

## Hidden Influences in the Poetry of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath

Writing in 1970 about Sylvia Plath's poems from her first collection, *The Colossus* (1960), Anne Sexton drawing on her own experience as a poet, has this to say about the issue of influence:

Let's get down to facts. I'm sure Sylvia's influences are hidden, as with most of us... Believe me, no one ever tells one's influences – and certainly not on the radio or the TV or in interviews, if he can help it... I'd never tell anyone and she was smarter than I am about such hidden things. Poets will not only hide influences. They will bury them!<sup>1</sup>

Ted Hughes in interview with Ekbert Faas in 1971, has this to say about influences on his own poems:

There are superficial influences that show and deep influences that maybe are not so visible. It's a mystery how a writer's imagination is influenced and altered.<sup>2</sup>

This article explores the issue of influence – visible, hidden, superficial, deep, buried, but ultimately shared - in Plath's seven-sectioned *Poem For A Birthday* (*The Colossus*, 1960); and Hughes's *Memory* (*Recklings*, 1966); and *Wodwo*, (*Wodwo*, 1967).<sup>3</sup> The dates given are those of book-publication; however references from Plath's *Journals*; Plath's *Letters Home*; *Letters of Ted Hughes* and *Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946–1980* reveal that the poems were written earlier: *Poem For A Birthday* in late October to early November 1959; *Memory*, published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1961; and *Wodwo* published in *New Statesman*, 15 September 1961.<sup>4</sup> Given the time lag between composition and submission and eventual magazine publication, such proximity of dates suggests that the poems were practically contemporaneous. Furthermore, textual detail suggests that Plath and Hughes influenced each other considerably, but under the mutual influence of the poetry of Theodore Roethke, whose voice and poetic vision are clearly in evidence. In discussing influence there is no suggestion that the poets were involved in the “lifting” of sections, fragments and lines from Roethke, but rather that Plath and Hughes were so immersed in the world of Roethke and each other's writing that ideas and techniques have become absorbed and transformed into the expression of the individual poet's voices as conditioned by experience. What leads me to this conviction is Hughes's dating of Plath's poetry, and his explication/explanation of the sources for the poetry she wrote at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York from 9<sup>th</sup> September to 19<sup>th</sup> November 1959. Interestingly, apart from Margaret Dickie Uroff and Erica Wagner, critics tend to treat Hughes and Plath as separate poets, limiting coverage of their relationship primarily to biographical detail, rather than seeing some of the poems as having equal weight as products of a mutual poetic interchange.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in those studies in which the issue of their creative partnership is hinted at, opinion seems to be that Hughes provided the example for the poetic-apprentice, Plath, while her role was mainly as the editor, publicist and guide to American literature for the master-poet, Hughes. Keith Sagar's 1975 description of their relationship provided the template:

His was the stronger, surer, poetic voice, and the immediate effect was of ventriloquism. Her *Spinster*, one of the first poems she wrote after their meeting, is a variation of his *Secretary*, and echoes the vocabulary of *Fallgrief's Girlfriends*... And another poem of the period, *Strumpet Song*, ends with a passage of pure Hughes, the wrenched syntax, the savage consonants, the pounding monosyllables... Later Sylvia seized on *View of a Pig*, *The Green Wolf*, *Out* and

<sup>1</sup> Anne Sexton, *The Barfly Ought To Sing*, in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, Edited by Charles Newman, (Faber 1970), p. 178

<sup>2</sup> *Ted Hughes and Crow*, *London Magazine*, (January 1971), pp. 5-20

<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes, *Recklings* (Turret Books, 1966). This limited edition of 150 copies was not published separately; and its contents remained uncollected until the publication of *Ted Hughes, Collected Poems*, (Faber, 2003). *Memory* appeared in Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems, 1957-1994*, (Faber, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Edited by Karen V. Kukil, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*, (Faber 2000); Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963*, (Faber, 1975); Selected and Edited by Christopher Reid, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, (Faber, 2007); Keith Sagar & Stephen Tabor, *Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980*, (Mansell, 1983)]

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Dickie Uroff, *Ted Sylvia Plath and Hughes*, (University of Illinois Press, 1979); and Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the story of Birthday Letters*, (Faber, 2000)

several other poems from **Wodwo**... Sylvia was able to act as a guide to American poetry for Hughes, and he could hardly have had a better one... Also she helped to get his poems published, sending out beautifully typed manuscripts in a very efficient American way.<sup>6</sup>

Sagar's patronising assessment takes no account of the complex interaction of their personalities, and the effect this may have had on their consequent poetic output in terms of style and thematic concerns. Hughes and Plath are almost unique in twentieth century poetry as two important, imaginative, experimental writers who for several years worked together in a prolifically-creative partnership forging new poetic styles and opening up fresh territory of subject matter and expression. That they worked together is made evident by the existence of poems that both composed on similar subject matter, for example Plath's *Sow* and Hughes's *View of A Pig*; that they influenced each other's poetry is seen, at its simplest level, in poems which Plath composed shortly after their meeting [*Pursuit, Faun, Ode for Ted and Song*], written in response to Hughes's *Bawdry Embraced*,<sup>7</sup> and which in turn provided the stimulus for Plath's *Epitaph for Fire and Flower* which shares similar attitude, imagery and period language. Hughes's edition of Plath's **Collected Poems** (1981) "In as true a chronological order as is possible"<sup>8</sup> has facilitated the process of comparison of the two separate poets' achievements within a given time-span. Such information is important at arriving at an understanding of the issue of influence. The inclusion of a selection of fifty early poems written by Plath in the three or four years before her meeting with Hughes, and the addition of several poems dating from 1956 suggest that Plath was a competent versifier well before her meeting with Hughes. She could handle stanza structures with wit and ease; and in several poems – *Love is a Parallax, On looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover* (pp. 329-331 and 325) – her imagery and expression, almost Metaphysical in its contraction and syntax, anticipate the style of Hughes's **The Hawk In The Rain** (1957). In comparison, the majority of Hughes's early uncollected poetry of his graduate and immediate post-graduate period has a leaner style, without the oratorical bludgeoning, tortuous syntax and verbal dynamism of his first volume. Probably the most significant account of their creative partnership, and the influence which Plath had on Hughes, is contained in the only public statement that Hughes made in the years immediately following her death. In interview with John Horder in 1965, Hughes states,

There was no rivalry between us as poets or in any other way. It sounds trite but you completely influence one another if you live together. You begin to write out of one brain... After we'd returned to England [from America in December 1959]... we would each write poetry every day. It was all we were interested in, all we ever did. We were like two feet, each one using everything the other did. It was a working partnership, and was all-absorbing. We just lived it. There was an unspoken unanimity in every criticism or judgment we made. It all fitted in very well.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Hughes's reference to the lack of tension between them, which is so understated that it has become a distortion of fact, and allowing that the claims he makes for their undivided devotion to writing poetry may be exaggerated, this account does point to his recognition of their influence as poets on each other. In fact, Hughes admits this influence was so strong that they wrote as if they were one person. Significantly the expressions "out of one brain" and "like two feet" are reworked in poems Hughes was to publish at a much later date, for example *Lovesong* (**Crow**, 1970, pp. 88-89) and the **Cave Birds** marriage poems (1978). Commentators on Plath and Hughes seem to be unaware of this statement, or if aware have elected not to use it. Uroff while claiming that there is internal poetic evidence of influence between the two poets is led because of her apparent ignorance of the Horder interview (she does not cite it in her bibliography) to qualify her thesis by stating that much of her interpretation is based on conjecture. Sagar, who lists the Horder interview, completely ignores this section of it, primarily because his study concentrates almost exclusively on Hughes's poetry. Moreover, he suggests, albeit by omission, that any influence Plath's poetry may have had on Hughes's writing stopped with her suicide in February 1963. As executor and subsequent editor of Plath's literary estate, Hughes had the opportunity

<sup>6</sup> **The Art of Ted Hughes**, pp. 10-11

<sup>7</sup> Uncollected until **Recklings**, 1966, but initially published in June 1956. Plath wrote to her brother, Warren, "I want you so to get to know my dear new husband. By the way, his first poem (about us in an allegorical way!) has been accepted by **Poetry** in Chicago." (**Letters Home**, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1956, p. 259) and to her mother, "*Bawdry Embraced* in **Poetry** was dedicated to me." (**Letters Home**, September 2, 1956, p. 270)

