

Cross-pollination: *Root, Stem, Leaf*

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Discussing what he terms the “cross-pollination” of poems within the various collections, Paul Keegan in the *Preface* to **Ted Hughes, Collected Poems** (2003) writes,

Several texts of a Hughes poem often coexist in print, depending on whether it is encountered in its original setting, or in the changed context of a later collection, or in one of his several selections of his poetry. (p. ix)

Such is the case of three individual poems – *A Match*; *On The Slope* and *To Be A Girl's Diary* – which originally appeared in Hughes's third collection, the limited edition **Recklings** (1966, pp. 27; 7; and 30, respectively).¹ Their later “trade” appearances in that order but with minor modifications in phraseology, punctuation and lineation were as Parts I–III of *Root, Stem, Leaf* first published in the USA edition of **Wodwo** (1967, pp. 32–33) where they replaced the original UK poem, *Logos*. Subsequent appearances with slight changes but under the same composite tri-partite title and without any reference to their **Recklings** provenance were in

- 1) the **Wodwo** section of **Selected Poems, 1957–1967**, (UK, 1972, pp. 72–73) though they had not appeared in the UK edition of **Wodwo** (1967);
- 2) the USA **Selected Poems, 1957–1967** edition, (1972, pp. 70–71); and
- 3) **Selected Poems 1957–1981**, (UK, 1982, pp. 76–77).

Though *Root, Stem, Leaf* was omitted from **New Selected Poems, 1957–1994**, (1995), *A Match* appears in the latter's **Recklings** selection, p. 52; while in **The Collected Poems** (2003) all three poems appear in their original **Recklings** form and sequential position, even though *On The Slope* had made a further cross-pollination appearance in the **Remains of Elmet** section of **Three Books**, (1993, p. 43).

¹ Ted Hughes, **Recklings**, (Turret Books, 1966), printed in a limited edition of 150 copies.

This paper seeks to explore these three poems as individual works; their relationship with each other; their influences and cross-pollinations; what is gained by their tripartite grouping; their relationship with the displaced *Logos* poem, which also appeared in **Recklings** (p. 39), albeit with slight textual discrepancies from the subsequent **Wodwo** version; and how they relate to Hughes's poetry of the period, and beyond.

On The Slope

Although there is no documentary biographical evidence, textual detail suggests that *On The Slope* is modelled on Hughes's mother, Edith Farrar Hughes, who in later years suffered the pain of an advancing arthritic condition – the “stone agony growing in her joints” – which would increasingly make her movement slow, laborious and agonized.² The anonymity of the subject and the absence of close biographical detail or personal description emphasise the poem's private nature. For while Hughes has utilised his personal and familial experiences as stimuli for his poetry he has until such later sequences as **Capriccio** (1990), **Howls and Whispers** (1998) and **Birthday Letters** (1998) written about them in an objective, detached, sometimes coded manner; thus the compassion with which he writes is intensified by an element of distance and remove. Certainly, Hughes's feelings for his mother were very intense, “so complicated and so deeply rooted ... too much for a writer to manage”. Explaining in the early prose reference to the contents of the children's collection, **Meet My Folks**, (1961) that “these people in my poems are not my real relatives” Hughes admits “when it came to inventing a mother ... I was stuck. My feelings about my mother, you see, must be too complicated to flow easily into words. I ended up writing a poem that left me quite unsatisfied.” **Poetry In The Making** (1967, p. 102).

Perhaps to compensate for this poem in which the mother is presented as an expert chef of improbable meals “out of no cook-book pages” – such as “kippers in carrot juice”, “Buffalo Puff and Whipped-Cream Goose” (**MMF**, p. 51) – Hughes later worked out his intense feelings into a more satisfactory statement recorded in *On The Slope* with its praise of silent stoicism and the description of a sudden painful realisation bravely

² See Edward Butscher, **Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness**, (Seabury Press, New York, 1976), p. 253.

borne. The personal significance of *On The Slope* is confirmed by its position as the **Recklings** opening poem, thus balancing the closing poem, *Bawdry Embraced*, (written as early as February 1956, and included in the original typescript of **The Hawk in the Rain** (1957) but subsequently removed) as memorial to his early life with Sylvia Plath. Unlike the two earlier volumes both dedicated "To Sylvia", **Recklings** has no dedication and no title-poem. It is possible that *On The Slope* exists as a dedicatory poem. A further feature supporting this notion can be seen in the dedication of **Remains of Elmet** (1979), "Poems In Memory of Edith Farrar". The stance, content and expression of *On The Slope* have similarity with the entire sequence which records Hughes's response to the area in which she lived for most of her life: the hills with their patterns of "field-walls" and "the steep slope where she climbs". It may be that the references to the enclosing hills link directly with the moorland surrounding his parent's house, "The Beacon", Heptonstall Slack, Hebden Bridge, to where the Hughes family had moved from Mexborough in 1952 and which is "the fine green goblet" house in *Wind*, (**THITR**, p. 40).

In the autobiographical piece, **The Rock**, (1964), Hughes acknowledges that "you could not escape the moors. They did not impose themselves. They simply surrounded and waited ... they hung over you at all times. They were simply a part of everything you saw ... the earth was held down by that fine line of moor, mostly a gentle female watery line ... The visible horizon was the magic circle, excluding and enclosing."³ This moorland presence is developed into the scenic backcloth for *On The Slope*, but, as with the central character, rather than being described in close, natural detail the scenery is hinted at in a reworking of several ideas from **The Rock**. Something of the moors' rather sinister omnipresence "the magic circle, excluding and enclosing" is communicated by the application of animism, so that their haunting existence becomes a concerted ambush – "They simply surrounded and waited" – in which at this single instance in her eighty years knowledge of them the woman has been caught in her slow, upward climb. Out of breath (the poem was originally titled *A Pause For Breath*)⁴, she is defeated by their very continuance; vanquished by their immobility, rigidity and unconquerability. There is the suggestion that the woman has always managed the climb uphill, but now has had to

³ Ted Hughes, *The Rock* in **Writers on Themselves**, (B.B.C., 1964), p. 90. Hereafter, **The Rock**.

⁴ See *New Yorker*, (27th August, 1966), p. 90. The poem is presented in five tercets.

submit to their challenge as they wait until they can possess her via "The stone agony growing in her joints". This stone-like element of her progress and body completes the horizon's ring in which as a connecting link she is no longer an outsider, but a contributing partner: "Having taken her slowly by surprise / For eighty years / The hills have won, their ring is closed". The use of "ring" is suggestive not only of encirclement, but also of the completeness of union, a marriage and harmony. Her limbs now atrophying, she is marked by the hills, controlled, tamed and possessed, at one. In response she is startled "by surprise" at her difficulty of progress, but more so at her apprehension that she is becoming part of something she always considered a separate reality. The suddenness and immediacy of this knowledge are carefully concealed in the use of transferred epithets: it is she that moves "slowly", she that is taken "by surprise". By giving these qualities to the hills, Hughes emphasises her previous unawareness of them in relation to her life.

The remainder of the poem broadens and deepens these ideas. There is little forward movement, almost as if because the old woman has discovered the significance of this revelation and her relationship to the environment, the brevity of her life, her position in the natural order, all form of progress – mental as well as physical – is impossible. In dealing with standing ground, the poem becomes static. Having stated the central ideas, each of the remaining stanzas is a development in the manner of musical variations, where the theme is transformed, enriched, deepened by different phrasing or changes in sound value. The poem opens inwards into itself in an almost self-exploratory manner that mimes the woman's newly-found self-knowledge as she begins a reassessment of her life, environment and purpose. Such is the union between woman and nature that the dividing lines between them, hitherto so clearly defined, have become blurred and begun to merge. Consequently, the imagery is freely-associative rather than being part of a unified schematic pattern; and ideas are implied rather than baldly stated.

