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Postcards from the Edge

The enduring legacy of Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes

INVESTIGATING AGATHA

THE SECRET MAGAZINE LIFE OF MISS MARPLE AND POIROT

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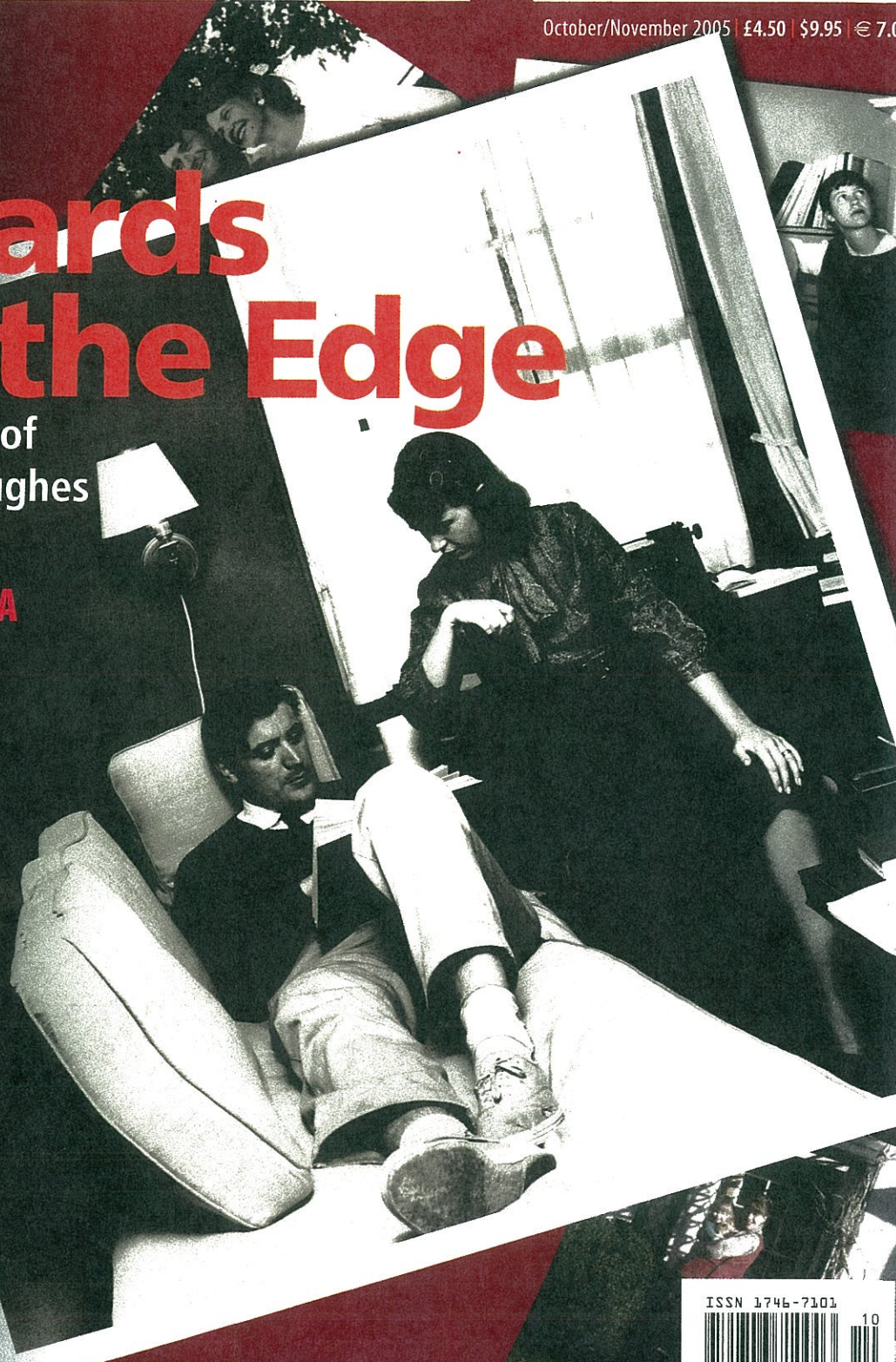
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"The Rest is Posthumous"