<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Plath, **Collected Poems**, p. 15

<sup>9</sup> **Desk Poet**, Interview with John Horder, **Guardian**, (23March, 1965), p. 9

of close working acquaintance with the poetry written during the period of their estrangement and separation. The fact that several poems from this period and published in *Ariel* (1965) – such as *Lady Lazarus*, *Fever 103*, *Nick and The Candlestick* – appear in different versions from those recorded by Plath for the BBC on October 30th, 1962 suggests that several versions of the same poems exist from which Hughes had to decide the final draft.<sup>10</sup> Such an editorial task demands close scrutiny of texts, and the exposure to the detailed workings of Plath’s poetry may have influenced Hughes’s poetry published since *Lupercal* (1960). The subject matter of these late Plath poems – the creation of a mythological figure as both symbol of and replacement for the exorcised father and betraying husband, and the exploration of a hostile “natural” world – is paralleled in Hughes’s poetry by the creation of the mythological world of **Crow**, the foundations for which are seen in *Logos* from **Recklings**, and the contemporaneous *Reveille* and *Theology* from **Wodwo**; and an exploration and reassessment of the natural world which takes the occasional resolved, grim note of *Snowdrop* and *Fire-Eater* and in **Wodwo** develops it along nihilistic lines set against surrealistic landscapes (*Ghost Crabs*), populated by creatures who “comprehend little” (*The Howling of Wolves*), have “no future, only their aftermath” (*Song of A Rat*) and question “what am I?” (*Wodwo*). It is apparent that following Plath’s death, Hughes’s poetry until **Season Songs** (1975) is haunted by some of the reservations about the solidarity and reliability of the natural world that feature in Plath’s early nature and landscape poems in **The Colossus**, the contents for which were completed by the end of 1959, and which take on nightmarish unsettling proportions in her later poems.

The issue of influence is not restricted to theme and subject matter, but also embraces matters of style, including, occasionally, almost parallel modes of expression. Critics of Hughes suggest that it was his reading of middle-English four-beat alliterative poetry which awakened his interest in the barer style that predominates in **Wodwo** and several **Recklings** poems. However, Hughes’s practice may owe something to Plath’s use of the natural folk-line. In her early poetry, before the separation from Hughes in the summer of 1962, Plath experimented with various rhythms. This is particularly apparent in the one volume published before her death, **The Colossus**, which includes ten poems which read in this natural folk-line: *Manor Garden*; *Night Shift*; *The Eye-Mote*; *Faun*; *The Bull of Bendylaw*; *Suicide Off Egg-Rock*; *I want, I want*; *A Winter Ship*; *Blue Moles* and *Sculptor*. In contrast, Hughes’s published output until **Wodwo** is mainly built upon poems which have a heavily stressed metric pattern; and it is only in the post-**Lupercal** poetry that Hughes adopts Plath’s more colloquially-based poetry, and seems to be striving to develop, in his own fashion, her experimentation in structure, format and layout. The tightly structured quatrain has been abandoned in favour of a free-verse patterning in which verse-paragraphing and lineation are used to plot out the poem’s idea-structure, with lines made from a single word, then followed by one which spills over the width of the page on to the next line. The verbal violence, couched in tortuous syntax – “by the bang of blood in the brain, deaf the ear” (*The Jaguar*), and the period language of early poems (*Bawdry Embraced*, *The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar*) have been replaced by colloquial, but precise, phrasing and diction; while parallelism and anaphoric repetitions have displaced regular, metrical impulse. The poems begin to explore the extra-semantic meanings that spatially-isolated lines can add to the argument, and many of the lines, or even whole poems, are unstopped or not punctuated grammatically. *Wodwo* for example in its structure and the gradual collapse of punctuation, including the abandonment of the capital letter at the beginning of lines, mirrors Hughes’s stylistic and thematic concerns; and its last line “again very queer but I’ll go on looking” exists on one level as his response to the stylistic and thematic issues which he had partially inherited as a result of Plath’s late poetry.

Moreover, in matters of expression, Hughes’s later poetry has several parallels with Plath’s: for example in *Song For a Phallus* (**Crow**, p.75) the use of nursery-rhyme metre mirrors the almost-aggressive, metric pulse of Plath’s *Daddy*, (**Collected Poems**, pp. 222-4); and her reference to the black-booted fascist is reworked in *Lovesong* (**Crow**, p.88) in the image of whispers as “whips and jackboots”. Similarly, the line “their screams stick in the wall” (*Lovesong*) echoes Plath’s “The child’s cry melts in the wall” (*Ariel*, **Collected Poems**, p. 239). Viewed in isolation such textual similarity may be nothing more than coincidence; however, a critical reading of poems dating from the autumn of 1959 confirms that both poets were partially influenced by the writing of Roethke, whose poetry Hughes encouraged Plath to read whilst at Yaddo.

In his essay, *The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems*, Hughes acknowledges the importance of the Yaddo experience to Plath as a poet:

The weeks spent at Yaddo – with only three or four other residents – completed the poems in **The Colossus**. It was, in several ways, the culmination of the first part of her life. For three months, while seeing the States, she had not touched verse. Her first child would be born six months later... In those weeks, she changed

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, pp. 16-19; 58-9; and 40-1 respectively. The Plath reading appears on **The Poet Speaks**, Record Five, Argo PLP 1085.

at great speed and with steady effort.<sup>11</sup>

In order to break the poetic deadlock from which Plath was suffering, Hughes records that they “devised exercises of meditation and invocation”; and that she completed *Blue Moles*, *Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond*, *The Winter Ship*, *Mushrooms*, *The Burnt-Out Spa*, *The Manor Garden*, and the seven-part *Poem For A Birthday*, including the important poem, *Stones*. He indicates that “the sudden enrichment of the texture of her verse, and the nimble shifting of focus, were something new and surprised her”.<sup>12</sup> Plath was especially encouraged by the fact that she was once more able to contemplate new ground for poetry subjects. Her **Journals** for the 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1959 note

Ambitious seeds of a long poem made up of separate sections:  
Poem on her Birthday. To be a dwelling on madhouse,  
nature: meanings of tools, greenhouses, florist shops,  
tunnels, vivid and disjointed. An adventure. Never over.  
Developing. Rebirth. Old women. Block it out.<sup>13</sup>

And the next day she wrote,

An exercise begun, in grimness, turning into a fine,  
new thing: first of a series of madhouse poems.  
October in the toolshed. Roethke's influence, yet mine.  
Ted's criticisms absolutely right.<sup>14</sup>

And by November 4<sup>th</sup>, “miraculously”, she had completed “seven pieces in my POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY sequence”.<sup>15</sup> Plath's use of block capitals may indicate her euphoria at her poetic breakthrough. Hughes emphasises the significance to Plath's poetic maturity of this sequence, and labels it as “the end of the first phase of her development”. Hughes identifies the particular importance of the last poem of the sequence, *Stones*:

The last poem she wrote at Yaddo, and the last  
in America. The immediate source of it was a series  
of poems she began as a deliberate exercise in  
experimental improvisation on set themes.  
She had never in her life improvised. The powers  
that compelled her to write so slowly had always  
been stronger than she was. But quite suddenly  
she found herself free to let herself drop, rather  
than inch over bridges of concepts...  
At the same time she was reading – closely and  
sympathetically for the first time – Roethke's poems.  
The result was a series of pieces, each a monologue  
of some character in an underground, primitive drama...  
where the self, shattered in 1953, suddenly finds itself whole.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of Plath's reading of Roethke is so important, that a fuller investigation of his life, thinking and poetry is essential. And given the close working partnership of Plath and Hughes it seems inevitable that Hughes's poetry of this period should also have been influenced by Roethke, with whose poetry he was already familiar.

