

## I

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## The problem of biography

All biographies are impossible, but Ted Hughes's is more impossible than others. One of the reasons for this is that he was made a character in the life-story of Sylvia Plath. Witness the title of one of the two Ted Hughes biographies to date: *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Diane Middlebrook came to Hughes from an interest in Ann Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Her approach testified to the construction of a personage called 'Ted Hughes' that took place early on in his own lifetime, originating in Sylvia Plath's poems and her extremely detailed journals and letters, which are one of the main documentary sources for any Hughes biographer. The earlier biography, Elaine Feinstein's *Ted Hughes; The Life of a Poet*,<sup>2</sup> while still relying heavily on Plath's writings, had already attempted to broaden the scope of what was then known by using first-hand correspondence and conversations with people who had been personally acquainted with the poet. Of course, huge new sources of information were discovered with the opening in the year 2000 of the Ted Hughes Archives in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library of Emory University in Atlanta. This consists of a major part of Hughes's letters, drafts, notebooks and drawings, and it provides ample material for a literary biography of Ted Hughes that could not but lead to a genuine reappraisal of the figure of both the man and the poet. The full achievement of this remains impossible, however, because part of the archive remains sealed off, withdrawn from public inspection until the year 2023.

Poets' biographies are ultimately as impossible as poetry translations; like them, they require to be periodically redone. Whilst this is true for any work of a historical nature, in the case of the biography of Ted Hughes, one has to face the supplementary foreclosure of what he called his 'inner life', of which perhaps his own literary work is the only legitimate record. Here lies one of the central paradoxes of Hughes's career, which is that his whole work is an exploration of the inner life, in an age which was, at best, sceptical of this concept. For the biographer of Hughes the usual difficulty of establishing the

'facts' of a life, and distinguishing their statement from interpretation, is further complicated by the subject's ideology, which challenges this very process by privileging and protecting an elusively subjective inner life.

One of the major sources of discord between Plath and Hughes was directly linked to what has been called her 'confessional' poetic attitude. Plath insisted on offering for publication two poems about details of their private life, 'The Rabbit Catcher' and 'Event', which were personal fantasies about her husband. In addition to the example of Robert Lowell, Plath admired Theodore Roethke, from the days when Plath and Hughes worked as guests in the Yaddo community of artists in Saratoga Springs, just before they returned to the UK, and strove to emulate him by writing what she called 'mad poems' of her own. This was almost a recognition of the partly delirious nature of her fantasies in poems such as 'The Rabbit Catcher', and later 'Man in Black' and 'Daddy'. On the other hand, Hughes had, at that time, always insisted that one should not publish poems involving recognizable characters.

One remarkable point is the superimposition of the figures of Ted Hughes and of Sylvia's father, Otto Plath, especially in her poem 'Daddy'. In some accounts that Plath made of her psychoanalytical treatment with Dr Ruth Beuscher, she explains how she came to realize that she had constructed some mental overlap of the image of her husband and that of her dead father. Her hatred and resentment against her father, whom she felt had abandoned her and his family when he died, was somehow projected onto Ted, despite the fact that the two men were very different characters. The 'Ted Hughes' character that Plath writes about in poems like 'The Rabbit Catcher' has apparently got nothing in common with Otto, but he is very similar to a nocturnal character who haunts the poems of Ted Hughes's juvenilia in his *Collected Poems*, a poacher who stalks the moors and woods by night and absorbs the exotic stories and poetry of Rudyard Kipling by day.

Otto Plath was a scientist and an academic, a hard-working German-American, very strongly of a rational mode of thinking. There was also a serious-minded work ethic in the Methodist strain in Hughes's education, which he received from his mother, Edith Farrar Hughes. As a child Ted went with his mother to a Methodist chapel, and he would later satirize this particular religious mentality in poems like 'Mount Zion'. But at the same time, Ted inherited from Edith an altogether different style of spirituality, for Edith Hughes was psychic – she was a seer and had premonitory visions of tragic events; she also had a regular relationship with the ghost of her sister, who had died at the age of eighteen. Ted Hughes was convinced that he had inherited her gift and that he was a seer too.

In the series of BBC Radio talks called *Poetry in the Making* Hughes explained that finding a poem was very much like catching an animal. The

comparison derived from his relationship with his elder brother Gerald, with whom, at an early age, he had got into the habit of leaving the house by night to go on hunting expeditions in the neighbouring countryside. Ted explained that Gerald's practical teaching developed in him a sixth sense, very much like their mother's psychic ability.

