.’ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*, 2nd edn (London: Picador, 1994): 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence*, for instance, and Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (London: Little, Brown, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. An early version of ‘St Botolph’s’, already forms part of a sequence that would become *Birthday Letters* under the numerical title ‘V’ (by which we can reasonably infer this is not the first draft of the poem). This version appears to contain the first mention of the ‘blue headscarf’, given that the marginal insertion changes the syntax rather than just adding a forgotten line from a prior version. See BL Add 88918/1/6. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Hughes redacted his ‘theft’ of Plath’s headscarf and earrings from the original publication of Plath’s *Journals* – an omission that Jacqueline Rose makes a great deal out of in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991): 121. In the version published after Hughes’s death and edited by Karen V. Kukil, we can read Plath’s full note, where she writes of her ‘lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered the sun and much love, and whose like I shall never again find’: *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, Karen V. Kukil (ed.) (London: Faber and Faber, 2000): 212. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. In no extant version of the poem I could find in the British Library archives is the headscarf described as red, nor do any versions of ‘Red’ make reference to Plath’s favourite red headscarf. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)