The idea of the encircling, trapping hills is extended in the portrayal of the fretted nets of walls where "The field-walls float their pattern", the visible signs of the agrarian enclosure system. Hughes suggests that this "pattern" has spilled "Over her eyes" into the woman so that in her realisation of her position within the timeless moors there

dawns the understanding of herself as victim of time too. The ephemeral nature of man's tenure of land in historical terms is linked with the brevity of her personal life. The use of the verb "float" suggests this lack of permanency and solidity, and simultaneously refers to her failing eyesight as the eye waters with age and bewilderment. Just as the visual image of the walls can be seen mirrored in her eyes, deep in her mind, in her inner eye, there is gradually forming the vast concept she is on the point of apprehending. Furthermore, with its suggestion of water, "floats" recalls Hughes's description in *The Rock* of the horizon as "a fine line of moor, mostly a gentle female watery line". Externally the pattern has always been apparent, now the ramifications of it are beginning to be internally appreciated. Physically, spiritually and mentally the woman "Whether she looks outward or inward" is part of a huge natural and historical, but timeless, plan, wider than walls can encompass and define, but as permanent as the rock from which the plan has been built, and from which she has emerged. The stone growing in her body is the beginning of her release from living, and simultaneously an inheritance of the larger natural life around her.

In the **Remains of Elmet** untitled introductory poem, Hughes explores similar ideas. Talking "Six years into her posthumous life" with his uncle, he becomes aware of his mother's presence, and the similarity between them: "My uncle raises my Mother's face / And says yes he would love a cup of tea // Her memory still intact, still good". This similarity is borne out of their inheritance of the locality in which they lived, "the smoky valley ... the womb that bore him / Chimney above chimney, hill over hill". Though there is far more detailed description of the landscape, its end-product is practically identical: a sudden realisation of the strong hold locality has over the individual, so that the individual is a living extension of scenery and time. Thus in his uncle's conversation, and his mother's memory, Hughes is aware that they are "Keeping their last eighty years alive and attached to me / Keeping their strange depths alive and attached to me". As in *On The Slope*, these "strange depths" – the sense of identity with locality, their place, and his, in the pattern of time and the roots of history – are further developed by the connection Hughes makes between past and present in the juxtaposition between language ("my last inheritance, / Archaeology of the mouth") and the image of a fish ("the prize of a lifetime, / Exhausted at the surface, the eye staring up at me") both of

which are dragged up to a surface-world in which neither language or fish is entirely at home or safe. The startling image "Archaeology of the mouth" recalls the statements Hughes has made about the formative years of his life and the influence that dialect has exerted on his poetry. Other **Recklings** poems, particularly *Dully Gumption's Addendum* (**R**, p. 10)⁵, explore this idea more fully, but in *On The Slope* Hughes makes an oblique reference to it in the use of an image which is also drawn from his angling experiences: "Nothing added, nothing taken away. / Year after year the trout in the pools / Grow heavy and vanish without ever emerging." Here Hughes develops the concept of the woman's encirclement by the hills and time. She will not emerge from the landscape in which she has been captured, just as the trout never leave their rounded pools. It is as a fish in water that she will vanish. Nothing will be "taken away" because her vanishing will be an extension of the process of total identification with the locality; nothing will be "added" because she has always been there although not fully cognizant of the extent of her presence until this moment. At the end, the only thing that can be taken is her life, and this she has given already. The descriptive "grow heavy" suggests the increasing weight of the trout which drags them down to the pool's depth. Though they fatten and mature, their only harvest is their death. Similarly the woman's only end is her commitment to place: she grows heavy as she physically deteriorates so that her stone limbs drag her progress, keep her rooted to the land, tied to her own past in the past of the locality.

The ideas here (and in the **Remains of Elmet** poem) are reminiscent of the concluding section of *Pike* (**L** p. 56) in which Hughes's grasp of the continuity of time, depicted in the vastness of the pike and their age, "too immense to stir, so immense and old", is a recognition of the elemental life "as deep as England" stretching back into history's "Stilled legendary depth", so that the present is marked by memory and the subconscious. Thus the fish is an analogue for Hughes's subconscious, or the woman's awareness; and the pool a microcosm of his/her mind, history and place. The concept of persistence and rootedness is extended to embrace the vegetable world in the reference to plants that have animals as part of their names: "Foxglove and harebell

⁵ For a fuller discussion, see Roger Elkin, "Ted Hughes and "A Separate Little Self"" on the Earth-Moon website: http://www.ted-hughes.info/uploads/media/Elkin_Hughes_Sep_Self.pdf

[which] neither protest nor hope". Not having mobility, the plants are fixed to the hillside. She, too, in her pause for breath, her age and her infirmity is undergoing a loss of movement. Like them, she is independent of the land in so far as she flowers above it, and like them is dependent on it because she grew out of it. The gauntness of the foxglove, tall and stoopingly-erect, that flourishes on so poor a soil is suggestive of her stature; while the harebell, fragile but persistent in its flowering in so hard an environment, mirrors her life. The fact that both flowers have pendent tendencies is suggestive of her drooped head as she pauses to catch breath "By the steep slope where she climbs". Like her they demand little; like them "Out of nothing she grew here simply". Such environment breeds only patience: the only potential is for a little colour and life against the wider, grimmer backcloth of the moors. What Hughes seems to suggest is that the patient, the delicate, the frail should not be despised for their apparent lack of outward "protest" or "hope", for their very simplicity ties them to the purpose of existence in as strong a manner as any more aggressive outward show. Thus, there is no ridicule implied in the fact that the woman, like the flowers, "grew here simply". Hughes's use of transferred epithets, as in the first stanza, helps to convey the character of the central protagonist. It is she that neither hopes nor protests. The transference of these qualities to the flowers strengthens the identification of her with their purposeful and purposeless existence and thus reinforces the nature of her sudden awareness. By examining their existence, she is aware of hers. This device prepares the ground for the centrality of the idea (in terms of its position within the total idea system) of the following spatially-isolated line, "Also suffering to be merely flowerlike".

By separating it from the flanking stanzas Hughes draws attention to its message. The simplicity of the statement in terms of expression echoes the simplicity of the woman's existence. The use of "merely" is in no way patronising or condescending. Her existence is the limit of her expectancy; and Hughes honours such simplicity, such stoical persistence for nothing more than existence. The use of "suffering" is ambiguous. It not only refers to physical hardship, but also suggests allowing. All the woman demands is the patience of the flowers, mere allowance to exist. It is akin to the idea expressed by the *Hawk Roosting* (L, p. 26), "No arguments assert my right", but without the arrogant

attitude and self-delusion that he possessed. This woman could never believe "It took the whole of Creation / To produce" her; rather she humbly recognizes her position within the wheel of Creation, of which the encircling moors are both symbol and part. The physical implications of "suffering" are developed in the final two lines: "But with the stone agony growing in her joints / And eyes dimming with losses, widening for losses". Though she is flowerlike, she experiences a painful seizure of joints, which in their rock-hard texture build her into the landscape. The last line indicates that though she is averse to this suffering, she has come to terms with it. Visually and personally her horizons may diminish, but simultaneously they widen to include a realization that her losses of vitality, of faculty, of identity are the very things that define her position in the environment, in time, and in the natural design.

In *The Rock*, Hughes mentions that it was not only the physical presence of the moors which dominated his early horizons, but also "The peculiar and desolate spirit that cries in telegraph wires ... I suppose in some ways it was eerie, and maybe even unpleasant." (p. 91) This haunting, sad spirit is conveyed in *On The Slope* by its lean style, suggestive of the barrenness of the moors, the wide open natural spaces, and by the adoption of a restricted and muted sound palette. There is limited use of the rich heavy sounds of the early volumes, and none of its insistency on metrical tread and external rhyme. Instead, Hughes uses a more colloquially-based flow of words whose sounds echo and rise throughout the poem. The absence of heavy descriptive passages means that the weight of the poetic ideas are carried by practically every word, so that there are no sections which are included as example of virtuosic, self-indulgent sound-patterning at odds with the over all sonic mood of the poem. The poem's structure seems casual, almost prosaic, in expression; and the sound-pattern emerges as incidental to the mood of the poem, rather than dominating it in the manner of the dynamic description of similar landscaping in the early poem, *Crow Hill*, with its mix of aspirate and alliterative energy: "What humbles these hills has raised / The arrogance of blood and bone" (L, p. 14).