When the family left Mytholmroyd, Ted's birthplace in West Yorkshire, for the town of Mexborough in South Yorkshire, Gerald joined the RAF and then took up a position as a gamekeeper on an estate in Devon before emigrating to Australia for the rest of his life. This separation from Gerald was felt as a heart-rending and long-standing deprivation by Ted, who would long afterwards write a letter to his brother, saying 'Think how you deprived me – orphaned me, really'.<sup>3</sup> From time to time Ted would wish to be with his brother again, either by thinking of joining him in Australia, or by devising endlessly renewed money-making schemes to try and induce Gerald to return and live with him in England. One immediate consequence of Gerald's departure was that Ted had the terrible feeling that he was faced with the impossible task of making up for this loss to his mother. The shadow character of his juvenilia seems very clearly to develop from this situation; there is always the feeling, in these poems of his youth, which he published in the Mexborough Grammar School magazine *Don & Dearne* (named after the local rivers where the young Ted attempted to go fishing), that Ted the wanderer is constantly accompanied by a double, a ghostly doppelgänger, haunting his every step.

What are the implications of this for the biographer's understanding of the actual relationships with women by a poet whose whole work can be read as a search for a relationship with a female figure whom he comes to characterize (for Shakespeare's work) as the Goddess of Complete Being? One of Hughes's lovers, aware that there were others, said to Elaine Feinstein that 'Ted was a man who needed several women ... other men do, don't they? He isn't unique.'<sup>4</sup> Could it be that Hughes needed 'several women' because he was the spiritual heir of Robert Graves, whose *White Goddess* includes a theory of the necessity for a poet to keep falling in love with a muse to go on writing genuine poetry? Robert Graves famously explained that 'The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual "other woman", and her part is difficult for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years, because the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart.'<sup>5</sup> Among the writers who spoke out against the sexual prurience of their times whom Hughes admired one should also add C. G. Jung and D. H. Lawrence. Ted Hughes once said that when he was reading D. H. Lawrence, he felt as if he was reading his own autobiography. In a letter defending fishing, Hughes referred to Jung's notion that if primitive

impulses were not found an outlet – such as in fishing, Hughes suggested – one outcome might be, in Hughes's words, a 'hectic bout of adultery' (*LTH* 658).

The now well-known cases of Jill Barber<sup>6</sup> and Emma Tennant<sup>7</sup> offer two examples of women who temporarily played the part of the White Goddess for Hughes in the 1970s. But what were their own agendas? Barber sought an introduction to London literary life after following Hughes from a reading in Australia. Tennant quite readily admits that she had wanted to become Hughes's lover in the hope of gathering confidential information about what had really happened between him and Sylvia Plath. According to them, it seems that he offered both the same discourse about a spiritual marriage. In the case of Sylvia Plath, Hughes was accused by some American feminists of being an adulterous husband who was the chief cause of her suicide. How can a biographer ever know the full story of a separation and a suicide? Should the suicide of his wife make Ted Hughes's poetry unworthy of study, as has been the common attitude in American academia? If Plath's poetry has come to be, however misleadingly, read through her suicide, it is now clear that Plath's death haunted Hughes's work in the harrowing trials and dismemberments of his mythic sequences published well before *Birthday Letters*.

When he was a student in Cambridge, Ted Hughes and his friends used to meet to sing and recite poems at a pub called The Anchor, where the received opinion was that Sylvia Plath was not the right kind of girl for him, or perhaps even that marriage was not such a good idea in his particular case. Years after the tragedy of Plath's suicide, Al Alvarez said to the literary journalist Janet Malcolm that 'Ted kind of went through swaths of women, like a guy harvesting corn; Sylvia must have known that.'<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence from other contemporaries to corroborate this statement. On the other hand, Plath wrote in her journal, the day after meeting Hughes for the first time, that she had been told by her boyfriend, Hamish, that 'he is the biggest seducer in Cambridge', adding, 'I could never sleep with him anyway, with all his friends here and his close relation to them, laughing, talking, I should be the world's whore, as well as Roget's strumpet.'<sup>9</sup> In fact, one of Hughes's Cambridge friends, Daniel Huws, believes that 'Sylvia was far more sexually experienced than Ted.'<sup>10</sup> Which of these three views is the biographer to believe, and would it help to understand Hughes's problematic relationships with his Muses? What is the role of the biographer in unravelling 'the difficulties of a bridegroom', in Hughes's enigmatic and totemic phrase?<sup>11</sup>

