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**Poetry and Co-Dependency:   
Poetry of Sylvia Plath**

Professor Belinda Jack

Good evening and welcome.

We have been listening to Beethoven’s Grosse Fugue which inspired one of Plath’s poems, ‘little Fugue’, a poem about death. We will hear some more of the fugue at the end.

There are interesting difficulties associated with reading Plath’s poetry. Like it or not, the biography is always there, luring us to read the poems against the life – one of mental illness, loves, marriage and suicide.

But more than that there is the presence of her poet husband, Ted Hughes, which continued for decades after her death. And he was heavily involved in editorial and interpretative work on her poetry.

What I want to argue this evening is that too much attention has been paid to the influence of these two poets on each other – much of it tentative and speculative.

I would like to begin by looking at what they both thought about the question of their mutual influence, and then go on to see what literary historians, critics and biographers have had to say. I then want to analyse two poems, one by Hughes, one by Plath, often read alongside each other.

Moving away from the partnership I would like to explore the importance of the American confessional movement of the 50s and 60s for Plath.

Then I will finish arguing against Ted’s interpretation of one of Plath’s very last poems, ‘Sheep in Fog’. So let us begin with the question of ‘influence’.

Literary partnerships are not so rare: Rebecca West and HG Wells, Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry, Jean Rhys and Ford Madox Ford, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre, Martha Gellhorn and Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. In each of these relationships there was passion both sexual and literary and an obsessive, sometimes desperate dimension which is perhaps part of what co-dependency is. I use the term loosely.

In 1958, two years after Plath had met Hughes, Plath wrote in her journal: “I must be happy first in my own work and struggle to that end, so my life does not hang on Ted's... do we, vampire-like, feed on each other? A wall, sound-proof, must mount between us. Strangers in our study, lovers in bed.”

And in July of the same year, 1958, she wrote: “We are amazingly compatible. But I must be myself - make myself and not let myself be made by him.” (Journals, 401)

A couple of years later, in January of 1961, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath gave an interview to the BBC third programme. They were asked, naturally enough, about their relationship and about their poetry. The broadcast was entitled ‘‘Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership.’’ One of the things they were asked about – inevitably - was their influence on each other’s poetry. Plath, generally eloquent and articulate, responded with a somewhat confused, even contradictory answer, one that testifies to her anxiety about the very idea of poetic ‘‘partnership’’.

Key, here, are these words from Plath:

Well I think that all the poems that we wrote to each other and about each other were really before our marriage, and then something happened, I do not know what it was, I hope it was all to the good, but we began to be able to, well, somehow free ourselves for other subjects and I think the dedications, at least as far as mine goes, I feel that I would never be writing as I am, and as much as I am, without Ted’s understanding and cooperation, really.

Plath suggests that the poems they wrote to each other before they were married were inferior to what came later, presumably after they had ‘free[d]’ themselves and therefore their poems from each other’s influence. I want to come back to the whole notion of ‘influence’ in a moment. She claims to be unclear as to how they found this freedom – ‘‘something happened, I don’t know what’’ - and unsure whether or not this was for the best (‘‘I hope it was all to the good’’). She goes on to pay homage to Hughes’s help, which seems to contradict her earlier claim that marriage brought a new freedom. As the interview continues they both repeatedly say contradictory things about their creative relationship. Hughes expresses very little anxiety about their poetic union saying that he and Plath have ‘‘a single, shared mind,’’ ‘‘a telepathic union’’ that is ‘‘a source of a great deal’’ in his poetry. On the other hand, he emphasises that when they ‘‘happen’’ to write about the same subject, they always approach it differently. Plath says Hughes encouraged her to bring the natural world into her writing, but is ill at ease with their interviewer’s claims that she and Hughes write about nature in similar ways. Her retort is, ‘‘this was true of our poems before we ever knew each other’’ but now, their work is ‘‘really quite, quite different.’’ It should be unsurprising that each in turn accepts and then rejects the notion of influence.

And the same anxiety can be read in a number of their poems, most obviously Hughes’s poem ‘Lovesong’, from his collection Crow, published in 1970, and seven years after Plath’s suicide:

In their entwined sleep they exchanged arms and legs

In their dreams their brains took each other hostage

In the morning they wore each other's face

Ted Hughes

To some degree these lines, if not the lines that precede them, are a simple parody of love poetry. The shock comes in the penultimate and final lines.