This sound-patterning is controlled by balanced lines; by line enjambement which falling against the units of usual grammatical continuity adds a note of hesitancy and wondering; and by the carefully-discreet use of punctuation and line-ending which lead

and nudge the voice and eye in a series of exploratory statements. A further feature is the use of repetition, either in actual words ("dimming with losses, widening for losses"; "nothing added, nothing taken away"; "year after year") or in balancing of phrases ("outward and inward"; "neither protest nor hope"; "heavy and vanish"; "foxglove and harebell"). The cumulative effect of this can be seen, for example, in verse one: the alliteration of the aspirate "h" over the lines supported by the regularity in flow of the phrasing is suggestive of the catching of breath and the rhythm of breathing. The position of "slowly" after the line's natural caesura serves to elongate the word thus emphasising the length of time the process has been in existence. The assonance of "by surprise" is mimetic of the suddenness of the woman's understanding. Similarly, the assonant pattern of "taken" and "eighty" spread over the sound pattern of "her", "sur-", "years" depicts the finality of the action, the catching of breath. The half-rhymes, almost atonal, in "surprise", "years", "closed", and the balanced expression of the two halves of line 3 extend this impression which is further realised as the rhythmic impulse falls upon the stressed "won" and "closed". The positioning of the final word is important. Everything in the verse has been leading to this statement, and the word "closed" has in its actual mouthing something very definitely complete: the word closes in on itself.

Probably the most important feature controlling the overall sound of the poem is Hughes's adoption of the "folk" or "dipodic" line in which the lines are divided into halves, with two stresses in each (sometimes alliterative), and a variety of unstressed syllables between each stressed word. Apart from the two half-lines this is the predominant rhythmic feature of the poem – and indeed much of Hughes's output since **Wodwo**. This heavy stress accent native to English spoken language allows a more natural reading, a freer voice almost colloquial in its patterns. It suits particularly the melancholic, wistful, hesitant note of *On The Slope*. It is probably this feature that Hughes has in mind when he identifies the influence on his writing of West Yorkshire dialect which "connects you directly and in your most intimate self to middle English poetry", and "Without it, I doubt if I would ever have written verse."⁶ In *On The Slope* the stress patterns naturally fall on the rhythms of the speaking voice, rather than on metre. This

⁶ *Ted Hughes and Crow, London Magazine*, (January 1971), pp. 10-11.

conditions the phraseology of the poem and its general syntactical expression. The sentences flow simply, without the tortuous additions of qualifying subordinate phrases and clauses, so that a sentence is contained in a few lines. Similarly, there is little room for lists of adjectives: only three exist in *On The Slope* – "eighty", "steep", "stone" – and these are used to convey the major ideas of the poem, rather than as decoration or as devices to satisfy the requirements and resolution of metrically-based lines. Critics of Hughes suggest that it was his reading of middle English four-beat alliterative poetry which awakened his interest in this simple style. However, Plath's use of the natural folk-line, even as early as **The Colossus** (1959), may have awakened Hughes to the potential effects that this could bring to his own poetry.

While the genesis for *On The Slope* may lie in Hughes's interpretations of his mother's stoic endurance of an advancing arthritic condition and the effects that the landscape of the Calder Valley area had on her mobility, stylistic features suggest that Hughes's interpretation of her sudden apprehension of the purpose of her life may have been influenced by a cross-pollination of a differing order in the form of two Plath poems, *Hardcastle Crags* and *Wuthering Heights* which deal with her particular response to this Yorkshire landscape.⁷ These two poems, in turn, record Plath's response to the new subject matter of nature and landscape to which Hughes's poetic example had introduced her. *Hardcastle Crags* (published under the title of *Night Walk* as early as October 1958)⁸ is contemporaneous with two Hughes poems similarly located, *Crow Hill* and *Pennines in April* (**L**, pp. 14 and 25).

Hardcastle Crags is a large wooded rocky valley which climbs from the small industrial town of Hebden Bridge up to the Pennine moorlands. In the poem the protagonist, "she" (presumably Plath) walks at night from the town up to the moors, but feeling menaced by the nature of the landscape quickly returns. Plath's description of the moorland pulses with quiet threats of extinction to which, as passive victim, her single response is to retreat to urban familiarity, "Before the weight / Of stone and hills of stone could

⁷ Sylvia Plath, **Collected Poems**, edited with an Introduction by Ted Hughes, (Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 62 and p. 167 respectively, hereafter **SPCP**.

⁸ Sylvia Plath, *Night Walk*, *The New Yorker*, 34 (11 October 1958), p. 40.

break / Her down". In *On The Slope* Hughes hints at the ominous element contained in Plath's description of the moorland. His portrayal of the old woman mirrors the lines in *Hardcastle Crags* where Plath is suddenly aware of the alien landscape. "The indifferent iron" of Plath's hills, in themselves threatening in their aloofness, are developed by Hughes into an image of an encircling snare to become almost animal, waiting in ambush until "their ring is closed" and they have "won". What Plath feared for herself, Hughes suggests has become reality for the old woman. Similarly, Plath's "pastures bordered by black stone set / On black stone" which later in the poem threaten to "break her down to mere quartz grit" have become in Hughes's poem "field walls [that] float their pattern / Over her eye / Whether she looks outward or inward". Eventually Hughes describes the woman as possessed already by the "stone agony growing in her joints". In both poems "stone" stands symbolically for death: in Plath's "the weight of stone and hills of stone" there is a suggestion of the serried ranks of gravestones, including her own imagined "quartz grit"; in Hughes's "stone agony growing in her joints" the atrophying bone is precursor to death. In **Remains of Elmet** Hughes gives prominence to the connection between moorlands, stone-walls and death: "This harvest of long cemeteries" (*Walls*, p. 33); "The hills were commandeered / For graveyards" (*First Hills*, p. 90); "Wreath of hills" (*Bridestones*, p. 64) and "Live wreathed stone" (*High Sea Light*, p. 62). This connection features also in **The Rock** where Hughes claims "Nothing ever quite escapes into happiness. The people are not detached enough from the stone, as if they were only half-born from the earth, and the graves are too near the surface." (p. 92) Several of these ideas seem supportive to an understanding of the mood and content of *On The Slope*, but, as **The Rock** was first published as late as 1964, Plath's much earlier poem may have prompted some of Hughes's observations.

Plath's *Wuthering Heights*, first published in March 1962, later appeared as the opening poem of her posthumous **Crossing The Water** (1971). It seems to be a reworking of *Hardcastle Crags* but, in keeping with the assurance that poetic practice and the success of publication had brought, the experience is more strongly realised and more explicitly stated. This time, there is more internal penetration into the mental processes of the poem's persona, and this time there is no mention of the return to the town. As the volume in which it appeared was prepared for publication by Hughes it is possible that

the opening verse of *Wuthering Heights* depicting the hostile landscape in which the woman is trapped gave him not only the idea, but also the expression, for the opening verse of *On The Slope*. Plath's first line, "The horizons ring me like faggots" is echoed in Hughes's "The hills have won, their ring is closed." Whereas Plath envisages the horizons as lacking any solidity or permanency, "the distances they pin evaporate ... They only dissolve", Hughes develops the idea of water implicit in "evaporate" and "dissolve": thus "the field-walls float their pattern". Furthermore, Plath's description of the horizons that "dissolve / Like a series of promises" seems to have seeded Hughes's description in a later stanza of the mysterious fading away of "the trout in the pools" which "grow heavy and vanish without ever emerging". Where Plath fears "If I pay the roots of the heather / Too close attention, they will invite me / To whiten my bones among them", Hughes appears more positive in his description of the relationship between the old woman and the vegetation and landscape. The use of animism, and the connection between stone and death, seem to have grown out of Plath's poem in which she describes the air remembering "a few odd syllables" "of people" which it "rehearses ... meaningly: Black stone, black stone". Even "the sky leans" and "The grass is beating its head distractedly. It is too delicate for a life in such company". What Hughes has done is to condense Plath's ideas and is thus able to express similar concepts in a more economical and spare manner. When he expands Plath's ideas he utilises a similar image but relies on ambiguity to convey the state of things which Plath minutely observes. In Hughes's final line, "and eyes dimming with losses, widening for losses", in which he hints through repetition at the flickering eyes of the old woman as she apprehends her lack of permanency in comparison to landscape, he has drawn his ideas from the entire nine lines of Plath's opening stanza in which she describes the shifting horizons as dissolving "like a series of speculations".