Hughes the astrologer was convinced that he and Plath were, in fact, destined for one another, and would express it in his own vocabulary, saying 'the solar system married us' (*CP* 1051). In her turn, Plath wrote to her mother: 'It is ridiculous for us to separate our forces when it is such a

magnificently “aspected” year.<sup>12</sup> And marriage seemed to Sylvia the one obvious thing to do in such a situation. Ted followed suit. ‘I didn’t even ask her to marry me,’ he said. ‘She suggested it as a good deal and I said OK, why not?’<sup>13</sup> They were married in London on 16 June 1956 at the parish church of Saint George the Martyr in Holborn. Sylvia believed, wrongly, that her Fulbright scholarship would be compromised unless they had kept their wedding secret. However, there would soon be the first symptoms that the two poets were involved in something that looked like a reciprocal Pygmalion complex. Each of them soon proved to be dreaming up further idiosyncratic images of the other.

They went on honeymoon to Spain, with the fantasy that they would eventually become globe-trotting poets, very much like Frieda and D. H. Lawrence, spending every year in a different country. What for Sylvia was merely a holiday before she returned to Cambridge to complete her BA was for Ted a trial of his desire for a happy-go-lucky year in Spain teaching English as a foreign language to survive and write poetry. But return to Cambridge they must, so Ted Hughes found himself transformed into a school teacher in Cambridge against his heart’s desire, while Sylvia Plath planned what she called her ‘campaign to make Ted fall in love with America’. It should not be too difficult, she thought, since her ‘big, unruly Huckleberry Finn’<sup>14</sup> of a husband loved fishing and the outdoor life, and so he was already very much like an American. Her vision of their future in those days was ‘the American dream of a secure sinecure writing on campus’.<sup>15</sup>

The transition to America was facilitated by Hughes’s collection *The Hawk in the Rain* winning Harper’s first publication contest in New York. However, his discontent increased when they lived the lives of junior academics in Northampton, Massachusetts. That was partly because Hughes had the feeling of being trapped in a society that was cutting him off from the roots of his artistic creativity. In a letter to Lucas Myers, he said that for him, in America, the world was ‘sterilised under cellophane’ (*LTH* 105). He felt, as Coleridge had done, that the poet was dying in him.

So he had undertaken to begin his education in American literature over again, by rereading everything in chronological order. The American modernist poets repelled him. William Carlos Williams sounded to him like the ‘most brainless American romanticism’; e. e. cummings he considered as ‘prevailingly a fool, and essentially a huckster’ (*LTH* 145). He was only interested in a very few contemporary artists and poets whom he met – especially John Crowe Ransom – and also Leonard Baskin, Robert Lowell and W. S. Merwin with whom he became friends. The only really important literary discovery that he made in those days were more folktales of the American Indians, which would be a seminal influence for his

future masterpiece, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, published more than a decade later, in 1970.

Sylvia's pregnancy seems to have been what triggered their decision to return to the Old World, and it would soon be Sylvia's turn to suffer from a depression of which the causes were deeper than mere homesickness. In London, then in Court Green in Devon, each of them was attempting to persuade the other to his or her own idea of life. Just as Plath had failed in her tentative accommodation of Hughes to America, he would hardly have any more success in his efforts to win her to his own theory of literary creation. True, they practised various techniques of spiritualism, especially the Ouija board, which produced a spirit they called PAN that they conjured up all too easily and who apparently spoke through Sylvia's voice. (Daniel Huws has recently owned up to being PAN on the occasion recounted in the poem 'Ouija' in *Birthday Letters*.)<sup>16</sup> Ted also did peculiar exercises of concentration and complicated physical postures that sometimes left him with muscular cramp, and he went through a general discipline of work that proved productive for him. But Sylvia found these exercises much less effective for her, and they did little to vanquish her writer's block. In fact, Sylvia resisted the methods that Ted was trying to teach her. Perhaps one may presume that a plausible reason for this was that these methods were in conflict with the psychoanalytical work with Dr Ruth Beuscher that Sylvia had secretly resumed when they arrived in Boston.