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes have long been the individual subjects of scholars' attentions. A new exhibition finally allows the influence each had on the other to be assessed, reports **Melissa Maday**

Sylvia Plath is identified by readers and scholars alike as one of the great American poets of the 20th century. Remarkably, despite her acclaimed poetry, her renown emerged more from the tragedy surrounding her life than from her writing. Her father died when she was eight years old. She attempted suicide in the middle of a brilliant undergraduate career at Smith College. Her husband, the burgeoning British poet Ted Hughes, moved out after six years of marriage to be with his mistress. Over the next few months, she proceeded to write the most famous – and most revered – poetry of her career, while caring for her two small children in a cold-water flat. Then, most famously and most tragically, she committed suicide, initiating the mythology that continues more than 40 years after her death.

Ted Hughes and
Sylvia Plath in
Concord,
Massachusetts,
December 1959
© Smith College



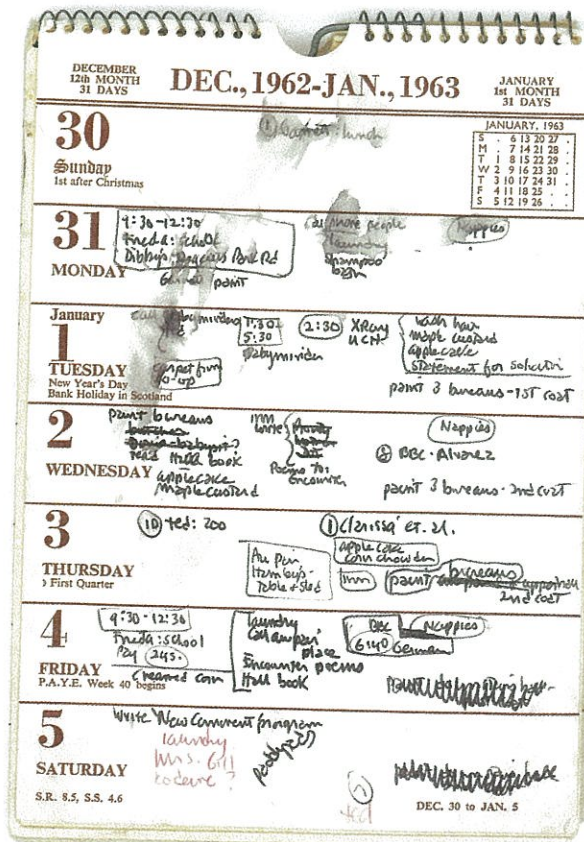
From the beginning, there was something extraordinary about the pairing of Plath and Hughes. The poets met when Plath, an American Fulbright Scholar, came to England to study at Cambridge. She and Hughes, a Cambridge graduate, encountered each other's poetry even before they met in person at a party in February 1956. Famously, as she approached him, Plath recited lines she had memorised from one of his poems. They were married in June of that year, and their individual literary careers blossomed during the years of their marriage. They had two children, a daughter, Frieda, in 1960, and a son, Nicholas, in 1961. In 1962, Hughes began an affair with Assia Wevill, and he and Plath separated in October. Months later, in February 1963, Plath committed suicide. Hughes' career continued, and he published more than 20 volumes of poetry, in addition to other writing, in his lifetime. He also edited Plath's *Collected Poems*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, and he served as Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death in 1998.

The initial furore after Plath's death led to a deluge of attacks on Hughes; among the more overt and vicious acts was the repeated removal of the name 'Hughes' from Plath's headstone in a Heptonstall churchyard. By the 1970s, Plath had become a feminist icon, and a wave of biographies and critical studies followed; then came a period of relative quiet. The current rush of interest in the couple was prompted in early 1998 by the unexpected release of *Birthday Letters*, in which Hughes detailed his relationship with Plath in starkly autobiographical verse, from his first glimpse of her in a photo as she arrived at Cambridge, to his poignant recollections of her more than 30 years after her suicide. This volume stunned the literary world, and it stirred new interest in the poets and their life together. In a feature article for *The Times* in 1999,