A Match

As published in isolation, *A Match* is so opaque in expression and illogical in the relationship of image to image that its meaning is obscure. However, its connection with the other two poems gives some clue as to its meaning. While this practice of grouping the poems may make the meaning more public, internal evidence suggests that like *On the Slope*, *A Match* may be seen as a private response to the stylistic and thematic

concerns of Plath's *Hardcastle Crags* and *Wuthering Heights*. Nevertheless, it may be that the cross-fertilisation of ideas that ensues is purely accidental, partly a result of juxtaposition, and that initially the poems had separate genesis as well as individual existence and meaning. Thus, the poem's meaning exists on various levels, and, because it is so personal, any interpretation may be far from Hughes's original intention.

By linking the two poems, Hughes has both internalised and externalised the poetic themes of *On The Slope* so that the poem becomes an intensification of the point of illumination from both within and without. Hughes adopts the second person singular and directly addresses the woman, yet simultaneously suggests that the poet and/or reader may also be part of, and benefit from, this process of recognition and event. Thus the "you" is both personal and public; specific and general. The "Match" stands symbolically for the woman, for Hughes as witness, and for the reader as onlooker of what is essentially a personal/private happening. It may be that the "you" does not refer specifically to the same person as in *On The Slope*, but that simultaneously both that woman and the reader may reach fuller understanding of self by the cross-pollination of poetic ideas from the two disparate poems. Such ambiguity of purpose and meaning is conveyed in the title. Through the woman's mental illumination and the poet's perception, the reader is made equal to the experience, brought into the sequence of events, and invited to recognize how significant and ephemeral is his own hold on life. Furthermore, the woman's process of self-awareness, expressed by the means of the title, is intensified by the application of the title as metaphor for the woman: thus, the "Match" refers to the means of illumination, both literally and metaphorically, and also carries the idea of correspondence in quality and similarity.

The sudden burst of recognition as the woman is sparked into perception of self, and the purpose and brevity of life against the backcloth of a comparatively timeless natural world, is captured in the alliterative opening lines:

"Spluttering near out, before it touches the moors / You start, threatened by your own tears." The woman is as a single match attempting to illuminate the vastness of the dark moorland stretching around her; any light of recognition, though suddenly penetrating, is minimal and insignificant set against the great unknown events of time,

place and history; any attempt to probe into the unknown, through self-exploration, is also self-destructive, as the light of illumination burns up its own resources. The woman's realization of her insignificance and the purposelessness of her life is rewarded by bewilderment and regret, "threatened by your own tears". How apposite that light and fire should feel menaced by dark and water. The image of the match to describe the woman indicates the instability of her form, and the transitory hold and tenuous control over destiny that the woman (and by extension the poet/reader) has. The woman's knowledge of her position within the ring of moorland, and by implication her understanding of her part in the wider order of things, is almost over, "out", even before it has dawned, "before it touches the moors".

The mention of "tears" is extended in the water imagery that dominates the poem's central section; and which is used to describe the almost compulsive, but simultaneously inconclusive, task of the woman's exploration of self (or the poet's/reader's attempts) "Through everything human or unknown" to "savour and own the dimensions of woman / As water does those of water." Although the woman's quest may allow no restriction by "skin doors ... borders" (i.e. by self-awareness, confined in an internal mental examination; by the personal world operating behind closed domestic doors; by the wider geographical world limited and controlled by the artificial labelling of boundaries), it will be without result. She will be neither more nor less successful than water which can penetrate everywhere but knows only itself and its own darkness. Hughes suggests via the eating connotations in "foraging" and "savour" that the quest for self-knowledge, the development of a conscious critical perception for an understanding of self as self is all-consuming. Even so, Hughes concludes that what makes mankind different from the water is his remove from the elemental world in which water has no need to search within itself for its own identity, knowledge or purpose.

The contrast between water and the woman is extended in the poem's second section. The river, made up of so many currents and so many depths, has in its own existence achieved its own need and purpose. Its movement is a supplication to itself, "a prayer to its own waters", in a communion with its own motion, so that it has gained its own

peace, "in stillness". The river's prayer, its movement "Where the circulation of our world is pouring", is, like a circular prayer-wheel, both symptom and result of its constant activity. In contrast, only for the few can peace be found at the still point through inner penetration and self-knowledge. This woman, threatened by tears, might as a result of submission to her own water begin the process of self-exploration, and, losing herself in her own depths, so find not only herself but also peace. The reference to "No movement but the rooted willows" links with the idea of *On The Slope* where the woman was connected with "foxglove" and "harebell". The implication is that although the willows may move their roots are firmly fixed in the substance which gives them sustenance. Similarly the woman in her quest for self-knowledge is rooted to her own source of enquiry, her self. She too is a product and extension of the environment, and is both limited by and dependent on it, an idea which is extended in the use of "bedrock" with its nursery connotations as well as rootedness, in the concluding section: "Out of bedrock your blood's operation / Carves your own eyes clear not so quickly / As your mouth dips deeper / Into the massed darkness." The lines are heavy with alliteration and description reminiscent of the denser style of his two earlier volumes, particularly the conclusion of *Thrushes* (L, p. 52); and the tortuous syntax lacks the colloquial fluency of the rest of the poem. As opposed to the looser form of the earlier parts of the poem the quatrain structure looks back to Hughes's former verse-patterning. His concern is with the futility of purpose in ordinary life. The woman's self-awareness and perception may be rooted in her sudden apprehension of place, but her quest is distracted from full realisation by her awareness of time and the threat of extinction by darkness. Though the "blood's operation" may sharpen her apprehension and give visual clarity to her sudden appreciation, her "start" of the second line, that same force drops her to darkness and death. The alliterative last lines, "As your mouth dips deeper / Into the massed darkness" connect the drooping of the willows over the river with the idea of the opening lines where the sudden illumination of the match, so soon to be extinguished, stood symbolically for both the brevity of her insight and the length of her life. Though the woman may be aware of both her origin and purpose, her response to and dependence on locality, the "bedrock", imposes its control. The extension of "the massed darkness" as an alien force to include the concept of death as the mouth "dips deeper" into the ground/water is linked with the idea of the woman's inner quest as a drowning.

Either way, death will be a return to the "bedrock". The link between "bedrock" and "water" is reminiscent of the prefatory poem to **Remains of Elmet** where Hughes links the idea of inheritance with water and river imagery; and also features elsewhere in the cycle, for example in *It is All* (p. 23), "There are gulleys gouged in cold hills / By the sufferings of water / And gulleys / Cut in the cold fire / By the worn-out water of women / And the lost rivers of men."

As with *On The Slope*, Plath's *Hardcastle Crags* and *Wuthering Heights* may have been influential in both stylistic and thematic terms. In the opening stanzas of *Hardcastle Crags* Plath utilises a series of fire images – "Flintlike", "struck", "quick air ignite its tinder" – which are developed in stanza five in the description of the "long wind, paring her person down / To a pinch of flame"; while in the concluding stanza Plath's fear is that the menacing moorlands are a force hostile "Enough to snuff the quick / Of her small heat out." These ideas are mirrored in Hughes's opening lines where the woman is similarly expressed in terms of fire being struck, "A match spluttering near out". Plath's description of the moorlands, "absolute as the antique world was / Once, in its earliest sway of lymph and sap, / Unaltered by eyes," is paralleled in *A Match* in the last verse in which the "blood's operation" "carves your eyes" "out of bedrock". Hughes's description of the suggested death – "As your mouth dips deeper / Into the massed darkness" – seems to be a reworking of Plath's fear that the landscape might extinguish her. Where Plath writes "The weight / Of hills and hills of stones could break / Her down to mere quartz grit," Hughes links his "bedrock" with a similar downward movement as the woman's mouth "dips deeper / Into the massed darkness".