Actually, it seems that Sylvia was not very receptive to Jungian psychology and proved a baffling pupil for Ted's sorcerer's apprentice tuition. Far from being won over to his developing cult of the Goddess, Sylvia soon felt the imperative need to go to church again. Because she thought it was 'the best way to grow into the community here'<sup>17</sup> she went to see the Anglican rector, who welcomed her, in spite of her 'heretical' Unitarian beliefs, and started attending church regularly and looking forward to sending their daughter Frieda to Sunday school. Very soon, however, she disagreed with the preaching and stopped her ears during the sermons. At home, she shed tears of joy over the beautiful sermons of the Unitarian minister in Wellesley, Massachusetts, which she asked her friend Marcia Plumer to send over to her. When their second child, Nicholas, was born, they decided to have both the children baptized. However, Ted Hughes was hardly a Christian any more, at least from his late teens onwards, and his anti-Christian opinions would keep asserting themselves as he grew older. In those days, Plath defined herself as a 'pagan-Unitarian at best!'<sup>18</sup> Whatever that means, one cannot help reading it as an expression of the dramatic tension inherent in their relationship.

Meanwhile, friends often came to visit the Hugheses on weekends. Ted Hughes was then an increasingly famous figure of the London literary world,

whose voice was heard occasionally on BBC radio broadcasts. Among this crowd of old friends and new acquaintances, Assia Gutman, the wife of the Canadian poet David Wevill, half-jokingly made a bet with a friend that she was going to seduce Ted Hughes on their visit to Devon. Nevertheless, the love affair between Ted and Assia that developed from this visit was perhaps rather the consequence than the cause of the tensions in Sylvia's and Ted's marriage. In fact, only one meeting between Assia and Ted in London (for tea, Assia told William Trevor when she returned to the office)<sup>19</sup> can be documented before the fateful day when Assia asked a male colleague to make a phone call to Devon which Sylvia guessed was on Assia's behalf when she picked up the phone.<sup>20</sup> The blunder gave rise to a melodramatic scene resulting in Sylvia and Aurelia Plath driving Ted and his suitcase in their car to the railway station for the train to London. When Sylvia returned home she lit a bonfire of his papers. Might Hughes have been 'more sinned against than sinning' in the events that led to this separation? Can a biographer narrate this story without implying a view on this?

Perhaps the Hughes biographer might try to assess the importance of the Protestant ideology and especially a peculiar Nonconformist mentality inherent in Hughes's Methodist upbringing. One of the masterpieces of British literature on this subject is James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, which identifies a schizophrenic tendency in the Scottish Presbyterian religion: the 'justified sinner'. Ted Hughes was aware of this kind of notion at least as early as 1961, when he and Sylvia Plath moved from London to their house in Devon. Evidence of this can be found in Ted's letters to his sister Olwyn in the Emory archives. Ted and Olwyn were always very close. In 1961, one year before his separation from Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes was writing a letter to his sister in which he was trying to analyse his shortcomings and to understand what was going wrong in his own life. He said that there was something infantile about him, which amounted to a kind of incapacity to exert mental control and deliberate mental play in everyday life.

He put that down to his discovery of the writings of Carl Gustav Jung, already referred to above, at the age of eighteen. That year, 1948, was also the year when Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* was first published, and his English teacher at Mexborough Grammar School, John Fisher, had presented Hughes with a copy when he won his Open Exhibition to Cambridge. Hughes read Graves and Jung for the first time when he was doing his military service in the RAF before going up to Pembroke College. Jungian psychology made such a strong impression on him that he quite deliberately made the decision to impose upon himself some rules of behaviour that were meant to inhibit his conscious mind and rational thinking. In this way, he thought, his unconscious would compensate with an increased



activity. This means that he hoped to foster the productivity and the growth of his creative mind, which he liked to call his 'factory', or his 'mental cabbage'.<sup>21</sup>

It was also in those years of his life that he very consciously took the decision to become a poet and nothing else. Hughes's poem 'Song', which came to him on a rainy night in 1948, can be read as a declaration of love to what Jung called 'the *anima*', the creative principle of male psychology, which is very close to what Graves called 'the White Goddess'. With Hughes, this had the seriousness of a religious vow. From then on, he told his sister, he adopted a self-imposed discipline to follow a list of 'seven laws' (unspecified). Thirteen years later, however, when he found himself up to his neck in 'the difficulties of a bridegroom', he looked back and realized that these eccentric rules of conduct, which suppressed his conscious life in order for his imagination to access the unconscious, had also rendered him rather ill-equipped to lead the life of a normal husband.