Throughout practically all his writing career, Theodore Roethke (1908-63) was beset by mental breakdown. What complicated matters for him was the need to conceal these mental crises so that he could face the academic world in which he was employed: Lafayette College, Pennsylvania from 1931 to 1935; Pennsylvania State College from 1936 to 1943; and the university of Washington from 1947 to 1963, the year he died. This necessitated the creation of a new persona modelled upon Jung's process of individuation, and supported by wide reading in philosophy and religion; its form took the shape of poetry, particularly the long poem sequences of which *The Lost Son* (1948) is the most famous. In this cycle and the other associated ones – *Praise To The End* (1951), *The Waking* (1953) –

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<sup>11</sup> **The Art of Sylvia Plath**, edited by Charles Newman, (Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 191

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> **Journals of Sylvia Plath**, p. 520

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 521

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 523

<sup>16</sup> **The Art of Sylvia Plath**, p.192

Roethke, as part of the process of self-definition, probed the boundaries of outer and inner experience, and, moving from the outer “I”, created an “inner” or “sunken” eye, a process which is similarly recorded in Hughes’s poetry between 1960 and 1967. Roethke’s spiritual biography records the growth of a psyche, which although based on personal experience, has a relevance outside his own life. As Karl Malkoff writes,

The anxiety experienced during a psychotic episode, the dissociation of personality, become in Roethke’s hands not states of mind peculiar to the insane, but rather more intense perceptions of the human condition as it is experienced by any man.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, although writing largely about personal experience, he saw himself as an example of universal man beset by the anxieties and anguish of his time, and involved in negotiating the conflict between the material and spiritual worlds. Faced with this dilemma, he transformed the disadvantages of his mental crises into an asset. In its quest for psychic and spiritual identity, his poetry is the record of this conflict, as the external world became a mirror for the inner conflicts of mind and emotion. Roethke’s application of Jungian archetypal images and his exploration of the collective unconscious was complemented by stylistic innovation, for example, in *The Lost Son* in his adoption of a verbally regressive language of almost emblematic and aboriginal communication. Simultaneously, Roethke widened his subject matter to include a close investigation into the non-animal natural world of vegetation, insects and molluscs, and inanimate matter.

Of particular importance to Roethke’s poetic creativity, and by extension Plath’s and Hughes’s, was the example of Rimbaud whose ideas on poetry are set down in two letters dating from May 1871.<sup>18</sup> In these, he differentiates between the versifier and the true poet, the “voyant” or seer. Rimbaud believed that poetry should be a means of exploring beyond visible reality, and the vehicle for penetrating into the inner consciousness:

The first study for a man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, complete. He looks for his soul, inspects it, puts it to the test, learns it. And soon as he knows it, he must cultivate it.<sup>19</sup>

Wishing to return to an artistic and moral temperament uncluttered by Christian deliberation of right and wrong, and the consciousness of sin, Rimbaud embarked upon a study of Cabalistic literature, magic, alchemy and the occult. From the occult philosophers he took the adoption of the importance of words in themselves, through their sound as divorced from their logical and lexical meanings; from the alchemist literature he adapted the concept of a spiritual wholeness far transcending the more conventional search for the material philosopher’s stone. These “borrowings” are mirrored in his poetry: the former in his obscurity of language; the latter in his use of the predominant colour images of black, white and red, (colours which appear in several of Plath’s post-Roethkean poems, as well as forming part of the alchemical leitmotiv in Hughes’s *Cave Birds*). To achieve this rarefied knowledge of self, Rimbaud was prepared to undergo a process of self-abnegation in which the external self was lost in the quest for the universal soul through the descent into self. Thus, Rimbaud claims, “I’m lousing myself up as much as I can these days”<sup>20</sup> as part of his belief that,

The poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, prodigious and rational *disordering of all the senses*. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself; he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only the quintessences.<sup>21</sup>

In this way the poet is (or becomes) the means of unconscious expression; for though Rimbaud can claim

The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, to be born a poet, and I have discovered I am a poet,

he qualifies this by saying,

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Malkoff, *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry*, (Columbia University Press, 1966, pp. 7-8

<sup>18</sup> The text to these two letters (to George Izambard on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 1871, and to Paul Demeny on 15 May, 1871) is given with parallel English translation in J. N. Rimbaud, *Selected Verse*, with an Introduction and Prose Translation by Oliver Bernard, (Harmondsworth, 1962) pp. 5-7, and 7-17 respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from J N A Rimbaud to Paul Demeny, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1871

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Georges Izambard, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1871

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Demeny

It is not my fault at all. It is a mistake to say: I think.  
One ought to say: I am thought... I is someone else.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, Rimbaud maintains that the process of arriving at the “unknown” will involve great suffering, both physical and mental, even to the point of complete self-sacrifice:

This is an unspeakable torture during which he needs  
all his faith and superhuman strength, and during which he  
becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed –  
and the great learned one! – among men. For he arrives  
at the *unknown*! Because he has cultivated his own soul –  
which was rich to begin with – more than any other man!  
He reaches the unknown, and even if, crazed, he ends up  
by losing the understanding of his visions, at least he has  
seen them! Let him die charging through those  
unutterable, unanswerable things: other[s]... will come;  
they will begin from the horizons where he has succumbed.<sup>23</sup>

The end product will be the knowledge not only of the “underworld” of self, but also the garnering of the ideas of the Universal Soul and eventually the making of a poetry in new structures and a new language accessible to all:

The poet... is responsible for humanity, even for *animals*...  
If what he brings back from *down there* has form, he brings forth form;  
if it is formless, he brings back formlessness. A language has to be found –  
for that matter, every word being an idea, the time of the universal language  
will come!... This language would be of the soul, for the soul,  
containing everything, smells, sounds, colours; thought latching on to thought  
and pulling. The poet would define the amount of the unknown awakening  
in the universal soul in his own time: he would produce more than  
the formulation of his thought... An enormity who has become normal,  
absorbed by everyone.<sup>24</sup>

Roethke so took to heart Rimbaud’s theory and example that he cultivated mental disorder to expand his own poetic consciousness. In his statement of self-analysis prepared for his psychologist, Roethke cites Rimbaud as his example in the production of an objective poetry based on the exploration of the personal, unconscious level of experience.<sup>25</sup> In 1935, when Roethke was twenty-seven, excessive drinking compounded by severe depression brought him to a breakdown serious enough to require hospitalisation. In his notebook he insisted that the episode was self-induced:

A descent can be willed. The real danger lies in the preceding euphoria  
getting out of hand. My first breakdown was in a very real sense  
deliberate. I not only asked for, I prayed that it would happen.<sup>26</sup>

Out of this consciously-induced state came not only the groundwork for the pre-rational consciousness, vocabulary and syntax of *The Lost Son*, but also his definition of his own mental state which was to influence his poetry, and in due course several of the poems of Plath and Hughes:

Manic:

1. A limitless expanding of the ego with no control principle.
2. An intense communion with nature in which subject and object seem identical.
3. Abdication of the ego to another center, the self.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Letter to Izambard

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Demyen

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> See Allan Seager, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke*, (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1968), p. 94

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Rosemary Sullivan, *Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master*, (University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 10

Much of what Roethke took from Rimbaud bears similarity with Hughes's ideas and the transformation of experience, particularly that associated with Plath's mental state and his response to her death. It is possible to see in both Rimbaud and Roethke what Hughes identifies as the initiation procedures of the shaman in which "the aspirant inflicts on himself extraordinary solitary ordeals of fasting and self-mutilation".<sup>28</sup> Moreover, John Ciardi's assessment of Roethke's poetry, "This is poetry as a medicine man's dance is poetry... therapy by incantation",<sup>29</sup> is also applicable to Plath's later poetry such as *Lady Lazarus* and *Daddy*; and such Hughes poems as *Song for a Phallus*. Rimbaud's description of the suffering that the poet undergoes in order to arrive at the "unknown" and become "learned" parallels the ordeal of the **Cave Birds** central protagonist, "the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed"; and the acknowledgment that such suffering may result in the poet's loss of sanity even to "losing the understanding of his visions" is paralleled in the *Epilogue* of **Gaudete** (1977) and the re-emergence of Lumb from the underworld as an enlightened but deranged poet, wandering wildly reciting poems of "unutterable, unnameable things". Rimbaud's comment on the new structures and language of poems brought out from "down there" and his claim that "inventions from the unknown demand new forms" parallel Hughes's development in poetic theme and style between 1960 to 1967. Although Hughes makes no mention of Rimbaud in his expository writing, his poetry from this period bears uncanny resemblance to Rimbaud's in its movement from the concrete to the abstract, its use of animism and minimism, its staccato statements, quick turns in associations and the strategy of opening up the poem in the final lines to hint at a wider, more universal, meaning. Hughes's *The Green Wolf*, *Pibroch*, *The Hunting of Wolves* (**Wodwo**, pages 40, 177, 178) and the **Recklings** poems *To Be A Girl's Diary*, *A Match* and *Memory* are of a similar order to an English translation of *Faim*, one of Rimbaud's last poems in verse:

### Hunger

If I have any taste, it is hardly  
 For anything but earth and stones.  
 I breakfast always on air,  
 On rock, on coal, on iron.