Part of the obscurity of *A Match* may be because the poem is a private response to personal events surrounding Plath's composition of *Wuthering Heights*. Although in Plath's **Collected Poems** Hughes dates its composition as September 1961, Butscher suggests the poem records Plath's response to an experience she had at the Hughes family home during their 1961 Christmas visit when, made fun of by Olwyn, Hughes's sister, "Sylvia fled the room in tears and ran upstairs ... Hours later, when Ted ... had not shown up, she ... marched downstairs without a word and walked outside, heading for the moors ... Ted did not follow ... It was hours later, after twilight, when he finally

realized that Sylvia was not returning ... he stalked into the darkness ... and soon located her in a "semi-conscious" state. Gently he guided her back to the Hughes house." ⁹ Butscher's account is based on details Plath reported to her friend, Elizabeth Compton, and leads him to date the poem as belonging to the winter of 1961–1962. In the light of Hughes's earlier dating of the poem it is possible that Butscher is confusing two separate incidents. Plath's 1957 poem, *The Snowman on The Moor* (SPCP, pp. 58–59), records a similar response to a family tiff at the Hughes household, when "She flung from a room ... // And in fury left him ... / 'Come find me' – her last taunt. // He did not come // But sat on, guarding his grim battlement". Whatever the actual date of event, in *Wuthering Heights*, Plath transfers her antipathies towards the Hughes family, and by concentrating on the fears of the extinction of her personality in a country foreign to her both literally and metaphorically makes them into an extended portrayal of an alien landscape in which all things natural appear hostile even to the point of threatening death. The opening line, "The horizon rings me like faggots", suggests her fear of extinction by the landscape in which she describes herself as "the one upright / Among all horizontals". In the second stanza the wind pushes her and bends "Everything in one direction" so that she "can feel it trying to funnel" even her heat away, while beneath her the roots of the heather invite her "To whiten my bones among them". In the fourth stanza she records the dilapidated buildings, symbolic of the death and destruction she sees in the natural world: "Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass; / Lintel and stone have unhinged themselves." People no longer exist, but only their names in "a few odd syllables" which the wind "rehearses ... meaningly". In the final stanza even the sky is oppressive, it "leans on me", and the grass "is too delicate / For a life in such company: / Darkness terrifies it."

Hughes's *A Match* has obvious parallels. Where his poem differs is in its leaner style and its more experimental format. What may account for this is the three years separating their individual compositions, for by the time of writing *A Match* Hughes had fully

⁹ **Method and Madness**, pp. 280–281.

absorbed the style of Plath's later poems, and had forged a looser, almost Lawrentian voice. The use of the image of a match suggests Hughes may have intended his poem as his response to her experience: i.e. a match in the sense of companion piece, correspondence, or shared state. Interestingly, as early as April 23rd 1956 Plath had written to her brother, Warren, that Hughes was "the only man in the world who is my match" (Sylvia Plath, **Letters Home**, p. 240 [emphasis added]); while writing to his brother, Gerald, in summer 1957, Hughes says, "She [Sylvia] is one of the best critics I ever met and understands my imagination perfectly, and I think I understand hers. It's amazing how we strike sparks" (Ted Hughes, **Letters**, p. 97 [emphasis added]). Thus, in personal terms, the poem's "you" may refer directly to Plath, and the entire poem be an examination of the difficulties she met in discovering her own inner peace through self-knowledge. Accounts of Plath as Butscher's narrative demonstrates reveal that she had a fiery impulsive nature, so the opening fire image later to be threatened by tears may stand for Hughes's portrayal of Plath's character in response to that particular experience. Consequently, the final stanza becomes an explicit statement relating to Plath's death and burial in the Heptonstall churchyard in the middle of the moorland which Plath had found so alien. Indeed, the inscription on Plath's gravestone – "Even amidst fierce flames / The gold lotus can be planted" – contains reference to the fire image central to both Plath and Hughes's poems. The concluding lines may acknowledge that though her perception may have been formulating, the darkness of death and internment would inherit and close her mouth. Significantly "bedrock" has no qualifying possessive pronoun, and is thus linked with "the massed darkness" which conveys the impression of a forced, hostile entity relentlessly pursuing its aim of extinction. With such opposition, "a match", symbolically Plath, would have little chance.

To Be A Girl's Diary

While *A Match*, in its concern with inner penetration to arrive at self-awareness and its acknowledgement of inevitable death in a return to the "dark" "bedrock", might have suggested the concept of "root", and *On The Slope*, with its investigation of the woman's sudden apprehension of her "flowerlike" suffering, might have suggested "stem" in terms of an abrupt halt, the "leaf" element in the third poem is conveyed in the idea of pages in the diary, the mention of a thorn-hedge and the consideration of the age of the

central female figure with its emphasis on youth. Apart from their concern with roots – “rooted willows” and “bedrock” (*A Match*), “the stone agony growing in her joints” (*On The Slope*) and “roots in a thorn-hedge” (*To Be A Girl's Diary*) – what the poems share is Hughes’s preoccupation with the brevity of man’s hold on life in comparison with the wider natural/cosmic backcloth against which they are set. In each poem Hughes is aware that man is tied to a historical framework in which the part he has to play is insignificant, even though, as in *To Be A Girl's Diary*, he may leave behind him artefacts by which he might be remembered, if “only in a manner of speaking”.

The title and the first line of the second verse, “To be an heirloom spoon, blackening”, stand almost as desires of an ideal future state when what was owned, either as an intimate record of events, “a girl’s diary”, or as something inherited down the generations, “an heirloom spoon”, has passed from its original or familial owner into an entirely new and incongruous situation where its secrets are safe because they can only be half-understood, and its history forgotten because it is reduced to little more than litter. The special nature of both objects, individual and personal, of primary value to its author or family owners, is guaranteed by severance and dispossession. The anonymity thus afforded to the objects, Hughes suggests, might be welcomed by a person. It is almost as if aware of the impossibility of the search for self-understanding (*A Match*) and the pain of sudden perception (*On The Slope*) Hughes has recognized the limitations and discomfort of such knowledge and proposes instead a future state, a wish “to be” detached, severed, dispossessed. However, by leaving the sentences incomplete he acknowledges that such a condition is both impossible and of uncertain outcome. In both the previous poems Hughes’s awareness of the weight of the past on the present has not been without effort or pain: similarly in *To Be A Girl's Diary* his presentation of a new inheritance is couched in terms connected with uncertainty, decay and death – “crumbling”, “dust”, “old”, “dung”, “blackening”, “forgetful”, “fleeting towards ... dispersal”.

In the opening lines, Hughes gives a concise, and initially credible, description of a saleroom where prospective buyers browse through the various lots and among other things handle and eye a crumbling diary. The incongruity of something hitherto so personal now being made public is expressed by the mention of “strange smiles in a

saleroom", in which "strange" is descriptive not only of the foreign nature of the lookers, but also the response which the diary's contents evoke from the passing reader and potential new owner/collector. Similarly, "saleroom" is suggestive of the exposure to the world of materialism and business of what one imagines was secretive and private. The remaining two lines, "Where the dust is of eyes and heart, in proportion / As well as of old shoes, meteors and dung" are opaque in meaning, partly because of syntactical looseness and partly because the imagery is so freely associative. While the reference to "old shoes" is in keeping with the idea of an auction preview with its juxtaposition of otherwise disconnected items, the association between them and the diary in connection with "meteors and dung" seems strained. Presumably dust does contain particles of all these things. Furthermore, the lines anticipate the cosmic imagery of the remaining verses, the "spoon ... Fleeting towards heavenly dispersal" and the nightfall which "collects the stars". What Hughes seems to be suggesting is that all that is left of a person's life are dates and times and brief, personal jottings, or discarded old shoes. Similarly, the once brilliant stars are now, like the diary, fallen out of their fixed ownership and place, reduced to meteors, so much burnt-out cosmic dust; while dung, which is both personal and universal, is the sum of human activity, and mankind reduced to the level of the merely animal. Thus, all things and all people, common-place and cosmic, young and old, even emotional and detached observation ("eyes and hearts in proportion"), the girl-diarist and the glancer are reduced to elemental dust and dung.