Furthermore, in 1961, when he was explaining all this in his letter to his sister, he went on to say that he was once again toying with the idea that he had already had in his Cambridge years, of emulating Fernando Pessoa by writing under several aliases, or at least in various poetic voices. He said, 'I'm now creating other poets.' But he now came to the realization that he had really succeeded in developing only *two* such distinct voices. One of these two poets in him pursued the exacting ideal of formal verse, putting the stress on detailed objective observation and the thorough development of ideas. The other poet turned his back on this 'rigid formalist' outlook, which he called 'puritanical'. This poet went for free verse and indulged in taking as many liberties as possible, in a resolutely 'experimental and lyrical' attitude. All this did not result in a Jekyll and Hyde division, for these two poets got on fairly well together: they were just as fluently outspoken as each other, and Hughes had the feeling that his own poems 'barged midway' between these two extremes.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, there are some obvious resemblances with Jung's well-known *animus/anima* dualism. However, the issue of the two-sidedness of Ted Hughes's personality, which played such an important role in the misunderstanding with Plath, and ultimately in the antagonism between the two poets, is a domestic aspect of an ideological debate which is still a matter of dispute.

The whole purpose and justification of Ted Hughes's poetic undertaking is to try and find a literary means of coming to terms with unconscious forces which, from his point of view, will play havoc in the Western world as long as they are suppressed. From Hughes's point of view the major suppressive forces in history remain essentially reformed Christianity and the rationalism it has led to. In this respect, he perpetuates Romantic ideology, and his



dualistic take is very much derived from William Blake's and Percy Bysshe Shelley's discourses. In his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley argues that 'the cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave'.<sup>23</sup>

Already in the Cambridge of the early 1950s, Ted Hughes encountered a dominant academic ideology characterized by a strong resistance to Jungian psychoanalysis, and he arrived on a literary scene that was under the influence of modernist discourse that defined itself in radical opposition to Romanticism. In what was still the prolonged aftermath of the Second World War, no-nonsense rationalism could easily appear to be the last resort bulwark against fascism, although perhaps not quite so when it came to the latest totalitarian threat. Such an opinion is still widespread today, in an intellectual tradition largely based on Thomas Mann's 1945 address to the Library of Congress 'Germany and the German', where he declared that, 'reduced to a miserable mass level, the level of a Hitler, German Romanticism broke out into hysterical barbarism'.<sup>24</sup>

More recently, one variant of this ideological discourse is the resistance to Jungian psychoanalysis, as most strongly expressed, perhaps, in the books of Harvard professor Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult*<sup>25</sup> and *The Aryan Christ*.<sup>26</sup> In the late twentieth century, anything Jungian encountered the ostracism of a large part of the academic world. However, Hughes might challenge Jung for cultural designation as 'black beast', because his neo-Nietzschean, anti-Christian ideas also alienate him from the opposite Christian conservative camp. Hughes's alleged responsibility for the suicide of Sylvia Plath has tended to be implicitly perceived as the unsurprising confirmation of deeper ideological beliefs.

The Hughes-baiting that followed the quickly rising posthumous fame of Sylvia Plath reached a noteworthy climax in a poem entitled 'Arraignment' by Robin Morgan in her 1972 collection *Monster*. She reproached Hughes with domestic violence and Nazi tendencies: "How can / I accuse / Ted Hughes / of what the entire British and American / literary and critical establishment / has been at great lengths to deny / without ever saying it in so many words, of course, / the murder of Sylvia Plath?" Morgan went on with an invitation to 'disarm him of that weapon with which he tortured us, / stuff it into his mouth, sew up his poetasting lips around it, and blow out his brains'.<sup>27</sup> Morgan is, incidentally, clearly harping on a Jungian archetype, although perhaps this Maenad was mistaking Dionysus for Bluebeard. In the 1970s, it became a badge of honour for Plath supporters to cry 'Murderer!' on the rare occasions that Hughes appeared at a public reading. He privately called them

the 'Red Guards' and scornfully refused to retaliate or even reply. All this did very little to alleviate his occasional depression, and it certainly harmed his literary career in America in particular.