The transferred epithet, ‘entwined’ belongs, in conventional prose, with ‘arms and legs’. But it is ‘sleep’ that is ‘entwined’. The arms and legs are not entwined, they are ‘exchanged’. This is the first hint of something more sinister. Limbs can only truly be ‘exchanged’ if severed. In the penultimate line ‘brains take each other hostage’. Hostage-taking is a violent business. The conventional ‘entwined’ sleeping lovers become less conventional with the suggestion that their subconscious minds, which work away furiously when we sleep, are at war.

And the final line suggests an exchange of identity; as though the self has been so lost in the other as to become the other.

Plath’s idea that they must be ‘strangers in [their] our study, lovers in bed’ finds echoes in Hughes’s poem, written years later and after Plath’s death. I am not suggesting that Hughes’s poem should be read in a narrow biographical way. The poem is about psycho-sexual complexity, something we have all experienced. And notions of dominance and submission, independence and dependency are germane to all human relationships. But if you are a poet then an extra dimension is involved – the question of poetic influence, hence Harold Bloom’s study of the phenomenon, entitled The Anxiety of Influence. His central thesis is that all poets have to overcome the obstacle of what other poets have already written. Poets become poets in large part as a function of reading the poetry of others. The fear, or anxiety, is that the contemporary poet’s work will be imitative or derivative or unoriginal. Unless the poet’s vision is strong, their work will be forgotten. What Bloom goes on to do is to try to establish why it is that a small minority of poets are sufficiently ‘strong’ to survive while most are forgotten.

So is the anxiety expressed by Plath and Hughes really any different from the anxiety felt by all ambitious poets?

The biographies certainly complicate the matter. In her subtle study, The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (1994) which is about the two poets but also a wonderful study of the problematic nature of biography as a genre (and its ethics if relatives are still alive), Janet Malcolm writes:

‘Life, as we all know, does not reliably offer – as art does – a second (and a third and a thirtieth) chance to tinker with a problem, but Ted Hughes’s biography seems to be uncommonly bare of moments of mercy that allow one to undo or re-do one’s actions and thus feel that life isn’t entirely tragic. Whatever Hughes might have done or redone in his relationship to Sylvia Plath, the opportunity was taken from him when she committed suicide, in February 1963, by putting her head in a gas oven as her two small children slept in a bedroom nearby, which she had sealed against gas fumes, and where she had placed mugs of milk and a plate of bread for them when they awoke.’

They had been married for six years, and then separated. They were young. Hughes was with another woman.

It’s not such an unusual story but as Malcolm goes on to write:

‘A person who dies at thirty in the middle of a messy separation remains forever fixed in the mess. To the readers of her poetry and her biography, Sylvia Plath will always be young and in a rage over Hughes’s unfaithfulness. She will never reach the age when the tumults of young adulthood can be looked back upon with rueful sympathy and without anger and vengefulness.’

It is hardly surprising that readers approach the poetry via what we know of the biographies. And a number of critics have considered the related question of influence.

Margaret Dickie Uroff, author of the first full-length study of poetic influence between Plath and Hughes, argues that their poems should be read ‘‘as parts of a continuing debate about the nature of the universe, in which Plath’s reservations and Hughes’s assertions play against each other’’ (12). Uroff claims that Plath’s ‘‘interest in psychological states and extreme human experiences’’ are similar to Hughes’s ‘‘concern with the non-human cosmos’’. She claims that they influenced each other in equal measure, albeit at different stages of their poetic development.

Uroff’s study came out two years before the publication of Sylvia Plath Collected Poems (1981) edited by Ted Hughes. He made a number of editorial decisions that have been questioned. He re-arranged the Ariel manuscript (the Collected Poems are arranged chronologically). Was this an act of appropriation, suggesting that her own arrangement of the manuscript was without significance? He burnt her last journal. And he labelled her pre-Cambridge (and therefore Pre-Hughes) work ‘juvenilia’. The notes in the Collected Poems are often surprising. In relation to Plath’s poem ‘The Burnt-Out Spa’ (1959), Hughes writes, ‘The Burnt-Out Spa’. ‘The old health spa at Saratoga Springs remained only as a burnt-out spa.’ If Plath had wanted the poem to be exclusively about the spa at Saratoga Springs she would have named it thus. As it is, Plath’s poem conjures the idea, the mood, of the burnt-out spa; it doesn’t refer to a single real spa. And the idea alludes to other poetry, perhaps Eliot’s Burnt Norton in particular, the title of the first of Eliot’s Four Quartets. A few lines from the end of the poem is the line, ‘And we shall never enter there’, reminiscent of these lines from Burnt Norton:

‘Down the passage which we did not take. Towards the door we never opened’.