Such a fate awaits the treasured "heirloom spoon" of the second verse. Once owned, shining, used and useful, its hallmark now is its dispossession as it lies "blackening among roots in a thorn-hedge". Just as the full relevance of the diary's detail is lost to the glancer, so the spoon is "forgetful of flavours as of tongues". From its active involvement and use it has become a passive victim of its own disuse, uprooted from tradition to lie unpossessed beneath hedge roots. Diary and spoon share a similar fortune and future: the former is "crumbling" and the latter "blackening". The diary is "glanced into / By strange smiles", while the only thing to handle the spoon are spiders. Both are involved in the process of decomposition: the diary into dust, and the spoon "Fleeting towards heavenly dispersal". In both cases the collectable value of the object is reversed. Eventually they will be useless.

In the final part of the poem Hughes suggests that such dispersal is simultaneously part of a further collection in which all things are possessed and possessing. The lines "Nightfall collects the stars / Only in a manner of speaking" draw together the earlier ideas of the poem as expressed in the use of "meteors", "blackening" and "fleeting towards heavenly dispersal". The existence of a star-lit night is a reversal of what has happened to the diary and spoon: for while they have fallen into obscurity and blackness and are no longer any single person's possession, the stars, which unlike diary and spoon are invisible in daylight to the naked eye, have been given identity and position by the process of nightfall which has made clear their existence. The cosmic litter of stars, another "heavenly dispersal" is now fixed and gathered by a "blackening". Hughes is careful not to make too huge claims: he suggests that nightfall does not collect the stars any more than the diary collects a life. Everything is involved in the continuous cycle of decomposing and recomposing, as stars become meteors become dust become earth become root, stem, leaf, become dust. The practice of moving from a line of startling metaphysical awareness which reaches out beyond the limits of everyday apprehension but which is expressed in direct and exact terms, and then following it with a line of casual, almost colloquial, phrasing and humour anticipates the later **Crow** (1970) and **Prometheus On His Crag** (1973) cycles. In this instance, it prepares the reader for the spatially isolated last line, "Everything is inheriting everything," in which the sententiousness of the concept is not undermined by its prosaic expression. In fact its very ordinariness reinforces the universality of Hughes's message. The directness of expression and structure counterbalances the lengthy descriptive early sentences in which, though positing "To be", Hughes is unable to arrive at any definite conclusion. The dispersal of these earlier sentences, their inconclusiveness and fragmentation prepare the reader for an acceptance of what in reality is nothing more than a truism. Hughes has covered similar grounds before, particularly in *Relic* (L, p. 44) in which he labours the idea of the sea and its animal contents thriving on the voracious appetites of their own kind as "Nothing touches but, clutching, devours".

It is perhaps a measure of Hughes's growing awareness of his poetic abilities that in *To Be A Girl's Diary* he should be content with such a straightforward statement. That this is so is evidenced by comparison between the final published **Recklings** version and its manuscript draft contained in a longer piece entitled *A wire, wobblingly long ...*¹⁰ As opposed to the published poem's 12 lines, the draft has 37 lines of Hughes's distinctive handwriting, the sense of most of which (given the context of the printed word of the final version) is discernible. There are, as might be expected, considerable single word variants, and crossing-out of words, phrases and odd lines, including a complete section of 13 lines (over a third of the draft, and longer than the final poem) speculating about the harvest of "winter-feed of clouds", "Water & wind" and ending with a five-line section which develops the idea of "To be a robe / In the closet". This verbal construction echoes the final version's title and the opening line of its second stanza, "To be an heirloom spoon". In fact, the draft opens with the similarly-constructed "To be a kind of fouled nest, cold, old" which explores the position of being tree-bound, "saturated", "naked" in a "dung of rejection", and subject to the vagaries of weather "while the sour draughts pick you to pieces" in the hope of "Bringing the same world back". The thinking behind these lines which Hughes eventually puts on one side is perhaps too allusively "personal" and "private" (criticisms which have been levelled at the **Recklings** poems in total); though the draft's final line which makes reference to "Inherits what heaven there is" has consonance with the published version's concept of "heavenly dispersal", "Nightfall collects the stars", and the conclusion that "Everything is inheriting everything". Such allusive economy of expression as seen by the contrast between the manuscript draft and the published version is the hallmark of these particular poems.

As with *A Match* and *On The Slope* Plath's poetry seems to have influenced Hughes's content and expression. *To Be A Girl's Diary* parallels Plath's *All The Dead Dears* (SPCP, p. 70) which was contemporaneous with *Relic*.¹¹ Written in 1956 after a visit to the Cambridge Archaeological Museum, *All The Dead Dears* records Plath's response to a fourth century A.D. stone coffin housing the skeletons of a woman, a mouse and a shrew "That battened for a day on her anklebone". Plath's concern is that the past

¹⁰ See Liverpool. University of Liverpool Library, MS. 26.1 (68-73), p. 69.

¹¹ Sylvia Plath, *All The Dead Dears*, **Greccourt Review**, (November 1957), pp. 36-37.

reaches down through the ages, and that we are involved in "the gross eating game" of time in which we can hear "Stars grinding, crumb by crumb / Our own grist down to its bony face." The connection between stars, the darkness of time (seen in nightfall as a symbol of death), eating and death is developed by Hughes in the image of the heirloom spoon "blackening / Among roots in a thorn-hedge, forgetful / Of flavours as of tongues, / Fleeting towards heavenly dispersal." These lines echo Plath's insistence that previous generations, "all the long gone darlings", threaten to consume her in death:

they

Get back, though, soon

Soon: be it by wakes, weddings

Childbirths or a family barbecue:

Any touch, taste, tang is

Fit for these outlaws to ride home on ...

until we go ...

to lie

Deadlocked with them, taking root as cradles rock.

Plath's "be it by" is paralleled by Hughes's "to be"; her idea of death by eating – "touch, taste, tang" – becomes Hughes's "forgetful of flavours as of tongues"; her mention of "outlaws" is matched by "strange smiles" from outsiders as they look into the girl's diary, or the spiders which now walk the heirloom spoon, as opposed to Plath's "outlaws" that "ride home on"; and her presentation of death lying "Deadlocked with them taking root as cradles rock" is worked by Hughes into the "roots in a thorn-hedge" and the concept of a universal inheritance in which "Everything is inheriting everything" carries the idea of both birth and death as states of possession. There is of course nothing new in this observation. Dylan Thomas (from whose early poems both Hughes and Plath in their Cambridge writing days drew much of their thematic concerns, subject matter and stylistic approach) voices similar ideas in poems like *The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives The Flower*, *A Process In The Weather Of The Heart* and *Before I Knocked*. In these early poems Thomas is preoccupied with the suggestion that all life, animal and vegetable alike, is subject to the same laws of nature, and that all things grow old, decay and die. These poems begin with the assumption or insistence that we begin to die from

the moment of birth, even indeed from the instant of conception. Hughes puts these ideas into a more abstract and cosmic framework. He hints that this continual process of death (depicted by dispossessed diary, unwanted old shoes, errant meteors and misplaced heirloom spoon) links man with everything else, both on earth and in the heavens. However, Hughes's simpler expression, particularly in the last three lines, seems to have more affinity with T. S. Eliot's handling of similar concerns, as for example in ***East Coker***:

Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf

and

Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of seasons and the constellations ...
Feet rising and falling,
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