Turn, my hungers. Feed hungers,  
 On the meadows of sounds,  
 Suck the gaudy poison  
 From the convolvulus.

Eat the pebbles which break  
 The old stones of churches,  
 Boulders of old floods  
 Loaves sown in the grey valleys.

The wolf howled under the leaves  
 Spitting out the bright feathers  
 Of his feast of fowl:  
 Like him, I consume myself.

Salads, fruits  
 Are only waiting to be picked;  
 But the spider of the hedge  
 Eats only violets

Let me sleep! Let me simmer  
 On Solomon's altars  
 The scum runs over the rust  
 And mingles with the Kedron.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 12

<sup>28</sup> Ted Hughes, Review of **Shamanism** by Mircea Eliade, *The Listener*, (29 October 1964) pp. 677-678), p.677

<sup>29</sup> John Ciardi, "Theodore Roethke: A Passion and A Maker", *Saturday Review*, XLVI (August 31, 1963), p. 13

<sup>30</sup> J. N. A. Rimbaud, **Selected Verse**, p. 332

Such textual similarity suggests that it is not only Roethke that is indebted to Rimbaud, though, in this instance, the influence may be “buried” rather than “hidden”. But what cannot be hidden is Plath’s indebtedness to Roethke. Plath may have been drawn to a close identification with Roethke and his writing because her personal circumstances and experiences share an uncanny similarity to his. Both had fathers named Otto, who were of Prussian descent, and were disciplinarians; both fathers were closely linked with the natural world, Roethke’s father being an owner of glasshouses, and Plath’s a professor of entomology; both fathers died when their children were still young, Otto Roethke when Theodore was fifteen, and Otto Plath when Sylvia was nine.<sup>31</sup> Like Plath, Roethke suffered mental disorder and breakdown; but in his case it was deliberately cultivated to expand his consciousness as part of the process of self-knowledge. As Stanley Kunitz observes:

In the beginning he was terribly ashamed of these episodes and tried to conceal them... The onset of his best work coincided with his discovery that he need not feel guilty about his illness; that it was a condition he could explore and use; that it was, in fact, convertible into daemonic energy, the driving power of imagination.<sup>32</sup>

This seems to have some similarity with Plath’s belief in the freedom as a poet to express formerly taboo emotions:

I think my poems immediately come out of sensuous and emotional experiences ... I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness... with an informed and intelligent mind.<sup>33</sup>

How far, it might be asked, did Plath, like Roethke and Rimbaud, cultivate her mental disorder as a strategy in the creation of poetry?

Roethke’s *Open House* (1941), like Plath’s *Colossus*, *Poem For A Birthday* and other *Ariel* poems, records his attempts to come to terms with his father’s death and his own mental breakdown. Roethke’s later poetry, particularly *The Lost Son* sequence, is, like much of Plath’s work, a purgative process via which he can begin to explore his own spiritual alienation, his private agonies and frustrations. His early poetry, like Plath’s most important work, is haunted by the quasi-divine, censorious, ghost-figure of his father. Her adoption of Roethke’s monologue style, and his search for his own identity through the association of the humans with the natural world, can be seen in *Mushrooms*, *The Burnt-out Spa* and *Poem For A Birthday* from *The Colossus*. This process is echoed in Hughes’s work from the period 1960 to 1967 in his resort to animism and minimism in such poems as *Water*, *The Lake*, *The Toughest* and *Memory* from *Recklings*; and *Still Life* and *Pibroch* from *Wodwo*. These poems with their use of non-animal subject matter – plants, rocks, trees, water, stones – anticipate Hughes’s later resort to animism and minimism in poems such as *Memory* and *Wodwo*.

The most immediate influence on Plath’s *Poem For A Birthday* was Roethke’s *Praise To the End* cycle which in the *Collected Poems* covers some fifty pages. The cycle charts Roethke’s spiritual autobiography alongside his childhood apprehension of sexual awareness, and the personality conflicts with an authoritarian father. From conception the child is involved in the complex problem of self-definition. He searches around for identification with others, including non-human and sub-human forms – frogs and roots, for example – and discovers that his own creative energy is by necessity repressed into the negative and narcissistic act of onanism, which devoid of love, cuts him off from harmony with the natural order. Having emerged as an organism, alive in the world, the son must attempt to acquire his relationship to reality and find solution to the paradox of his dual (physical and spiritual) nature. Although based on Roethke’s biographical experience, the “lost son” is an archetypal image of the same order as Oedipus or Hamlet, and his quest for an identity is a reworking of the death-rebirth theme that features in much European literature from classical times onwards, and is explored in both Plath and Hughes’s poems, and the much later *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete*. Roethke’s statement on the nature of his sequence anticipates their later concerns with the quest for identity and relationship to Nature via an exploration of the self and the unconscious.

Each poem... is complete in itself, yet each in a sense

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<sup>31</sup> In almost amazing contiguity, Roethke died, suddenly, from a heart attack in 1963 the year that Plath committed suicide.

<sup>32</sup> *Stanley Kunitz: an interview* in Robert Byers (ed.), *Contemporary Poetry in America – essays and interviews* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 38

<sup>33</sup> Peter Orr (ed.), *The Poet Speaks* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 169



is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and, later, to become something more... The method is cyclic. I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experience... There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going forward; but there is some "progress".<sup>34</sup>

In keeping with such a quest, Roethke abandons the convention of rational discourse and replaces it with a system of expression which, because it attempts to approximate pre-rational consciousness, is rooted in the imagery and symbolism of the natural world, and the world of legend and myth. Roethke's poems are both verbally and psychologically regressive, as he attempts to find a language, almost emblematic and aboriginal, in which to express the stirrings of consciousness. Both Plath and Hughes adopted Roethke's stylistic strategy, with the result that, although their later poetry is increasingly personal (even to the point of obscurity), formality, restraint and too fussy a preoccupation with such technicalities as structural regularity and rhyme patterns are discarded in preference for much freer and more immediate work. Moreover, it is apparent that in many respects the scope of thematic concerns in Roethke's sequence provides the models for both Plath and Hughes's expressions of identity. Like Roethke's cycle, Plath's *Poem For A Birthday* is based on personal experience. The protagonist is an inmate of a mental hospital, and the poem records her quest for rebirth of identity by examining the nature of her own psychic condition. The title indicates the symbolic content of the poem, for the "Birthday" refers to the fact that the poem was composed in October, the month of Plath's birthday. At this time, Plath was pregnant and her apprehension of this condition heightened her concern with her own physical and mental identity. The fact that she was in the process of giving birth underpins the thematic exploration of being born with its emphasis on the creation of a new life (mental, psychic and spiritual) out of a dead persona. Her experience of electric-convulsive therapy and the creation of a more stable personality is an underlying concern in the poem's thematic structure. The most relevant sections to Hughes's *Wodwo* and *Memory* are the first three sections, *Who*, *Dark House* and *Maenad*. In *Who* the protagonist, having completely lost identity as a result of mental illness, is led to identify herself, like Hughes's *wodwo*, with inanimate nature: "I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet." In *Dark House* the subterranean inhabitant mouthing its way, like the *wodwo*, to an eventual depth in the bowels of the root is linked with images of the womb, and the activities of the creature – part-animal, part vegetable – are associated with the foetal stirrings of the developing infant. In *Maenad* Plath explores the idea that the only way of resolving childhood conflicts with parents lies in the evolution of a new identity. Echoing Roethke's "I'm somebody else now", Plath's protagonist, in questing for an entire personality, states, "I am becoming another". [cf. Rimbaud's "I is someone else".] The concluding lines reveal that, although aware of the complete loss of individuality and identity, the protagonist is purposefully questing for a definition of self as she pleads, "Tell me my name." This feature links directly with the later Hughes poem, *Wodwo* (1961). However, Hughes's *wodwo* is preoccupied with identity, but not in terms of self as a person, but as a what – an object in a bigger world, rather than as a person controlling it. The *wodwo*, Hughes writes,

is some sort of goblin creature... just discovering that it is alive in the world. It does not know what it is and is full of questions. It is quite bewildered to know what is going on. It has a whole string of thoughts, but at the centre of them... is this creature and its bewilderment... A *wodwo* is a sort of half-man half-animal spirit of the forests.<sup>35</sup>

Hughes emphasises the fact that the *wodwo* has recently discovered that it is alive, not that it has just been born. This is confirmed by Sagar's statement that, introducing a public reading of the poem, Hughes described the *wodwo* as

some sort of satyr or half-man or half-animal, half all kinds of elemental little things, just a little larval being without shape or qualities who suddenly finds himself alive in this world at any time.(emphasis added)<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> **On The Poet And His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke**, edited by Ralph J. Mills, Jr (University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 37-39

<sup>35</sup> Ted Hughes, **Poetry in the Making**, (Faber, 1967) p. 62

<sup>36</sup> Sagar, **The Art of Ted Hughes**, p. 98

The symbolic, personal nature of the poem to Hughes at some crucial crossroads of understanding is confirmed by textual evidence. References to his earlier poetry, particularly *Hawk Roosting* and *Bullfrog* exist in the lines:

What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find  
this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret  
interior and make it my own?