Hughes’ scholars tend to deny that Hughes was influenced in any way by Plath’s poetry. Other critics, like Susan Van Dyne, for example, has argued that ‘‘Plath’s dialogue with Hughes’s poems is always competitive and her strategy revisionary’’ (1993: 40).

With the publication of Hughes’s Birthday Letters (1998) the debate became still livelier. Diary entries and letters to friends reveal Hughes explaining how he first began a ‘written conversation’ with Plath as far back as the early 1970s. Diane Middlebrook was able to take Birthday Letters into account in her study, Her Husband: Hughes and Plath, a Marriage (2003). Middlebrook explores what she terms the ‘‘the call-and-response manner of their productive collusion’’ (2003: 191). More recently Heather Clark has provided a thorough study of the borrowings, echoes and allusions between the two poets’ work in a book called, The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (2011).

It is a very good book in many ways and the result of extensive research of both published and unpublished material but I would like to explore her reading of two poems, Hughes’s ‘Hawk in the Rain’ and Plath’s ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’. Clark claims that Plath’s rook is a response to Hughes’s hawk. She further claims that Plath’s intention is to explore ‘as Hughes does, the self’s place in nature’, employing ‘feminine imagery… to assert an essential harmony between humankind and nature.’ I fear this is Clark allowing her feminist sympathies to encourage ‘wishful reading’.

Here are the two poems, Hughes’s then Plath’s, each read by the poet:

1/

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up

Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth’s mouth,

From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle

With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.

His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,

Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.

While banging wind kills these stubborn hedges,

Thumbs my eyes, throws my breath, tackles my heart,

And rain hacks my head to the bone, the hawk hangs

The diamond point of will that polestars

The sea drowner’s endurance: and I,

Bloodily grabbed dazed last-moment-counting

Morsel in the earth’s mouth, strain towards the master-

Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still,

That maybe in his own time meets the weather

Coming from the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,

Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,

The horizon traps him; the round angelic eye

Smashed, mix his heart’s blood with the mire of the land.

2/

On the stiff twig up there

Hunches a wet black rook

Arranging and re-arranging its feathers in the rain.

I do not expect a miracle

Or an accident

To set the sight on fire

In my eye, nor seek

Any more in the desultory weather some design,

But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,

Without ceremony or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,

Occasionally, some backtalk

From the mute sky, I can’t honestly complain:

A certain minor light may still

Leap incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair

As if a celestial burning took

Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then –

This hallowing an interval

Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,

One might say love. At any rate, I now walk

Wary (for it could happen

Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical,

Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare

Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook

Ordering its black feathers can so shine

As to seize my senses, haul

My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear

Of total neutrality. With luck,

Trekking stubborn through this season

Of fatigue, I shall

Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,

If you care to call those spasmodic

Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait’s begun again,

The long wait for the angel,

For that rare, random descent.

Both poems meditate on the bird, the ‘rook’ and the ‘hawk’. In both there is rain, but Plath’s ‘desultory weather’ is in sharp contrast with Hughes’s ‘rain hacks my head to the bone’. In Plath there is an intellectual distance between the speaking subject and the object it describes: ‘desultory’ [lacking purpose or enthusiasm]. Hughes’s speaking subject is caught up in a physical encounter, a violent one; this is typical. The rain is an aggressor ‘hacking’ both the subjects ‘head’ and ‘bone’. We immediately recognise the truth of the poetic experience: cold rain, in a wind, can feel like a brutal assault. Both poems could be said to convey a sense of the experience of a country walk is strikingly different ways. Hughes’ is a feat of human endurance in the face of murderous forces; Plath’s poem is about the thoughts inspired by nature; Hughes’s is about the physical encounter between self and what is outside the self; the comparison of the poet, who remains earth-bound, and the weightless bird, surveying swathes of land from on high, is perhaps a worn conceit, but the poem culminates in the bird’s death.