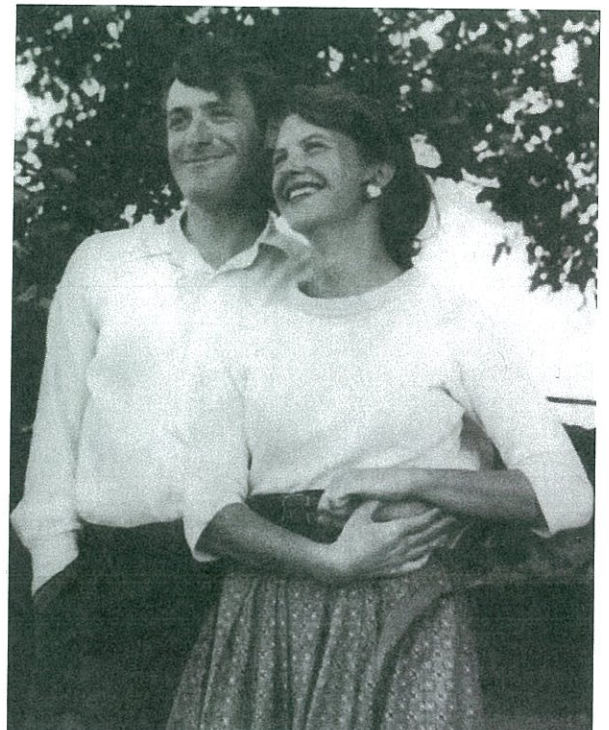
Matt Barnard aptly summed up the posthumous status achieved by the couple, writing that "Plath and Hughes are the Posh and Beckham of the chattering classes". This interest has continued to escalate, producing several prominent critical studies, as well as memoirs from friends and acquaintances, at least three novels, and a major movie starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Daniel Craig.

In the wake of these fictional treatments, archival materials survive to tell the true story. The primary holdings are in the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College and the Ted Hughes Papers at Emory University. Particularly since the opening of the Hughes Papers in 2000, scholars, admirers and students have been able to delve into the primary source material of these two famous lives. According to W Ronald Schuchard, Goodrich C White Professor of English at Emory, the significance of archival research cannot be over-estimated: "As the personal archives of major writers become accessible, with a rich array of manuscripts, letters, notebooks, and journals, they not only open up new areas of significant research but correct or support previous speculative criticism about the life and work. This has certainly been the case with the Hughes archive, which has fuelled new biographies and new critical studies."

In fact, the Hughes archive has also produced a wealth of new – and often unexpected – access to Plath, via manuscripts, correspondence and books. Most striking was the discovery of notes and pages from a chapter of Plath's unfinished novel, *Falcon Yard* (see opposite). It was widely believed that no piece of this novel survived past the early 1960s, and at least one Plath biographer raised a question about whether she ever got beyond the title, but a student helping to process the Hughes archive at Emory in 1999 unexpectedly located a number of typescript



(Left) the last page of Plath's annotated calendar, December 1962-January 1963, showing on New Year's Day how she called Hughes and the baby minders, collected carpet from the Co-op, washed her hair, made maple custard and apple cake, prepared a statement for the solicitor and painted three bureaus, reproduced with kind permission of the Sylvia Plath Estate; (right) Hughes and Plath, Heptonstall, Yorkshire, September 1956 © Warren Plath



