

OMENS AND PORTENTS



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TED HUGHES, *Tales From Ovid*. Faber and Faber, stg £7.99
Birthday Letters, stg £14.99

Now that some of the controversy surrounding Ted Hughes's most recent works has abated it may be possible to consider them in the context of his oeuvre. While *Tales from Ovid* stirred the debate on translation versus new text (not forgetting Edwina Currie's rap on the Poet Laureate's knuckles for mixed metaphor and cliché), *Birthday Letters* has revived the issue of Ted Hughes's part in Plath's suicide.

Ostensibly very different, the two books are nevertheless connected. As a critic Hughes reads a story across the work of a poet, an approach epitomized in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). This synthesis of myth, history, religion and biography is essentially Hughes's poetic credo. The "tragic equation" he makes by adding "Venus and Adonis" to "Lucrece" is solved in "The Tempest", a play with obvious Plathian associations.

Central to Hughes's narrative imagination is the mystical marriage, an extension of his early "preoccupation with the shamanic dismemberment and reconstitution of the body, with *The Bacchae* and the Orphic myths", as Myers Lucas has called it. After Plath's death this preoccupation gained a new significance realized in *Crow* (1970), and *Gaudete* (1977). In *Gaudete* Hughes reversed the ending of *The Bacchae* allowing his priest, Nicholas Lumb (Crow incarnate) to be killed by irate fathers and husbands.

Thematically and stylistically *Gaudete* anticipates *Tales From Ovid* and *Birthday Letters*. Lumb's affinity with Actaeon and the urgent rhythm inspired by Kleist's prose sets the key for *Tales*. The gnomic verses which the otter presents to Lumb *redivivus* use the form of direct address employed in *Birthday Letters*. Compare, for example:

It happened
You knocked the world off, like a flower vase.

It was the third time. And it smashed.
(*Gaudete*)

with

You nursed what was left of your Daddy.
Pouring our lives out of that jug
Into his morning coffee. Then you smashed it
Into shards, crude stars.

(“A Dream”, *Birthday Letters*)

The terms of the Shakespearean “tragic equation” are Venus and Adonis, and Tarquin, the boar. These are also the pivotal characters in *Tales from Ovid*, where the question of Hughes’s fidelity to the Latin is far less interesting than his selection and reordering of the originals. His version of *Metamorphoses* falls into a tryptichal structure whose central panel comprises “Actaeon”, “Myrrha”, “Venus and Adonis and Atalanta”, and “Pygmalion”. On one side he groups divine struggles (“Callisto and Arcas”, “Proserpina”, “Tiresias”), on the other, examples of human defiance of the gods (“Arachne”, “Bacchus and Pentheus”, “Niobe”).

“Actaeon”, (*Metamorphoses* Book 3) forms a prelude to three stories (as told by Orpheus) from Book 10, which Hughes rearranges by placing “Pygmalion” last rather than first. The effect is to chart the fate of those who fail the goddess, culminating in Pygmalion’s success and ritual marriage to his statue/daughter. Contrary to Ovid, Hughes makes Paphos, the child of this union, male—the saviour which Lumb hoped to father? Or a reflex of Hughes as progeny of Plath’s love for Daddy?

As in *Gaudete* Hughes’s language is galvanized by moments of struggle, deploying repetition, variation and an alliterative accentual beat derived from Middle English poetry:

Pentheus was like that
When he heard the unbearable howls
And ululations
Of the Bacchantes, and the clash of their cymbals.
And when he stumbled in his fury
And fell on all fours,
When he clutched the sod and felt their stamping
Shaking the mountain beneath his fingers,
When Pentheus
Saw the frightened worms
Twisting up out of their burrows
Then the red veil came over his vision.

(“Bacchus and Pentheus”)

Like the Goddess, Plath was disappointed by her husband, by his failure, confessed in *Birthday Letters*, to read the signs of her disturbance. Several reviewers have castigated Hughes's recourse to omens and portents in these poems as a form of handwashing. This is to impute an extraordinary naivete to Hughes. He is no less aware than most other people that gods, goddesses and supernatural powers are projections of our attempts to understand the human psyche.