Both the poet and bird suffer the violence of the world. Hughes’s poem is physical; Plath’s is much more intellectual. The ponderous reflections, in Plath’s poem, are communicated by means of parenthetical clauses, ‘Although, I admit, I desire’, ‘At any rate, I now walk’. Plath’s poem wants to establish a relationship between the walker and her surroundings, ‘some backtalk/ From the mute sky’. The ‘fear/Of total neutrality’ is the absence of poetic inspiration but ‘Miracles occur’. For Hughes, on the other hand, nature is not a source of poetic inspiration but a force that has to be resisted, stood up to. In Plath’s poems the hostile forces are psychological; in Hughes’ they are physical.

In Hughes’s poem the sound patterning adds to the atmosphere of violence. Further the stressed syllables and frequent alliteration recall the rhythms of Anglo-Saxon verse. Hughes takes his reader back in time to an England that is dark, threatening, home to warring factions; it is a legendary land.

For much of Plath’s poem the speaker seems unaware of the rook. Nine of the clauses in the poem have ‘I’ as their subject: I do not expect nor seek but let … fall I admit I desire I can’t honestly complain I now walk I only know I shall patch together… The effect is to foreground the meditative consciousness of the speaker. Most of the verbs are assertive. By contrast, five of the remaining ten clauses are modal [We use modal verbs to show if we believe something is certain, probable or possible (or not)]: a certain minor light may still lean / incandescent one might say it could happen whatever angel may choose to flare a rook … can so shine and there are two conditional verbs, introduced by ‘if’: as if a celestial burning took possession if you care to call. These clauses lend the poem an air of speculative thought. The verb forms given to the rook, by contrast, are straightforward present indicatives: it ‘hunches’, it ‘arranges and rearranges’, and then ‘orders’ its feathers; releasing, as it does so, the ‘shine’. And the poet becomes the object. The rook ‘seize[s]’ her senses, ‘haul[s]’ her eyelids up, and ‘grant[s]’ a brief moment of reassurance: ‘Miracles occur’. The effect of the poetic techniques combine to convey a sense of an experience that is little more than a glimpse caught out of the eye. It is fleeting, delicate, perhaps something that will disappear if subjected to too much scrutiny. Here it is Eliot who may be the major influence.

In my last lecture we reflected on the ‘other echoes’ that inhabit T.S. Eliot’s garden in ‘Burnt Norton’: the ‘unheard music’, the ‘unseen eyebeam’, ‘the empty pool’. Hughes’s poem is, as Clark suggests about ‘the self in nature’; Plath’s is not. Plath’s is about a fleeting, psychic and mysterious experience of poetic inspiration. It takes place in nature, but this is to a large degree incidental. It is about the experience of inspiration - and the fear that it may be lost.

Plath learnt how to write poetry by reading poetry, imitating other poets’ styles, experimenting with various set forms, and immersing herself in her thesaurus. She began writing under the influence of W.H.Auden who was touring America American college campuses in the 1950s. She was also influence by Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke. Plath within American tradition; Hughes with an English tradition of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Yeats, Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, Robert Graves but interested in the instinctive rather than the intellectual.

Plath suffered a nervous breakdown when she was at Smith College in 1953. She had attempted suicide and when she was physically well enough she was admitted to McClean, a mental hospital in Belmont. This was the same institution that Robert Lowell had attended after his breakdown and Anne Sexton, Plath’s friend and rival would also spend time there. Lowell’s daring in introducing the taboo of mental illness was a major influence on Plath.

And here is a reading of the opening lines of Lowell’s poem, ‘Waking in the Blue’ (1959).

In 1950s America admission of admission was a very brave act. Lowell had done it and this encouraged Plath to do the same.

In her poems, characters are unstable, shifting, and fluid. Miss Drake is clearly mad:

‘Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper’:

No novice

In those elaborate rituals

Which allay malice

Of knotted table and crooked chair,

The new woman in the ward

Wears purple, steps carefully

Among her secret combinations of eggshells

And breakable hummingbirds,

Footing sallow as a mouse

Between the cabbage-roses

Which are slowly opening their furred petals

To devour and drag her down

Into the carpet’s design.

With bird-quick eye cocked askew

She can see in the nick of time

How perilous needles grain the floorboards

And outwit their brambled plan;

Now through her ambushed air

Adazzle with bright shards

Of broken glass,

She edges with wary breath,

Fending off jag and tooth,

Until, turning sideways,

She lifts one webbed foot after the other

Into the still, sultry weather

Of the patients’ dining room.