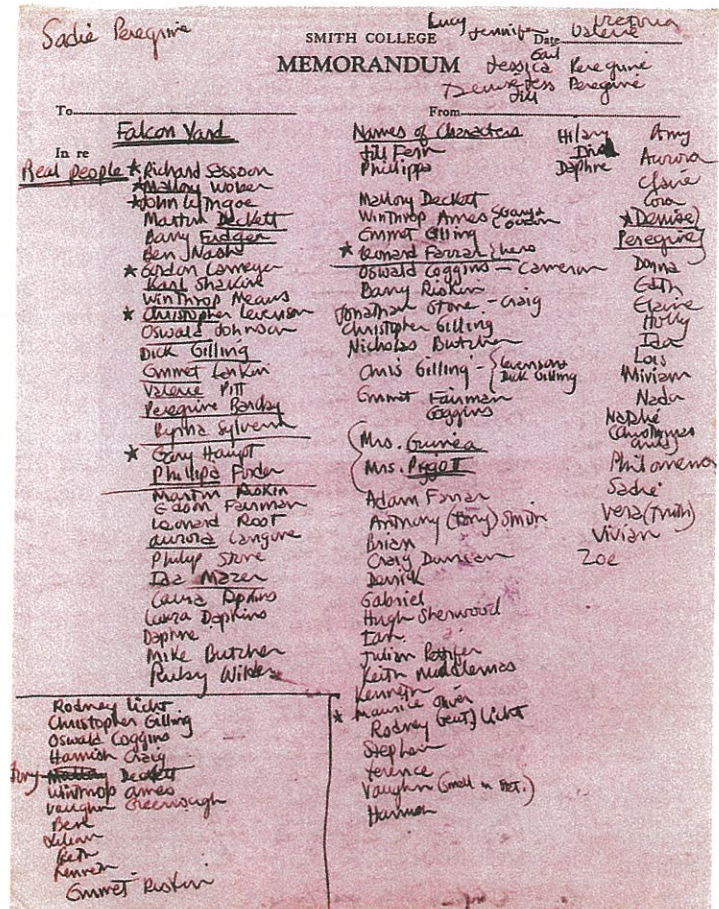
The Beach - Yorkshire, 1956 (Heptonstall Beach - Heptonstall, Yorkshire)

pages and manuscript notes for *Falcon Yard*, on the verso of various Hughes manuscripts. The significance of the *Falcon Yard* notes goes beyond their mere existence, however. In a page from the 'Venus in the Seventh' chapter, Plath described the hope of the novel's heroine that she would find a love letter from one of her suitors when she returns to England from Europe. As a companion piece, the Lilly Library at Indiana University, home of another Plath archive, holds Hughes' actual 31 March 1956 love letter, received by Plath upon her return to England from a trip to Paris. Karen V Kukil, Associate Curator of Rare Books at Smith, stresses the significance of considering materials from the various archives in tandem. "Echoes from their real life together are found in their poems and prose," she says.

The juxtaposition of items in the archives at Smith and Emory lends particular emphasis to a very significant book owned by Plath. The Smith archive includes a letter to her from her former psychologist and friend, Dr Ruth Beuscher, written in September 1962. In it, Beuscher tells Plath to read *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm. Plath's annotated copy of this book is at Emory: it was discovered among the contents of Ted Hughes' library, acquired by Emory in 2003. The significance of this item to Plath's poetic development should not be underestimated, according to Stephen C Ennis, Director of the Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library at Emory. "This is a book which Plath read on the advice of her analyst in the final months of her life," he says, "the months when she was also writing the poems that would ensure her posthumous fame as one of the 20th century's most powerful poetic voices."

Plath's copy of *The Art of Loving* has already attracted scholarly attention. She purchased the book within weeks after she and Hughes separated, writing the date 'November 9, 1962' on the front free endpaper, and it is heavily annotated in her hand. David Faulds, Rare Book Librarian at Emory's Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, noted the book's significance as he catalogued it: "The subject matter of the book makes the underlining and marginal annotation a fascinating insight into her state of mind at the time."

Eilat Negev and Yehuda Koren are the authors of a forthcoming biography of Assia Wevill. They studied Plath's copy of the Fromm text, as well as other books in Hughes' library, during a 2003 research trip to Emory. They have used the Fromm book – and Hughes' library in general – to help them construct their biography. "Fragments from the affair that were missing from Hughes' archive could be found in his library," explains Negev, adding that Plath's copy of Fromm offered insight into her psyche: "The annotations and notes inside the book point to a specific state of mind. Plath marked a passage which seems to describe what had happened to her and to Hughes during their marriage: 'The two persons become well-acquainted, their intimacy loses more and more its miraculous character, until their antagonism, their disappointments, their mutual boredom kill whatever is left of the initial excitement.'" Negev and Koren also found information pertinent to their study of Wevill. "When Assia was living in Plath's