The first six lines, with their oblique references to *The Man seeking Experience Enquires His Way Of A Drop Of Water* (HITR, p 37) and *The Toughest*, question his earlier stance of handling subject matter from an arrogant pompously-scientific manner, and asking: "What am I to split / The glassy grain of water?". The relationship of the poet to his poetry is also evident in the fact that the wodwo, though questioning with a human intellect, exhibits sub-human behaviour as it seeks its own identity by examining its relationship to the world around him, "turning leaves over", entering water, inspecting frogs and "picking bits of bark off this rotten stump". The wodwo is both the poet and the animal subject matter of the early volumes. Moreover, the suggestion that the wodwo represents Hughes is emphasised by the origins of the word. In Old English, "wodwo" existed as wuduwasa, wood-dweller, which was applied to the earliest Britons when the "civilisers" arrived. Hughes has claimed that his Yorkshire speaking voice links him "directly and in .... most intimate self to middle English poetry".<sup>37</sup> His insistence that

Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive  
in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self<sup>38</sup>

and that this "language under the language... which gets within whatever I write"<sup>39</sup> was crucial in his abandonment of English studies at Cambridge, parallels the wodwo's awareness of his existence in a world which threatens to extinguish him by imposing an identity. Thus, the wodwo's quest mimes Hughes's rejection of the trappings of convention and the mainstream English poetic tradition, the "terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus"<sup>40</sup> in preference for his interest in mythology and anthropology and his subsequent involvement with primitivism and alternative literature, including English folk-lore "where our mental life has its roots". As the title poem of the "single adventure", *Wodwo* also confirms the process begun in **The Hawk In The Rain** and **Lupercal** of an examination of both poetic creativity and consciousness as developed in the two most important poems of these volumes, *The Thought-Fox* and *Hawk Roosting*. The importance of these poems to Hughes in terms of the overall scope and quest of his work is suggested by the predominant position given them in his **Selected Poems**: neither of the title poems for the two first volumes is included, and the selection begins with *The Thought-Fox*. These three poems reveal Hughes's increasing abandonment of traditional poetics, from the regular rhyming quatrains of *The Thought-Fox*, to the inner rhymes of *Hawk Roosting*, and to the looser structure, prosaic expression and format of *Wodwo*, with its unconventional syntax, repetition and punctuation. This change is also recorded in the contrast between the subjects' visual security over their purpose and identity, for while "two eyes serve a movement" for *The Thought-Fox*, and the *Hawk Roosting* arrogantly insists "my eye has permitted no change", the *Wodwo*, almost hesitantly, proposes "I'll go on looking".

It is possible that beneath the personal level of meaning there exists a private one. Hughes suggests that the wodwo is "a satyr". As half-goat, half-man the satyrs or fauns were representative of the god Dionysus, a deity to whom Hughes makes frequent reference. In **The Golden Bough**, Fraser explains that

All of these minor goat-footed divinities partake more or less clearly  
of the character of woodland deities... Their character as such is still  
further brought out by their association, or even identification, with  
Silvanus and the Silvanuses, who... are spirits of the wood.<sup>41</sup>

The link with Hughes is seen in the association, via Silvanus, with Sylvia Plath, whose early poem, *Faun*, written in the period immediately following their 1956 meeting presents Hughes "Haunched like a faun" and transformed through his close identification with Nature into a goat-man and god. In other poems and letters from this period, Hughes lived in Plath's imagination in a world of spirits. The private nature of the poem is compounded by the fact that the Roman forest-god, Silvanus, was often associated in dedication with the woodland goddess, Diana. According to Fraser, she

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<sup>37</sup> Ted Hughes and Crow, p.12

<sup>38</sup> ibid, p. 11

<sup>39</sup> Desk Poet

<sup>40</sup> Ted Hughes and Crow, p. 11

<sup>41</sup> J. G. Frazer, **The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion**, (Macmillan, Abridged Edition, 1976), p. 610

appears to have developed into a personification of the teeming life of nature, both animal and vegetable. As mistress of the greenwood she would naturally be thought to own its beasts, whether wild or tame, that ranged through it, lurking for their prey in its gloomy depths, munching the fresh leaves and shoots among the boughs, or cropping the herbage in the open glades and dells.<sup>42</sup>

This passage parallels the wodwo's opening activity, "Nosing here, turning leaves over / Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge"; and its quest for an identity of its own suggests that Hughes may be recording his awareness of his relationship with Plath, as goddess to his own wood-spirit, in an exploration of physical, mental and sexual terms at a time when their marital relationship was beginning to show strain. He finds that his personal quest for identity coincides and conflicts with hers. The opening line utilises Jungian symbols in the examination of the wodwo's search for self. Thus, the wodwo's entering into water parallels Hughes's exploration of his poetic and personal consciousness. As the wodwo examines its relationship to the sub-human animal and vegetable life around it, so Hughes evaluates his own arrogant relationship to the subjects of his earlier poetry: he has inspected, named, located them, but wonders whether such activity is only a stage in the creation of his own persona:

Do these weeds  
know me and name me to each other have they  
seen me before, do I fit in their world?

Where Plath in *Maenad* demands "Tell me my name", Hughes asks in bewilderment

But what shall I be called am I the first  
have I an owner what shape am I what  
shape am I am I huge if I go  
to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees  
till I get tired that's touching one wall of me.

The abandoned punctuation and the repetition intensify the air of menace and panic. The process of defining the bounds and limits of identity involves loss of self not only in the exploration of consciousness, but also in others. Hughes acknowledges that love relationships and marital states involve the process of self-demolition and self-erasure. In *Wodwo* this is confirmed by the conclusion that

picking  
bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me  
no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it  
me and doing it have coincided very queerly.

That Hughes is examining his relationship with Plath is suggested by the parallel between the wodwo's acknowledgement that there is no further pleasure to be gained from "this rotten stump" and the incongruity that, according to Fraser, satyrs, wood-spirits and fauns, conceived in folk-custom as goats, destroy the very life-form on which they exist:

The inconsistency of a god of vegetation subsisting upon the vegetation which he personifies is not one to strike the primitive mind. Such inconsistencies arise, when the deity, ceasing to be immanent in the vegetation, comes to be regarded as its owner or lord; for the idea of owning the vegetation naturally leads to that of subsisting on it.<sup>43</sup>

The wodwo's conclusion that such dependence has "coincided very queerly" leads to an examination of ownership in which Hughes, punning on his own name, questions his own physical entity, "am I huge". This is almost a defiant rebuke to Plath's lines in *The Beast* where the protagonist, bedded "in a fish puddle" into which "the sky is always falling", and searching among lesser animal forms, states

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p. 185

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p. 611

I've married a cupboard of rubbish...  
I housekeep in Time's gut-end  
Among emmets and molluscs,  
Duchess of Nothing,  
Hairtusk's bride.<sup>44</sup>

The wodwo, like Hughes, can only "suppose I am the exact centre", but is aware that progress both physically and spiritually can be made by continuing the quest for identity in an examination of "roots", the nudgings and beginnings of life, either in vegetative, cultural, or, via Jung's collective unconscious, in human terms.