One of the most striking techniques that Plath’s poem exploits is enjambment. This is a technique where the line ending runs on onto the subsequent line, without room for a breath. The poem is essentially made up of two sentences, stretched across two stanzas made up of thirteen lines – that’s 26 lines. The effect is to suggest breathlessness, Miss Drake staggering on, without rest, conveying an anguished sense of Miss Drake’s own feelings of disorientation and lack of control. The tension rises as her sense of terror builds.

Miss Drake, walking ‘Between the cabbage-roses’ is a soothing image. Gardens are places of beauty, safe even. But the next line introduces something peculiar. The petals are ‘furred’, like an animal, hence their capacity to ‘devour’ her and ‘drag her down’. The hallucinatory experience is explained in the next line, ‘into the carpet’s design’. Carpets are often woven motifs of flowers. For Miss Drake, the carpet has come alive.

The alliteration of the‘d’ sound – devour, drag, down – conveys a sense of assault, further emphasising violence.

Miss Drake is ‘The new woman in the ward’ on her way to the ‘patients’ dining room’. Miss Drake is an in-patient with a terrifying fear of the patterned carpet. Plath uses a number of techniques here to postpone our understanding. We are not told that Miss Drake is mad. Rather we live through Miss Drake’s experience, we perceive as she does and the emotional correlatives are clear: terror, disorientation, helplessness.

The influence here is Lowell and Sexton, not Hughes. It is a good poem, but I would like to conclude by looking at one of Plath’s last poems that mediates despair in a highly-wrought poetic piece, ‘Sheep in Fog’.

Sheep in Fog

Sylvia Plath

The hills step off into whitness

People or stars

Regard me sadly, I disappoint them

The train leaves a line of breath

O slow

Horse the colour of rust

Hooves, dolorous bells -

All morning the

Morning has been blackening.

A flower left out.

My bones hold a stillness, the far

Fields melt my heart.

They threaten

To let me through to a heaven

Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

When the manuscripts relating to this poem came up for auction; Ted Hughes wrote an account of the evolution of the poem for Roy Davids, of Sotheby’s. It is an account that purports to shed light on its meaning. He ‘de-coded’ the poem’s possible mythical dimensions. He also sought to justify his view that the final lines, and I quote, ‘don’t quite work, don’t ring true, somehow’.

I think it is a wonderful poem that explores feelings of loneliness and despair that are part of the human condition and not unique to a poet perhaps already contemplating suicide – again. Plath died a couple of weeks later.

‘Sheep in Fog’

There is an extraordinary economy about Plath’s poetry and nowhere more so than here. The title dispenses with articles, not ‘A or The Sheep’ in ‘A or The Fog’, but ‘Sheep in Fog’. This gives the poem a universal reach.

It is not about a one-off experience.

In terms of the poem’s semantic or lexical fields (words that belong in some sense within a group’. We have a rural set, suggesting a rural setting: ‘sheep’, ‘hills’, ‘horse’, ‘hooves’, ‘fields’. We have another associated with a living being: ‘breath’, ‘bones’, ‘heart’. A living being in a large rural landscape, further suggesting vulnerability, is thus conjured. There is an astronomical lexis too: ‘stars’, ‘heaven’, and ‘starless’. This provides for a very large-scale canvas, further emphasising the vulnerability of the speaker – who is ‘threatened’ (l.13). The prepositions, ‘in’(in the title), ‘into’, ‘out’, and through, suggest movement through space. ‘Through to a heaven’ suggests a move not simply through space but from one world to another, otherworldly place, ‘heaven’. The adverbs ‘sadly’ and ‘slowly’ are downbeat and suggest inevitability.

The alliterative ‘leaves a line’ encourages a visual extension mirroring the aural extension. The alliteration and repetition - All morning/the morning suggest circularity and the impossibility of escape. The homophone ‘morning’/’mourning’ is suggested by its proximity to the dolorous bells tolling, maybe for the dead. And there is blackening, suggestive of the funereal. The blackening ‘flower left out’ could be an image of the lost poet, suffering, alone, decaying. Flowers turn black in autumn when their entire colour has drained away. Think of desiccated cow parsley against a background of autumnal yellows and oranges.

In the alliterative ‘far, fields’ ‘melt my heart’, the repeated ‘f’ sound brings the words into close relationship suggesting the scale of the landscape once again (mirroring the scale of the sky-scape). Similarly the repeated suffix in ‘Starless’ and ‘fatherless’ suggests an absence in the world and an absence in the speaker’s life. The ‘starlessness’ picks up on the ‘blackening’, and presages the ‘dark’ water of the final line. It also echoes the portentous mood of the dolorous bells.