(Above): Sylvia Plath pregnant with Nicholas and holding Frieda at Court Green, winter 1961 © Smith; (top right): recently discovered 'character list' of *Falcon Yard*, Plath's 'missing' novel. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Sylvia Plath Estate

CHARACTER FORMING

Having put aside the novel she described as a 'fable of faithfulness' in order to work on what would become *The Bell Jar*, Plath returned to work on the manuscript of *Falcon Yard* some time in 1962. When she learned of Hughes' affair with Wevill, however, the unpublished book was one of many papers from Hughes' study burned in a bonfire. As a result, many biographers have doubted the novel ever existed; only the poets' habit of composing new work on discarded manuscript pages ensured any samples survived at all.

One of the recently discovered pages is *Falcon Yard*'s 'character list' (above), written on Smith memorandum paper with an autograph manuscript of Hughes' 'The Bardo Thödol' on the verso. The accompanying notes establish strong autobiographical links: former boyfriends Richard Sassoon, Gordon Lameyer and Gary Haupt appear in a list of 'real people'. All pretence of distance is dropped, with her heroine's thoughts written in the first person.

Plath experimented with several names for the heroine, and 'Sadie Peregrine', 'Jessica Peregrine' and 'Jill Peregrine' all feature on the list, with the former receiving prominence in the top left position. Each, however, references the party at *Falcon Yard* where Plath and Hughes first met.

"The Rest is Posthumous"

maisonette in London, she found the book and added her own stamp of ownership, writing 'September 63'," says Negev. "The passage she marked deals with the wish of an adult to be sucked back into the womb."

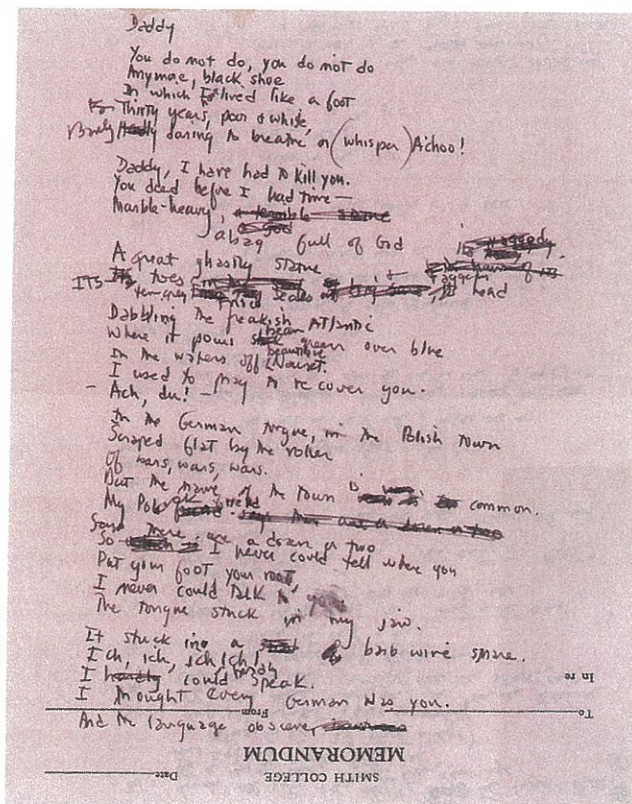
In addition to offering access to Plath's writing and the books from her library, these archives allow the story of Plath and Hughes to continue beyond her suicide, the point where many versions conclude. Among the most interesting books is *Howls and Whispers*, a limited edition volume of eleven poems selected by Hughes from the *Birthday Letters* sequence. Only 110 copies of *Howls and Whispers* were printed by Leonard Baskin's Gehenna Press in the spring of 1998. The Emory archive contains number seven of ten deluxe copies, which included a leaf of Hughes' manuscript, as well as one of the copperplates Baskin used for the etchings accompanying the volume. This book is only one of dozens of items in the Emory archive, including letters, limited edition books, artwork, and broadsides, which reveal the

friendship and artistic collaboration between Baskin and Hughes, which endured for more than 30 years.