In an appendix to *Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being* he deconstructs the tragic equation as a metaphor for the struggle between the rational ego and the "individual's natural, biological and instinctual life", historically called the Goddess. The equation dramatizes the "infinite problem of their living together in love as 'one flesh'", which is pretty much the theme of *Birthday Letters*.

Like *Tales from Ovid*, this sequence falls naturally into three parts or acts, with prologue and epilogue. The three acts can be marked by their locations: Paris and Spain; America; Devon. The prologue comprises the Cambridge courtship, the epilogue an account of life after Plath's death. Although written over a long period ("Visit" refers to her being "ten years dead", "You Hated Spain" was first published in 1979) the poems are consistent in tone and follow a narrative line.

At times the unfolding of this narrative through letters to one of its protagonists defeats Hughes, resulting in an awkward shorthand:

Weekends I recidived
Into Alma Mater. Girl-friend
Shared a supervisor and weekly session
With your American rival and you.
She detested you...

("Visit")

It takes fire, however, in the second act, when Hughes and Plath are in America. On first seeing Plath naked Hughes exclaims "Beautiful, beautiful America" ("18 Rugby Street"). But the America they visit menaces their marriage. From "The Chipmunk" to "Portraits" Hughes records his baffled encounter with an alien continent. "Badlands", one of the best poems in the sequence, encapsulates the book's symbolism in the threat of the "inimical" wilderness:

But then, suddenly, near us
Something hectic in a rickety thorn-bush.
It was a tiny terror, a maniac midget
Hurling in top-gear uncontrol—

Like a ball on a pin-table, clash and ricochet,
 Terror bounce and back, clash and back,
 Through the maze of the thorn-bush. I thought
 A panicky bird, fluttering maybe tethered
 By a slim snake like a bootlace
 Couldn't break out of the thorns. I thought
 Some electrical predator hunted
 Electrical tiny prey. Or two
 Tiny birds of desert ferocity
 Fought in there. It was a solitary mouse.

The "panicky bird" is Plath's "panic bird" ("The Bird"), the snake recurs throughout the poems as a harbinger of evil ("Portraits", "Rag Rug") and the maze is the labyrinth through which Plath seeks her father ("The Minotaur"). The image of the snake tethering the bird is an emblem of the marriage where Plath fights to restrain her dark side, mystifying Hughes until the release of her last poems.

In *Birthday Letters* Hughes conjures a palpable Plath with glittering eyes, "Veronica Lake bang" ("Fulbright Scholars"), "monkey-elegant fingers" ("St. Botolph's"), "juju lips" ("You Hated Spain"), broad nose and scarred cheek, nervous energy working her mobile features, and addresses her as if she were alive. Beside her he is a "post-war utility" husband ("A Pink Wool Knitted Dress"), a "guide dog" ("Your Paris"), "pitifully unimaginative" ("The 59th Bear"). They build their world in poetry, referring to Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Coleridge, but in "9 Willow Street", that "poetical address", their paths diverge, and the poem ends with Hughes's mistaken attempt to rescue a rabid bat.

Birthday Letters reveals not alone the difficulty of ego and goddess, man and woman living as "one flesh" but the difficulty for two poets to live together. Just as Hughes sees in Shakespeare's identification with Tarquin a possible "psychic alienation" from his culture, so his own identification with Lumb/Actaeon/Pentheus/the Boar (the dying Pentheus compares himself to Actaeon) expresses his outcast state after Plath's death. In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* he redeems the boar as an avatar of the goddess scorned, enfolding him in Dante's "love that moves the sun and the other stars". But the attempt to live that metaphor fully proved the undoing of the Plath-Hughes marriage:

Those bats had their eyes open. Unlike us,
 They knew how, and when, to detach themselves
 From the love that moves the sun and the other stars.
 ("Karlsbad Caverns")