Whether on public, personal or private level the poem explores the movement from outward appearances to inner states; from external awareness to inward consciousness; and from outward objectivity to inner subjectivity. This exploration, inner, deeper and backwards into pre-rational modes of thought is echoed in structure and style. *Wodwo* is written as a continuous monologue, which begins in a structured, grammatical manner and gradually abandons the formalities and conventions of both poetic and syntactical communication. The initial capital letters of the lines are jettisoned; sentences merge with one another, thus enriching by ambiguity the texture of meaning; and full-stops, commas and the important question-mark, symbol of the creature's bewilderment, are abandoned. This removal of most punctuation creates the effect of a stream of consciousness, which is appropriate to the investigation of personal/mental awareness. The language becomes emblematic, as natural imagery is utilised to imply mental states in which emotions and objects are compounded. As befits the examination of the pre-rational consciousness in which personal identity is complex, and the relationship of self to the reality of the world offers no conclusive help, the diction regresses from the Latinate, polysyllabic and abstract ("interesting", "inspect", "interior") to the Anglo-Saxon, mainly monosyllabic and concrete. Great play is made of the repetition of simple words. In the concluding lines the repetitive use of "roots" simultaneously suggest the significance of their physical/racial/mental existence, and mimes the movement from visual apprehension of object to the wodwo's active search, both inner and outer:

but there's all this what is it roots  
roots roots roots and here's the water  
again very queer but I'll go on looking

This concluding line is Hughes's personal and poetic manifesto on the one hand; and, on the other, a reaffirmative directive to a humanity faced with its inability to understand the mysteries of both Natural and inner agencies. The reappearance of the water, symbol of the poetic creative life, and the reaffirmation that "I'll go on looking" confirm Hughes's poetic preoccupation from **Lupercal** onwards with "The self under the eye" (*Otter*).

Roethke's technique in *Praise To The End* is an obvious influence on *Wodwo*. In *Open Letter*, Roethke argued that though the poems looked "peculiar" they were really "traditional", especially in terms of the materials used, particularly folk-lore and fairy tales, which provide an excellent basis for a myth dealing with spiritual growth and are, in turn, a source of Jungian archetypes.<sup>45</sup> This is echoed in Hughes's application of Fraser's investigation into classical and northern mythology, and Hughes's use of the satyr as symbol for his relationship with Plath. Moreover, Roethke's comments on the adaptation of rhythm to suit the requirements of certain poetic subjects seems to have influenced Hughes's movement towards free verse. In *Some Remarks on Rhythm*, Roethke maintained that

If we concern ourselves with more primitive effects in poetry we come to the consideration, I think, of verse that is closer to prose.<sup>46</sup>

Roethke's elaboration of the precise means for obtaining these "primitive effects" – lines that were varied, modulated, stretched out, or shortened – shares similarity with Hughes's advice to teachers engaged in stimulating children to write poetry. Roethke's comments not only outline Hughes's technique in *Wodwo*, but also indicate the reasons for its apt rhythmic flow. Writing about using "language that is natural to the immediate thing, the particular emotion", Roethke argued that

There are areas of experience in modern life that simply cannot be rendered by either the formal lyric or straight prose... The writer in freer forms must have an even greater fidelity to his subject matter

<sup>44</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 134

<sup>45</sup> see C. J. Jung, *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*, pp. 207-272

<sup>46</sup> *On The Poet And His Craft*, p. 81

than the poet who has the support of form. He must keep his eye on the object, and his rhythm must move as his mind moves, must be imaginatively right or he is lost.<sup>47</sup>

In comparison, Hughes advocates that the teacher should “develop the habit of all-out flowering exertion, for a short, concentrated period, in a definite direction.” The use of such “headlong, concentrated improvisation” creates a “crisis, which rouses the brain’s resources”, and in which “many things that are usually hidden find themselves rushed into the open”.<sup>48</sup>

In terms of lineation, Hughes’s advice also parallels Roethke’s technique:

Another... help is to give each phrase a fresh line. The result should be a free poem of sorts where grammar, sentence structure etc. are all sacrificed in an attempt to break fresh and accurate perceptions and words out of the reality of the subject chosen.<sup>49</sup>

Hughes’s indebtedness to Roethke extends beyond similarity in subject area and technique to include almost parallel modes of expression. It is not a question of direct “lifting”, but one of the absorption of the stylistic ethos and ambience of Roethke’s world. Hughes has distilled the essential characteristics of Roethke’s output between 1948-1953, covering some eighteen lengthy poems in sometimes as many as five individual sections, and adapted it to his personal and stylistic ends. Roethke states that his *Praise To The End* sequence attempts to

trace the spiritual history of the protagonist (not “I” personally but of all haunted and harried men)<sup>50</sup>

and indicates that in *The Flight*, the first section of *The Lost Son*, this protagonist is involved in

A terrified running away – with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting... is hunting like a primitive, for some animistic suggestion, some clue to existence from the sub-human. In a sense he goes in and out of rationality, he hangs in the balance between the human and the animal.<sup>51</sup>

Like Hughes’s wodwo, he is searching for clues that “he sees and yet does not see”, that “are almost tail-flicks from another world.”<sup>52</sup> In the opening poem, Roethke’s protagonist, like the wodwo, finds himself

Running lightly over spongy ground  
Past the pasture of stones,  
The three elms...  
Toward the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling.

Hunting along the river,  
Down among the rubbish, by bug-riddled foliage  
By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog-holes,  
By the shrunken lake, hunting.<sup>53</sup>

The earlier poem, *Cuttings (later)*, provides Hughes with the wodwo’s adoption of vegetable matter as an extension of its own action of rooting, as well as the opening idea of splitting “the glassy grain of water”:

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,  
In my veins, in my bones I feel it –  
The small water seeping upward  
The tight grains parting at last.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p. 83

<sup>48</sup> *Poetry In The Making*, p. 23

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*

<sup>50</sup> *On The Poet And His Craft*, p. 10

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p. 38

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*

<sup>53</sup> Theodore Roethke, *Collected Poems*, p. 54

These lines chart the shifting emphasis in Roethke's poetry from dependency on visual perception to a direct appeal to tactile and auditory senses, a feature that separates **Wodwo** from the earlier Hughes world of physical, mainly visual, experience.

Elsewhere in the *Praise To The End* sequence, as in *Wodwo*, statements give way to bewildered questioning, the answers to which are so freely-associative that Roethke's protagonist like Hughes's sub-human creature can only reach a supposition of his own physical and spiritual identity:

Where do the roots go?  
Look down under the leaves.  
Who put the moss there?  
The stones have been here too long.  
Who stunned the dirt into noise?  
Ask the mole he knows.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout the sequence, as in *Wodwo*, there is much play made of the association between the protagonist and plants;

The leaves, the leaves become me!  
The tendrils have me"<sup>56</sup>

and

When I stand, I'm almost a tree.  
Leaves, do you like me any?<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, though the concluding lines to *Sensibility! O La!* insist, like Hughes's *Wodwo*, on a changed understanding of existence ("I'm somewhere else, - / I insist! / I am")<sup>58</sup> Roethke acknowledges that "the illumination is still only partly apprehended; he is still 'waiting'".<sup>59</sup> This parallels the *wodwo*'s acceptance that the complete understanding of his relationship to the realities of the outer world and the apprehension of his own spiritual identity is a continuing search, "I'll go on looking", in which the inner eye is of importance.

Moreover, Roethke's prose statements on the origin, thematic concerns and stylistic techniques of his poetry have several parallels with Hughes's expository writings. Roethke's view of poetry-writing as a kind of fishing "patiently, in that dark pond, the unconscious" or a diving in "to come up festooned with... fascinating debris"<sup>60</sup> seems to have provided Hughes with some of his ideas about learning to think which he prepared for children:

There is the inner life... the world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination... There is also the thinking process by which we break into that inner life... That process... is the kind of thinking we have to learn and if we do not somehow learn it, then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.<sup>61</sup>

Roethke also suggested that in his quest for identity "all living things including the sub-human" can come to our aid. He maintained

that in a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being – and in some instances, even an inanimate thing – brings a corresponding heightening and awareness of one's own self.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, Roethke claimed that this expansion of consciousness could be self-induced,

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, p. 37

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, p. 54

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, p. 61

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p. 78

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, p. 82

<sup>59</sup> *On The Poet And His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, p. 37

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, p. 39

<sup>61</sup> *Poetry in the Making*, pp. 57-8

<sup>62</sup> *On The Poet And His Craft*, p. 24

simply by intensity in the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are part of it and it is part of you – Rilke gazing at his tiger for eight hours, for instance. If you can effect this, then you are by way of getting somewhere: knowing you will break from self-involvement.<sup>63</sup>

Hughes has written similarly about the process of poetic thought which he claims was achieved while fishing:

All a fisherman does is stare at his float for hours on end. I have spent hundreds and hundreds of hours staring at a float... All the little nagging impulses, that are normally distracting your mind dissolve... you enter one of the orders of bliss.