In terms of colour we have very little – ‘whiteness’, the ‘color of rust’ and ‘blackening’. It is a limited palette for a depiction of the countryside. This adds to the mood of bleakness, particularly as rust is the result of decay and is a reddish blood colour. There is also a good deal of personification: ‘The hills step’, ‘stars regard me’ (an inversion of us gazing at them; in other words an inversion of activity and passivity, further underlining the vulnerability of the speaker.). The train ‘leaves a breath’, the morning has been ‘blackening’, the fields ‘melt my heart’.

The speaker of the poem is relatively absent, lost like sheep in the fog. ‘People and stars regard me sadly’ – the speaker is the object of the verb. ‘I disappoint them’; here the speaker is the subject but the verb suggests a self-perception of failure – rather than activity, vivacity, energy.

The speaker is then absent until line 11: ‘My bones hold a stiffness… the far/Fields melt my heart.’ The rigidity of the speaker’s body and the idea of stasis, contrasts with the melting of the heart – perhaps conveying a sense of the over-whelming beauty of the landscape.

This is a poem which describes a liminal state, a moment on a threshold, everything on the brink. This is supported by the form of the poem. We have five stanzas. The first is a single sentence. The second, third and fourth, through the use of enjambment, are also a single sentence. The final three line stanza is again a single sentence. So we could illustrate this as 3+9+3.

The idea of the liminal, the threshold, is introduced in the first line where the hills are described stepping into whiteness. This is a vivid evocation of something we have all seen, although here it is inverted. We have seen fog or low cloud enveloping a hillside; but fog and scudding cloud can play tricks on our eyesight; here the hills step into the whiteness, but the image is clear.

This first line turns out to be a possible metaphor for the speaker of the poem, on the brink of being ‘let through to a heaven (whiteness)/Starless and fatherless, a dark water. Just as the hills have faded from sight, so the speaker may also become invisible.

And the three stanzas that delay the realisation of the metaphor, stanzas 2,3 and 4 are dominated by the vowel sound ‘o’and ‘oo’ and ‘ow’, explicit in line 5, ‘O slow’. The hills are on the brink – then there is a delay, emphasised by the repeated slow o’s: horse, color, hooves, dolorous, morning, out, bones, hold.

The final stanza is fantastically compressed, emphasised by imploding rhymes: ‘threaten’/’heaven’, ‘starless/fatherless’.

And earlier we had the brilliant repeated –ings (stanza 3), the sound of a bell ringing but ‘ringing’ is not explicitly mentioned. All is suggestive, like the powerful subliminal techniques of the multi-million pound advertising industry.

I encourage you to read Hughes’s reading of ‘Sheep in Fog’, based on his reading of the drafts of the poem for Sotheby’s.

In my view I think Hughes, no doubt unconsciously, attempts to appropriate the ‘meaning’ of the poem in a way which reduces its extraordinarily suggestive, mesmerising, mysterious qualities. It is as though he has installed some monstrous, gigantic machine that has dispelled the fog and left the hills there, themselves lacking all capacity to generate poetry. He ‘de-codes’ an allusive, fantastically complex set ofideas and feelings to provide a straightforward reading. It is a plausible one. But Hughes does not hold a monopoly on interpretation, however close they were as poets and lovers.

I would like to end by citing Keats’s notion of ‘negative capability’, which I touched on earlier in the year. It is both a poetic and philosophical notion and Plath, unlike Hughes, had studied a good deal of philosophy. Keats defines the idea thus: ‘When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. Plath, in my view, despite her mental illness, strived to live exactly in this way and I think that ‘Sheep in Fog’ demonstrates this. What Hughes saw as lacking, I see as Plath’s capacity to accept irresolution. Plath was also a keen reader of T.S. Eliot about whom I spoke last time. In his famous essay, ‘Tradition and the individual Talent’ he wrote:

‘the progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality’.

And I am reminded of Mrs Ramsey, in Virginia Woolf's ‘To the Lighthouse’, who looks at things so intently ‘until she became the things she looked at’.

Plath and Woolf both committed suicide and have become mythical figures. Why? I do not think that we will ever fully know. What matters to me, is to recognise and celebrate their greatness as writers, their ability to make out of difficult human experience and feelings, works of supreme literary power.

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