Many of the items posthumous to Plath illustrate Hughes' struggle to come to terms with her death and to get on with his own life. As Enniss explains, "Hughes has been perceived as a silent figure. The publication of *Birthday Letters* was greeted with headlines: 'Hughes breaks his silence'. What we now know is that Hughes was deeply wounded by Plath's tragic death, and that he lived for the rest of his life with a heavy weight of guilt and hurt. Far from being silent, he gave expression to these feelings in letters and manuscripts." Among the most poignant documents is a letter in the Smith archive, written to Leo and Ann Davidow Goodman, Plath's college roommate and her husband, after Plath's death. Hughes writes: "That's the end of my life. The rest is posthumous." Emory holds an undated manuscript notebook in which Hughes describes dreaming that Plath had been brought back to life, but only temporarily. One of the most revealing items in the archive is a fragment written years after Plath's suicide, probably in direct response to the March 1969 suicide of Assia Wevill and the death of her daughter. According to Enniss, "Hughes reveals his hurt in the years after Plath's death as he confesses in his journal, 'I am not composing poetry. I am trying to get out of the flames.' Hughes would later choose for the dust jacket of *Birthday Letters* an image of a painting by his daughter, Frieda, of a conflagration of fire and flame."

Correspondence with family and friends adds weight and depth to both archives. Emory boasts several collections peripheral to the Hughes Papers, including his letters to close friends (and poets) Seamus Heaney and Lucas Myers. Emory also holds Hughes' letters to his brother, Gerald, his sister, Olwyn, and their parents, and – via a recent acquisition – his letters to his daughter, Frieda. Smith holds Plath's unpublished correspondence with college friends Marcia Brown Plumer, Enid Epstein Mark, and Elinor Friedman Klein. "Plath's letters to her Smith friends give us firsthand information about McLean Hospital, Plath's first impressions of Ted Hughes, her attempts to advance Ted Hughes' literary career, the birth of Frieda, the breakdown of her marriage to Hughes, and Plath's state of mind a week before her suicide," explains Kukil.

Sylvia Plath has long been a focal point for scholars of confessional poetry and psychoanalytic criticism, as well as a feminist icon. Enniss hopes that access to these archives will help facilitate more wide-ranging critical consideration of her writing. "The manuscript notes and typescript fragments of Plath's lost novel, *Falcon Yard*, show her conception of that novel as 'a fable of faithfulness' and show, too, the degree to which she conceived her own life as narrative," he says. Susan Van Dyne, Professor and Chair of the Women's Studies Programme at Smith College, who has written extensively about Plath, sees the strength of these archives – which promote various perspectives on the same events and allow for consideration of items of different types – as supporting a new direction in reading and understanding Plath's works: "New critical methods require that we do not set aside biography, or history, or commercial 'packaging' but that we analyse their interrelation," she explains. "Our questions now legitimately encompass the composition of literary texts, their publication and reception, and the cultural uses of poets as icons or caricatures. The meanings of Plath's poems, I am proposing, are not fixed but change depending on our tools and the contexts in which we have learned, in the last four decades, to read them."



LIE EASY NOW

Plath wrote her most angry poem, 'Daddy', on the back of Hughes' manuscript for *The Calm* – a play loosely based on *The Tempest* but never produced – on 12 October 1962. A second draft was produced (the first is shown here) which heaped further resentment on the 'Daddy' of the title, and further changes still were incorporated before its publication in the collection *Ariel*. (Her original title for the volume was *Daddy*.)

Immediately after completion, Plath sent 'Daddy' to the *New Yorker*, then a few days later to the *London Magazine* and then, the following January, to *Encounter* where it was eventually published in October 1963 along with nine other poems and a note by Hughes. He wrote, "In spite of the prevailing doom in her poems, it is impossible that anybody could have been more in love with life, or more capable of happiness, than she was."

The items described here and the images and photographs that accompany them, along with many other pieces from the Sylvia Plath Collection and the Ted Hughes Papers, are currently on display at the Grolier Club in New York City. "No Other Appetite" – Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Blood Jet of Poetry', an exhibition co-curated by Kukil and Enniss, contains 151 items including manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, memorabilia, rare editions and books from Hughes' and Plath's personal libraries. It records and reflects the poets' close creative relationship during the seven years of their marriage and the repercussions of Plath's suicide in Hughes' life and work.