Your whole being rests lightly on your float ... At every moment your imagination is alarming itself with the size of the thing slowly leaving the weeds and approaching your bait...

So you see, fishing with a float is a sort of mental exercise in concentration on a small point, while at the same time letting your imagination work freely to collect everything that might concern that still point ... It is not very far from this, you see, to staring steadily at an imagined picture or idea.<sup>64</sup>

Roethke's explanation of the narrative line of *The Lost Son* not only anticipates Hughes's resort to mythic narrative in *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete* as analogue for spiritual rebirth, it has also been of help to Hughes as a "survivor poet":

I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is... a perpetual slipping-back, then a going forward; but there is *some* "progress". Are not some experiences so powerful and so profound... that they repeat themselves, thrust themselves upon us, again and again, with variation and change, each time bringing us closer to our own most particular (and thus most universal) reality? We go... from exhaustion to exhaustion. To begin from the depths and come out – that is difficult; for few know where the depths are or can recognize them; or, if they do, are afraid.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, Roethke's comments on the technical effects in *The Lost Son* sequence provide an approach to Hughes's changing style as seen in several of his mid-period poems:

In this kind of poem, the poet, in order to be true to what is most universal in himself... should not comment or employ many judgement words; should not meditate... He must scorn being "mysterious" or loosely oracular, but be willing to face up to genuine mystery. His language must be compelling and immediate: he must create an actuality. He must be able to telescope image and symbol... without relying on the necessary connectives: to speak in a kind of psychic shorthand... he must be able to shift his rhythms rapidly... he works intuitively, and the final form of his poem must be imaginatively right. If intensity has compressed the language so it seems, on early reading, obscure, this obscurity should break open suddenly for the serious reader who can hear the language: the "meaning" itself should come as a dramatic revelation, an excitement. The clues will be scattered richly – as life scatters them; the symbols will mean what they usually mean – and sometimes something more.<sup>66</sup>

Roethke's voice, particularly the more experimental style and the personal outpourings of the later *Praise To The End* sequence, also informs *Memory* as well as its more public companion-piece *Wodwo*. That these two poems share similar genesis is evidenced in the use of animism and minimism, the device of shifts in association to

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid*

<sup>64</sup> *Poetry in The Making*, pp. 80-81

<sup>65</sup> *On The Poet And His Craft*, pp. 39-40

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, p. 42

approximate thought patterns, and the posing of the question “What am I?”. It is possible that the poems are Hughes’s counterparts to Plath’s seven-part sequence *Poem For A Birthday*.

*Memory* from **Recklings** intensifies Hughes’s quest in a much more opaque and personal manner. Hughes’s preoccupation with his spiritual and physical identity is presented in a private, analogical mode of thought processes, including a series of exclamations, unanswered questions, staccato sentences, shifts in association and juxtaposition of ideas and words in which emotions and objects are compounded by an individual utilisation of Jungian archetypal symbols almost to the level of surrealism. Echoing both Roethke and Plath, the language is heavily symbolic, the words having several simultaneous levels of meaning. By modelling the thought processes along the rather limited range of primitive language, communication can only be conveyed by the use of symbolism so private that meaning in a full literal sense is dense and obscure. Despite this private level of meaning, the poem speaks with an almost authoritative voice which partially compensates for its lexical ambiguity. The character of the voice in its capturing of inner rhythms satisfies what T.S. Eliot defined as the “auditory imagination”:

The feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below  
the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating  
every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten,  
returning to the origin and bringing something back,  
seeking the beginning and the end. It works through  
meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the  
ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and  
the trite, the current and the new and the surprises,  
the most ancient and the most civilised mentality.<sup>67</sup>

The element of regression, “sinking to the most primitive and forgotten” is a strategy which Roethke employed in *The Lost Son* sequence. Hughes’s distillation of this poetic tactic coupled with the process of telescoping Roethke’s thematic concerns and identification with the minimal in so few as nineteen lines as opposed to Roethke’s fifty pages aggravates and deepens this obscurity of meaning. The landscape of *Memory*, reaching back to “the old and obliterated and trite”, is drawn directly from Roethke’s sequence which is littered with references to small, sub-human animal life – “mouse”, “eel”, “owl”, “spider”; to domestic details – “washboarding”, “thread”, “needle”; to trees and roots, particularly the “elm”; and is punctuated with references to the “nose” as symbol for the questing protagonist, who makes frequent appeals to a “mother” figure. Moreover, the action and/or argument of memory parallels Roethke’s quest for spiritual identity set against his fears of both physical and mental non-being. Hughes’s persona, the “I”, like Roethke’s “lost son”, returns to the actual moment of conception, and through the unborn child’s remembrance, acquires birth from dark to light, from unconsciousness to consciousness. Hughes complicates matters, however, by extending Roethke’s exploration of self to include a parallel development of the consciousness of poetic creativity, which, he suggest, can be not only therapeutic, but also negative, narcissistic and self-denying in a manner comparable with the resort to onanism of the “lost son”.

Hughes’s poem is located in the womb, symbol for the earliest memories of security and the darkness of consciousness where the seeds of mental/racial/poetic awareness have their roots. The issue of awareness is suggested by the emergence out of the slime (“the morass” in an evolutionary sense, and the fertilised ovum in a conceptual sense) into the darkness of the bulging uterus. Birth, even from the very instance of conception, is seen as an abortion in which, because of the progress from the dark security of the womb into the light, the foetal-being feels threatened and insecure, on the one hand, yet, on the other, acknowledges the cleansing nature of re-birth into the world out of the “writhing darkness” of the womb:

The morass is bulging and aborting –  
Mother, mother, mother, what am I?

Hands of light, hands of light  
Wash the writhing darkness.

Born either into the womb or the world, the (foetal) child searches for identity and wishes to belong. The invocation to the mother figure suggests not only the physical maternal-being from which birth has deprived him, but also a longing for an identification with a larger, all-embracing source of comfort, such as the symbolic Mother of the earth or the natural world. The triple repetition also suggests the three stages of the Moon goddess as

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<sup>67</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Matthew Arnold* in *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, (Faber and Faber, 1935), pp. 118-9



representative of the element of the poetic Muse in the White Goddess, the destructive-creative life force. Hughes is clearly paraphrasing Jung's archetype of the child-hero:

The hero's main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness:  
it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness  
over the unconscious. Day and light are synonyms for consciousness,  
night and dark for the unconscious. The coming of consciousness  
was probably the most tremendous experience of primeval times,  
for with it a world came into being whose existence no one had  
suspected before. "And God said; 'Let there be light!'"  
is the projection of that immemorial experience of the separation  
of the conscious from the unconscious... Hence the child  
distinguishes itself by deeds which point to the conquest of the dark.<sup>68</sup>

Aware of the encroachment of darkness in the loss of security, the foetal being sees that the act of intercourse is threatening his tenure:

Mother, the eel in the well is eating the moon!

In Roethke's sequence the eel, because of its phallic proportions, is symbolically identified with the father figure, and the moon with the mother; and Hughes extends this symbolism by the introduction of "the well" as representative of the moist, subliminal world of the womb. Elsewhere in Hughes's poetry, "eating" is used as a symbol for sexual passion; In *Bawdry Embraced*, love is seen as a mutual eating as Sweet Undercut, the choicest pick of "promiscuity's butchery", and Tailfever "fed their radiance to themselves" and "Died face to face, with bellies full"; in *Wodwo*, the relationship between Plath and Hughes is suggested in the reference to the satyr eating the vegetation, "picking bark", from the very goddess he serves; and in the later *Lovesong*, (*Crow*, page 88), love is seen as an expression of mutual consumption:

He loved her and she loved him  
His kisses sucked out her whole past and future...  
He had no other appetite  
She bit him she gnawed him she sucked  
She wanted him complete inside her  
Safe and sure forever and ever.

In *Memory*, Hughes is concerned with the fact that as eating is the way one grows into maturity, so eating, in symbolic terms, becomes a metaphor for psychic growth and the process of the acquisition of identity.