As has already been suggested, the intricate 'whodunit' of the circumstances that led to the suicide of Sylvia Plath in London in February 1963 is impossible to unravel. However, the personal and cultural after-effects were to be long-lasting. Actually, the news of his wife's death came to Ted Hughes as a surprise as well as a shock, for he had good reasons to believe that they would soon be reconciled. They had been seeing one another quite frequently in London, and on these occasions Sylvia had appeared to have mixed feelings about him. But, according to Hughes, at their last meetings they had talked of living together again soon. Hughes was appalled to realize that the people Plath had been corresponding with during the last months of her life, her mother, Aurelia Plath, her psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher, and perhaps also her patron, Olive Prouty, had been urging her to consult a solicitor in London to initiate a divorce.<sup>28</sup>

Ted Hughes's life with Sylvia Plath had lasted seven years, and six years after her death, the tragedy repeated itself one step further up the ladder of horror, when Assia Wevill committed suicide in the manner of Plath, by using a gas oven, but also took the life of her little daughter Shura.<sup>29</sup> Faced with the blunt facts, perhaps Hughes could no longer avoid attributing to himself what he had called, in a letter to his brother, 'Sylvia's particular death-ray quality'.<sup>30</sup> What killed Assia, however, was the guilt-ridden depression in which she had irremediably sunk, haunted, as she had been, by the continuing posthumous presence of Sylvia in Ted's life. There had been a time when his house had become a cauldron of tension, when his parents had come to live with him and simply could not bear the presence of Assia. Ted had taken refuge in a wooden writing cabin built by his father in the garden.

The situation seems at some point to have been even more complicated in a way which an anecdote from Hughes's notebook reveals. In August 1968, the children were going on holiday to visit their American grandmother. While waiting for the plane, Hughes heard them talking together, and they were saying that he 'ought to marry Carol and Brenda', for then they would have one mother each. Hughes found the incident striking enough to jot it down in his pocket notebook.<sup>31</sup> And indeed, it would mean that, at this time of his life, he was seeing at least two women in addition to Assia, in a way that was conspicuous enough for his children to have been aware of it. Again, the biographer can only seek some kind of explanation in the gaps between the poet's life, his thoughts and his art, or rather his multiple lives.

Assia Gutman's German Jewish multilingual background was part of her attraction for Hughes, and he came to bring her linguistic resources into his

developing fascination with translation. On New Year's Eve 1963, Ted Hughes had launched the idea of *Poetry in Translation* with Daniel Weissbort. The idea was to publish English translations of Eastern European poets such as Tadeusz Rosziewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslav Holub and Vasko Popa. He was interested in these poets because they had used poetry as a form of resistance against mental and spiritual oppression. He saw himself as an artist faced with the necessity to survive ideological oppression, in a modern Western world dominated, he thought, by forces that were aiming at ultimately closing up the unconscious and eradicating what he called the 'inner world' of spirits and poetic inspiration as so much superstitious mumbo-jumbo, or, in Philip Larkin's immortal words, a mere 'myth kitty'.

In Ted Hughes's own *Weltanschauung* the radical rationalism of the Western world was the disease of civilization. This for him was simply the continuation of the Christian religion as collective neurosis, as Freud had it in his book *Civilisation and Its Discontents*. One of the key issues was the Christian repression of sexuality, and more precisely the suppression of female sexuality – and the Goddess in all her forms – by reformed Christianity. For biographical reasons, the epitome of this nefariously narrow vision of the world was represented for Hughes in the ideology underpinning the American way of life, especially in its New England variant. Although Hughes never said so explicitly, he obviously had the feeling that this ideology was responsible for Sylvia Plath's long-lasting difficulties in accessing the unconscious. In his *Birthday Letters* poem 'You Hated Spain', Hughes describes Plath as a 'bobby-sox American' whose 'education had somehow neglected Spain' (*CP* 1068) – the Spain of Goya, bullfights and the *duende*. So her 'inner world' was like a desert from which all life had been napalmed out by the lightning of the ECT (Electroconvulsive Therapy) that she had undergone in Boston Hospital. From his point of view, this was the infernal world of Jehovah-Jupiter-Urizen-Krogon, and the whole castrating paraphernalia of the totalitarian scientific spirit of the West.