In my end is my beginning.¹²

Root, Stem, Leaf

The grouping of these three poems partially mimes the cycle of events which Hughes records: in *A Match* the exploration of the "massed darkness" of death and the return to the bedrock is complemented by the old woman's recognition in *On The Slope* of the "stone agony growing in her joints" which build her into the ring of the hills, and is extended in *To Be A Girl's Diary* in the poem's conclusion that "Everything is inheriting

¹² T.S. Eliot, **Collected Poems 1909-1962** (Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 196-7, and p. 204.

everything". The movement from the exploration of Plath's experience of a hostile environment, through his mother's awareness of age and death, to the extinction of a personality of a young girl (apart from the dust of a crumbling diary) is seen as part of the process of being. Root, stem and leaf are all resolved in death, the final truth. And yet that death is but part of the cycle of regeneration. This idea is also examined in *The Green Wolf* (W, p. 40) where utilising flower and vegetable imagery, "the warm hawthorn blossoms" and "the beanflower", Hughes records the paralysis and death of a neighbour in terms connected with the midsummer festival of the "sacrifice" of the man clad in green (the Green Wolf) in order to satisfy the demands of the White Goddess, and thus ensure the return of vegetation.¹³

Several features of *Root, Stem, Leaf* suggest the poem's tripartite grouping to form a thematic unit mirrors Hughes's adaptation of the White Goddess as manifestation of the Moon-goddess Muse. Robert Graves writes variously of her as "Threefold Goddess... mother, bride and layer-out"¹⁴; "The White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust" (ibid); "A personification of primitive woman – woman the creatress and destructress. As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was a woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag" (p. 386). This Triple Moon-goddess is associated with poetic inspiration, and "the true poet ... must address only the Muse" (p. 444), for the "poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth" (p. 448).

In *Root, Stem, Leaf* the three women stand symbolically as representations of the White Goddess. The old woman of Part II (*On The Slope*) approaching the winter of her life is representative of Hecate, "the death goddess" (p. 200) and the mother of "incantatory magic" (p. 386). As the woman is identifiable with Hughes's mother, there is the suggestion that this poem in presenting her stoic endurance is honouring the life-in-death and death-in-life agencies of the White Goddess's power. Her identification with flowers – "suffering to be merely flowerlike" with "Foxglove and harebell" which "neither

¹³ See J.G. Frazer, **The Golden Bough, A study in Magic and Religion**, Abridged Edition, (Macmillan, 1976), pp. 823-824, and p. 869.

¹⁴ Robert Graves, **The White Goddess, A Historic Grammar of Poetic Myth**, (Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 24.

protest nor hope / On the steep slope where she climbs" – suggests the recuperative and regenerative forces of Nature, and as such places her ideally in the ***Remains of Elmet*** section of **Three Books** (1993), and **Elmet** (1994). The woman of Part I (*A Match*) is representative of Juno, the pre-Hellenic moon goddess of woman and marriage. As this poem's persona is identifiable with Plath, she represents the Moon goddess as bride and Muse. The connection between the woman and the willow trees is confirmed by Graves's statement that "the willow is sacred to her [the White Goddess] for many reasons: it is the tree that loves water most, and the Moon-goddess is the giver of dew and moisture generally". (p. 173) Furthermore, Graves records that the willow is "a tree sacred to poets". (p. 174) The woman of Part III (*To Be A Girl's Diary*) is representative of Diana, often identified closely with Luna, the moon goddess, and generally associated with woods as symbolic of the sacred grove element of the Muse. Graves records that the hawthorn, "the thorn hedge" of Hughes's poem, "is the tree of enforced chastity", (p. 175) "marriage being considered hateful to the Goddess." (p. 176) This is confirmed by the emphasis on the unmarried state of the female: she is still a girl. Consequently, the three poems honour the existence of the Goddess in her triple manifestation, on the one hand; and, on the other, via the insistence on the cyclic nature of life and death in which "Everything is inheriting everything" hint at the omnipresence of the Goddess as the Mother of All Living.

That Hughes may have had such an idea in mind is confirmed by a Plath poem, *Aftermath* (**SPCP**, p. 113), which seems to have prompted his presentation of the White Goddess element in *To Be A Girl's Diary*. Plath's poem presents Medea, priestess of Hecate, the death goddess, as surveying the outcome of a tragic catastrophe, here reduced to the domestic level of the sacking of a burnt-out house: "Mother Medea in a green smock / Moves humbly as any housewife through / Her ruined apartments, taking stock / Of charred shoes, the sodden upholstery." In expression and theme, *Aftermath*, written in 1959, predates Hughes's concerns in *To Be A Girl's Diary*. In both the early draft and the published poem Hughes's reference to clothes ("robe", "coat" and "old shoes") echoes Plath's poetic content; while the presentation of Medea as "Mother ... in a green smock" initiates the idea of the White Goddess as regenerative life force, both destructive and creative, that Hughes developed in *Root, Stem, Leaf* and *The Green Wolf*.

Generally speaking, Plath's utilisation of historical reference and mythological personages predates Hughes's later thematic concerns; and it is possible that, although he was familiar with Graves's thesis from his late adolescence, Plath's personal identification with the White Goddess mythology prompted him to fuller investigation of such mythology, in a similar manner as her enthusiasm for Theodore Roethke's poetry seems to have spilled over into her husband's writing.¹⁵ Although Hughes's celebration of the White Goddess is not worked out into a unanimously-consistent theoretic and poetic argument until the *Epilogue* poems to **Gaudete** (1977) in praise of "a nameless female deity", various **Recklings** poems record the progress towards the clarification of the unifying theme behind his output. The three **Recklings** poems which constitute *Root, Stem, Leaf*, while demonstrating the stylistic developments in Hughes's poetry between **Lupercal** and **Wodwo**, also chart, albeit tentatively, the stages in the clarification of his mythic world and its relationship to the world of actuality. The obscurity of meaning, the freely-associative imagery, and the oblique references to the White Goddess mythology indicate the personal significance of the poems to Hughes, and the rather epigrammatic structures simultaneously anticipate later similar exercises in **Crow**, **Gaudete** and **Orts** (1978).

Logos

How does *Root, Stem, Leaf* relate to another **Recklings** poem, *Logos*, the poem it replaced in the 1967 USA publication of **Wodwo**? Is anything to be gained in our understanding of *Root, Stem, Leaf* by an exploration of the textual significance of *Logos*?

Given its provenance – *Logos* was first published in the summer 1966¹⁶ – it is not surprising that the poem rehearses similar references to the work and idea-systems of Graves and Plath that inform the tri-partite work; simultaneously, it foreshadows the thematic and mythic groundwork for the later **Crow** cycle. Hughes's reading of **The White Goddess** had provided him with an increasingly important mythic framework as

¹⁵ See Roger Elkin, 'Hidden Influences in the Poetry of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath' on the Earth-Moon website: http://www.ted-hughes.info/uploads/media/Elkin_Hidden_Inf.pdf

¹⁶ In *Critical Quarterly*, (8:108-9), Summer 1966; cf. *A Match*, *Critical Quarterly* (8: 5-8), Spring 1966; *On the Slope*, *New Yorker*, 27 August 1966, p. 90; and *To Be A Girl's Diary*, *New Statesman* (75:523) 7 October 1966.

an extension to his concerns relating to the rift between twentieth-century man and Nature. He saw in Graves's account of Logos a supportive viewpoint to his argument concerning the suppression of the Nature Goddess by rigid, repressive, male-dominated Puritanism. Graves suggests that the religious concept of free choice between good and evil is the result of the forcible displacement of the primitive cult of the Universal Goddess, whose "devotees accepted the events, pleasurable and painful in turn which she imposed on them as their destiny in the natural order of things" (p. 464). She was removed as a result of a religious revolution initiated by Ezekiel who instead promoted Logos, the Universal God of Pure Meditation. It is Graves's account of the ensuing philosophical and theological struggle between the two gods, the earlier female deity (representative of Nature) and the insurgent male deity (representative of the Spirit) which informs the poetic argument of *Logos* and the narrative framework behind **Crow**:

The result of envisaging this god of pure meditation, the Universal Mind still premised by the most reputable modern philosophers, and enthroning him above Nature as essential Truth and Goodness was not an altogether happy one ... The new God claimed to be as dominant as Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, pure Holiness, pure Good, pure Logic, able to exist without the aid of woman; but it was natural to identify him with one of the original rivals of the Theme and to ally the woman and the other rival permanently against him. The outcome was philosophical dualism with all the tragic-comic woes attendant on spiritual dichotomy. If the True God, the God of Logos, was pure thought, pure good, whence came evil and error? Two separate creations had to be assumed; the true spiritual Creation and the false material Creation. (p. 465)

The "true spiritual Creation" is delineated in the two opening stanzas of *Logos*. The reduction of the process of Creation to individual and personal terms in the account of any childbirth is part of Hughes's overall questioning of "the myth" of Christianity. Indeed "the frail mantle of a person" on whom "the family features mount" may be a reference to Christ as son of God; and to some extent is a re-working of ideas rehearsed as early as *The Perfect Forms* in **Lupercal** where Hughes depicts man (and Christ as God become man) as a "six-day abortion of the Absolute" and "monstrous-headed difficult child" (**L**, p. 51). The God of Logos, whether as father of Christ or as Creator of mankind, seems to have the advantage. As a spiritual being he damns man by imposing on him "the burning pentagram of His power". Although offered as a gift, it is a scourge; for the

pentagram refers to Graves's concept of the five material senses drawn from the heavenly bodies of the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter and Venus which, because they represented the rulers of the material world (Jupiter paired with the Moon goddess), the lustful flesh (the lovers, Mars and Venus), and the devil (Mercury, the author of the false creation), were regarded as sources of error which spiritually-minded followers of Logos tried to overcome by pure meditation. Hughes is arguing that Logos, the name of God before Creation, has become recognized as the God of Truth, incapable of mistake, particularly since Puritanism initiated the divorce between man and Nature. Logos thus represents the intellectualising, rational, logical mind which refuses to recognize the truth about both man and God, because it denies the possibility of a God capable of evil and error. Thus, although man's "frail person" is handicapped at birth by having the burden of lustful flesh and the devil and the weight of error moulded on to him, if he chanced to survive (which is "unlikely" "against such odds") this would not be evidence of the endurance of the material truth but of God's "perfect strength" and spirit. Birth and procreation are only permissible by "God's leave"; and, if carried out as part of an "opportune" process in the claim to making "everlasting / Their freehold of life", are a "doomed bid".

In the final three stanzas Hughes's delineation of the birth of the God of Logos from the maternal Goddess presents a nightmarish description of material Creation. Hughes is suggesting that the patriarchal God of the Bible, particularly as grafted on to older European religious belief, is in opposition to the creative force of Nature which allows error alongside perfection. The God of Logos is "the nightmare moving / Still in her mouth". Convulsed by nightmares, she awakens with a bad taste in her mouth which she "spits kicking out". This God is itself a nightmare, despite the claims made on its behalf as the God of Light, Peace and Truth. This degradation is confirmed as the "ancient laws", "the phrasings" and "truths" are "falling to pieces" in the face of the older primeval natural laws, here represented by the sea. Source of life in evolutionary terms, and of older lineage than the spoken word or gospel, its purpose is the ultimate truth of death for which it perfects its "alert and shapely" occupants in their one process of creation for destruction – as seen above, Hughes explored similar ideas in the earlier *Relic*. The God of Logos with its emphasis on everlasting life is in direct opposition to the material God,

the creative-destructive agency. Mother Nature cannot be subdued by rational argument; or by refusing to acknowledge her existence. It is not surprising that despite his good intentions, the God of Logos is powerless against older, more vital forces: a feature Hughes reinforces with use of savage irony verging on the surreal in the final line: "God is a good fellow, but His mother's against him." The enthronement of Logos as God of Truth has exacerbated the division within man between intellect and sensitivity, and the external and inner worlds. This universal Goddess ("Creation" in the **Wodwo** version of the poem) is the creative-destructive White Goddess or Sow Goddess. Appropriately her son's first cry is "swinish". Pure meditation as represented in Biblical terms – "In the beginning was the Word / And the Word was with God / And the Word was God" – is a distortion of the truth.

Although *Logos* needs familiarity with Graves's concepts to unlock some of its textual density, Hughes obviously considers it as marking an important stage in his poetic development, as evidenced by the inclusion of its later variant form in **Wodwo**; while its challenging of Biblical accounts prefigures the ground of myth which provided the stimulus for **Crow**. And in the opening line of the later **Crow** poem, the prominently-placed second poem *Lineage*, Hughes extends the reference to the "swinish cry" of Logos: "In the beginning was Scream." (C, p. 14)

As with other **Recklings** poems, *Logos* reveals his indebtedness to Plath's poetry. According to Hughes, several poems in Plath's **Colossus** (1960) and **Ariel** (1965) are to be seen as

chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear – even if the origins of it and the *dramatis personae*, are at bottom enigmatic;¹⁷

while the opening verse of *I Want, I Want* (1958) anticipates the birth of God in *Logos*: "Open-mouthed, the baby god / Immense, bald, though baby headed, / Cried out for the mother's dug" (**SPCP**, p. 106). Later lines referring to the creation of wolf and shark have similarity with Hughes's *Crag Jack's Apostasy* (**L**, p. 56) where the underworld god is

¹⁷ Ted Hughes, 'The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems' in **The Art of Sylvia Plath**, edited by Charles Newman (Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 187.

invoked by the dreams of "a wolf's head", and also in *Logos* where "the alert and shapely" killer of the sea is identifiable as the shark. In *The Moon and The Yew Tree* (1961) Plath's description of her Gravesian-inspired deity, "The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary" (**SPCP**, p. 173) shares affinity in metrical pulse, lexical structure and sentiment with Hughes's conclusion to *Logos*: "God is a good fellow, but His mother's against him."

Moreover, Hughes's poems post-**Lupercal** acknowledge Plath's increasing preoccupation with the rift between twentieth-century man and Nature. Hughes's 1970 comment on Plath's later poetry is applicable to his own ideas and thematic concerns:

The chemical poisoning of nature, the pile-up of atomic waste, were horrors that persecuted her like an illness – as her later poems record. Auschwitz and the rest were merely the open wounds in her idea of the great civilized crime of intelligence that ... has turned on its mother.¹⁸

This has philosophical and thematic consonance with ideas Hughes noted in his review of Max Nicholson's **The Environmental Revolution** (1970):

The story of the mind exiled from nature is the story of the Western man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute for the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost ... The lost life must be captured somehow. It is the story of spiritual romanticism and heroic technological progress. It is the story of decline ... When the modern mediumistic artist looks into his crystal, he sees always the same thing. He sees the last nightmare of mental disintegration and spiritual emptiness ... This is the soul-state of our civilization.¹⁹

It is the cross-pollination of these similarly-shared world-views that informs the philosophical uncertainties, questionings and reservations of *Root, Stem, Leaf* and *Logos* and several contemporaneous poems both from **Recklings** and **Wodwo**, as well as by Plath. This initiates a probable factor which may have influenced the decision to remove

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 190.

¹⁹ Ted Hughes, Review of Max Nicholson, **The Environmental Revolution**, in *Your Environment*, 1,3 (Summer 1970), pp. 81-83.

Logos from inclusion in the **USA Selected Poems**, and replace it with the equally obscure *Root, Stem, Leaf*; and (given the personal significance of **Crow** to Hughes's relationship with Plath) the simultaneous absence of *Logos* from the **USA Wodwo**; and to adopt the reverse practice in the UK editions of these publications. Perhaps the coincidence of reworking/adoption/rephrasing of so many of Plath's tropes lends credibility to the idea that these particular poems were "suppressed" inside the **Recklings** limited edition in order to conceal Hughes's poetic and personal debt. As such, they exist as a further expression of the coded admission in the concluding line of *To Be A Girl's Diary* that "Everything is inheriting everything".