Plans for this exhibition have been in the works for more than four years, according to Enniss. After deciding on a theme, he and Kukil each selected materials from their respective collections "that showed the nature of their lives together." While some of the items have been available to scholars and admirers for years, the exhibition is particularly exceptional, he says, "Because all of it is presented in a new context. For

After Plath's death Hughes confessed, "I am not composing poetry. I am trying to get out of the flames"

example, while the Plath manuscripts of Ariel have been exhibited before, Ted Hughes' presence in Plath's life has not been brought forward in a fully developed, rounded way."

Many of the items in the Grolier Club exhibition are new to the public. "A wealth of primary materials related to Ted Hughes' and Sylvia Plath's life together are becoming available for the first time," Enniss explains. "These archival materials are changing scholars' understanding of these two poets' extraordinary relationship, as evidenced by things like Diane Middlebrook's recent book, Her Husband, but the larger public has not yet assimilated these new materials into the story of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes." The more recently acquired Hughes items offer a new perspective on more-well-known Plath items, such as her unabridged journals, published in 2000, according to Kukil. "It is particularly enlightening to have Hughes' perspective on the same events that Plath writes about in her journals," she says. "She was a master of dramatising daily life."

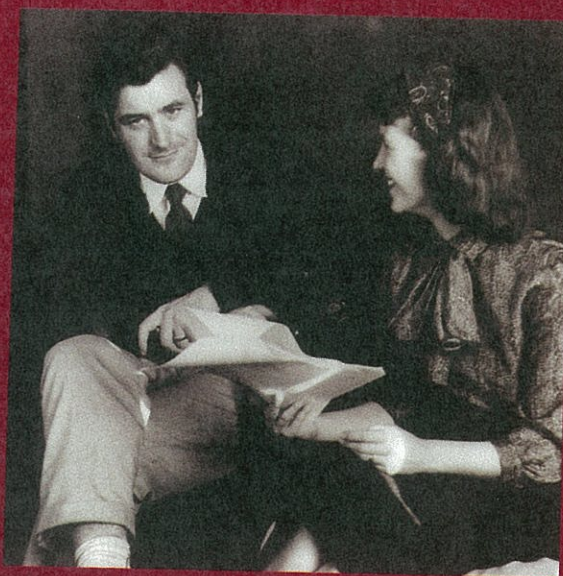
The Hughes manuscripts and correspondence add context as well as content to what is known about Plath, Kukil says: "It is the richest layering of their life together that I have ever encountered." Enniss agrees, believing the exhibition provides something important for everyone interested in Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and 20th-century poetry: new perspective, new information, and new critical and biographical insight. "Most readers of Plath's work come at her life through the moment of her dying," he explains. "The public preoccupation is with the months of dissolution, the breakup of Plath's and Hughes' marriage. What this exhibition demonstrates time and time again is the remarkably collaborative life that Hughes and Plath shared for six of their seven years together." ®

"No Other Appetite" – Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and the Blood Jet of Poetry' runs until 19 November 2005 at the Grolier Club, 47 East 60th Street, New York City, accompanied by an illustrated catalogue. For additional information, or to order a copy of the catalogue, visit the Grolier Club website: www.grolierclub.org.

THE GROLIER CLUB
is pleased to announce the publication of

"No Other Appetite"

*Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes,
and the Blood Jet of Poetry*



by STEPHEN C. ENNISS AND KAREN V. KUKIL.
This handsome catalogue describes all 151 items in the Grolier Club's landmark exhibition of books, manuscripts, letters, and photographs that document the personal and artistic relationship of two great modern poets. With typography and design by Bruce Kennett, and printing by The Stinehour Press, the book is 6x9 inches, 84 pages on acid-free paper, and has 32 duotone and full-color illustrations. Bound in blood-red cloth stamped in blind and gold, with a plate-sunk illustration on the front cover. 1000 copies. UK £20 / US \$35.

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P.O. Box 328
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USA
Tel. (413) 584-1867
veatchs@veatchs.com

Photo: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath holding a manuscript, 1958, by James F. Coyne (Emory © Black Star)