For the biographer writing about Ted Hughes it is difficult to avoid taking sides either for or against him, for merely to accept his preoccupations means placing oneself already outside the dominant Western ideology that he has challenged. Hughes was so aware of the problem, that he regarded biographers as among his worst 'black beasts'. 'These biographers,' he would write to Graham Ackroyd, are 'common burglars who creep into your life, defile everything, steal what they can lift, sell it with lies.'<sup>32</sup> He thought of founding a 'solidarity group', a kind of union of the victims of biographers with a 'vigilante commando' that could form a 'superego for the literary world',<sup>33</sup> exerting pressure on the publishers of libellous biographies.

In fact, a biographer who wants to eschew hagiography and arraignment equally will have to write in such a way as to present the subject as an open question. Since a biographical subject must always be misrepresented, it had better be so overtly and with a purpose. In other words, a worthy biographer has to admit failure from the start. A good biography, if there can be such a thing, has to be written as an unsolvable riddle.

NOTES

1. Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2003).
2. Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (New York: Norton, 2001).
3. TH to Gerald Hughes, 21 December 1979, Mss 854, Box 1, ff. 28, Emory.
4. Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, p. 165.
5. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 449.
6. Gill Barber, 'Ted Hughes, My Secret Lover', *Mail on Sunday* (13 and 20 May 2001).
7. Emma Tennant, *Burnt Diaries* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999).
8. Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 121.
9. Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. 213, 212.
10. Daniel Huws, *Memories of Ted Hughes 1952–1963* (London: Five Leaves Press, 2010), p. 37.
11. Hughes began using this title for various works in progress before it became the title of a radio play broadcast in 1963 and later of his collected short stories (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).
12. Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, ed. Aurelia Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 23 October 1956, p. 280.
13. Feinstein, *Ted Hughes*, p. 60.
14. Plath, *Letters Home*, 4 May 1956, p. 250.
15. *Ibid.*, 19 January 1957, p. 290.
16. Huws, *Memories of Ted Hughes*, pp. 43–4.
17. Plath, *Letters Home*, 13 October 61, p. 431.
18. *Ibid.*, 22 October 1961, p. 433.
19. Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill* (London: Robson Books, 2006), p. 96.
20. Olwyn Hughes: 'Assia got a male colleague to call Ted – just in case Sylvia answered. I've corrected this several times but everyone wants to believe Sylvia's poem. As people do.' Letter to Terry Gifford, 5 August 2010.
21. TH to Gerald Hughes, 24 August 1961, Mss 854, Box 1, ff. 10, Emory.
22. TH to Olwyn Hughes, 1961, Mss 980, Box 1, ff. 9, Emory.
23. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 502–3.

24. *Deutschland und die Deutschen in 'Die Neue Rundschau'* (Stockholm: Heft, 1 October 1945). *Germany and the German*, trans. by Helen T. Lowe-Porter (Washington: Library of Congress, 1963), p. 64. Thomas Mann delivered this address at the Library of Congress, 29 May 1945.
25. Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1994).
26. Richard Noll, *The Aryan Christ: The Secret Life of Carl Jung* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1997).
27. Robin Morgan, *Monster* (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 76.
28. Plath, *Letters Home*, 26 September 1962, p. 463.
29. Here is the biographer's conundrum: Hughes was named as Shura's father on her birth certificate, but neither Frieda nor Olwyn Hughes regarded Shura as his child. Frieda: 'My brother and I knew Shura only as Assia's daughter; there was no indication from Assia that she was related to us.' 'The poison that drove Sylvia and Ted apart', *The Sunday Times*, 28 March 2010, p. 7. Olwyn Hughes: 'Assia said she didn't know. Ted told me when I asked, "I'm taking her on anyway."' Letter to Terry Gifford, 5 August 2010. Ted Hughes: 'I have two nice children . . . I had a third, a little marvel, but she died with her mother', *LTH* 293. *The Iron Man* was dedicated 'to Frieda, Nicholas and Shura'.
30. TH to Gerald Hughes, November 1962, Mss 854, Box 1, ff. 11, Emory.
31. Koren and Negev, *A Lover of Unreason*, p. 184.
32. TH to Graham Ackroyd, 22 October 1982, Mss 644, Box 185, ff. 1, Emory.
33. TH to 'Natasha and Stephen' [Spender], 17 December 1992, Mss 644, Box 53, ff. 5, Emory.