The central section of the poem investigates the act of penetration from the vantage-point of the foetal child, who, aware of its own tenuous control over its own life, acknowledges its helplessness in controlling the activity of the paternal "needle" (symbolically the phallus) which "thread[s] itself". Seminal emission is seen in animistic and minimistic terms, as "mouse", "spider" and "ounce", as it progresses to the enlodged foetal child. Though acknowledging that its own process of foetal development has brought physical change, in its quest for identity it wonders whether it is "a mouse's remembrance". The question is a re-working of the "lost son" who boldly states, "I'm not a mouse."

The issue of non-being also stems from Roethke's thematic concerns as suggested to him in turn by a reading of Paul Tillich's **The Courage To Be**. Tillich maintains that contemporary consciousness is threatened by a spiritual non-being based on the general conviction that the spiritual centre of the individual has been lost and that the determining causes of existence have no ultimate necessity. He claims that the best way to approach the modern man's estrangement from God, world and self is to affirm one's being in the face of nothingness:

Since every day a little of our life is taken from us –  
since we are dying every day – the final hour when  
we cease to exist does not of itself bring death;  
it merely completes the death.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, **The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious**, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 167

<sup>69</sup> Paul Tillich, **The Courage To Be** (Nisbet and Co., 1962), p.13

Hughes develops this stoical capacity of overcoming death by facing it, in the suggestion that the “death” of the child’s foetal existence is a stage in its quest for complete physical and spiritual identity as a person:

If I stop my heart and hold my breath

The needle will thread itself.  
Daring the no-man quiet of my non-being

A mouse buds at the washboarding. A nose  
Of ginger spider weaves its hairs towards me.

Claws trickle onto my palm.  
An ounce pins itself there,

Nose wavering to investigate me.  
Am I a mouse’s remembrance.

The foetal response, a sudden action, or beginning (“I start”) is sufficient to secure its own spiritual and physical being; as the shadow of itself is released in the shape of a new emission into the womb. In psychoanalytical literature, the foot is often associated symbolically with the phallus, and in Hughes’s poem, the “mother’s shoe” is representative of the vagina. This is a final consummation of the male by the female: by the sexual act he has been eaten. This reversal of the situation so alarms the poem’s protagonist that he becomes “flustered”. The flight into the wintering elm echoes Roethke’s “Mother me out of here” and “In the hour of ripeness, the tree is barren”, which suggest the wish to be born and the birth itself. In *Memory* the foetal being enters the inhospitable world, no longer as an earth-bound “mouse” or “spider” but as some type of feathered creature, which, though a higher life form, still lacks exact physical identity:

I start, and it bounces past its shadow  
Into my mother’s shoe

Which twists out.  
I fly up flustered  
Into the winter of a near elm.

As well as drawing on Roethke for some of its thematic concerns and expressive techniques, *Memory* also echoes Plath’s Roethkean experiments. In *Poem For A Birthday* Plath utilises a system of imagery and symbolism drawn from the minimal; much of the “action” is located in the womb, and/or darkness; there are several references to a mother figure; and, while charting the process of physical/mental/spiritual identity through rebirth, the poems also chart the growth of poetic consciousness. Like *Memory*, Plath uses a staccato, almost distorted, phraseology, with apparently disconnected questions following on from bald, and opaque, statements. There are many references to water, darkness and light; to eels, birds and trees; and to eating:

Mother, you are the one mouth  
I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness  
Eat me. Wastepaper gaper, shadow of doorways (Who)

and

Lady, who are these others in the moon’s vat –  
Sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds?  
In this light the blood is black.  
Tell me my name. (Maenad)

It is possible that the similarity between *Memory* and both Roethke’s *The Lost Son* and Plath’s *Poem For A Birthday* has been the reason that Hughes withheld his poem: it did not reach a wider circulation until 1995. However, as an excursion into Hughes’s spiritual identity and the exploration of himself as inheritor of the racial consciousness, the poem, despite its privacy and opacity of meaning, is evidence of his continuing quest of the division within himself and mankind between outer appearances and inner realities that pervades his poetry from as early as *The Thought-Fox*. As such, it forms a connecting link between the earlier volumes and **Wodwo**, and

Hughes's recreation of self through purgation which partially constitutes the poetic scenario of **Crow**, **Prometheus On His Crag**, **Cave Birds** and **Gaudete**.

Afterwords:

It might be instructive to consider what critics think Plath and Hughes achieved in their adoption and adaptation of Roethkean approaches. Uroff is sceptical of Plath's achievement:

Although she was consciously trying to write spontaneously,  
in fact she succeeded chiefly in repeating lines and images  
from Roethke...<sup>70</sup>

whereas in her earlier poems that took days and even weeks, writing "a few pages of drivel until the juice came back",<sup>71</sup> any evidence of poetical influence was less obvious:

Paradoxically, whatever forced her to write slowly  
also allowed her to screen out the influence of other poets.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, such is the bias of her thesis that Uroff turns the table on Hughes to suggest that it was Plath who lead the way stylistically:

*Mayday On Holderness*... shows his own experimentation  
with the Roethkean technique that Plath used in *Poem For  
A Birthday*. Like Plath, he too reverts to the underworld,  
"Flowerlike, I loved nothing," confronts the vegetative  
force, recognizes a "motherly summer," hears at the end  
of the call, "'Mother, Mother!'" But at this point was not  
prepared to explore these origins. Although he was to return  
to this... in **Wodwo** and **Crow**.<sup>73</sup>

Although this is a rather superficial reading of Hughes's poem, Uroff's statement is interesting in that it locates it as contemporary with Plath's Yaddo experience, and therefore possibly with the composition of *Wodwo* and *Memory*; though what leads Uroff to date this **Lupercal** poem so specifically is uncertain. The only date we can be sure of is that *Mayday On Holderness* had its initial publication in the *Spectator*, 22 January, 1960.

As to their own acknowledgement of Roethke's influence, Hughes in his 1977 Interview with Faas, rather cagily sidesteps any reference to Roethke as an influence on his writing:

*Faas*: According to **Letters Home**, Lowell and Roethke were  
the only poets of their generation you both really admired.

HUGHES: Well, she came to Roethke rather late.

*Faas*: After you had given her his **Words for the Wind** in 1959.

HUGHES: Reading Lowell in 1958 had really set her off to break  
through whatever blocks there were. And then suddenly at Yaddo  
she was isolated, reading Roethke. At first she plundered him directly  
but then developed her own style out of it.<sup>74</sup>

Having turned the discussion away from his own writing and on to Plath's, he allows himself to be further sidetracked into a discussion of other American poets, especially Crow Ransom. Hughes homes in on a particular line of Ransom's poetry as being of particular significance to his own writing:

There is a solid total range of sensation within the pitch of every word...  
"Tawny are the leaves turned but they still hold." I mean, how does that  
strike you? It had my hair stand on end when I first read it. It was the first line  
I ever read of Crowe Ransom's where I felt that there was something extraordinary

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<sup>70</sup> Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p.216

<sup>71</sup> **Letters Home**, p. 352

<sup>72</sup> Uroff, p. 216

<sup>73</sup> Uroff, p. 123

<sup>74</sup> **The Unaccommodated Universe**, p. 210

there. It seems to be completely commonplace and yet it's very weirdly planned. "Tawny are the leaves turned but they still hold." It's still a mystery to me how that line should have stirred me so much.<sup>75</sup>

In terms of the issue of influence, the use and context of the word "mystery" strike a chord with Hughes's 1971 interview with Faas located at the beginning of this article. Given this, it is not surprising that Roethke is not listed in the index of the **Selected Letters**; and that there is no mention of either *Mayday On Holderness* or *Memory*. There is, however, a single reference to the poem, *Wodwo*, which appears in a letter to his sister, Olwyn, from early in 1961, in which he writes about the provenance of a handful of recent poems:

I'm enclosing a few poems – the Observer's printing them. Except for Gog they're all odd-thought poems – poems I could never write before because I didn't know how to, and now I get them very rapidly & slyly – and perhaps too easily. Still, I don't think these could have been much more than they are. I'm tired of the kind of poem that gets one little grain of a notion & erects a great architecture of verse about it. These spring directly out of themselves & stop when the impulse stops & its their own fault if there isn't more to them. I don't feel to have my shoulder behind any of them, except one or two of the lines in Gog. When I write the next central pieces they'll be like nothing else. *Wodwo* came as a complete little lizards voice. I tried afterward to put punctuation in, but that seemed to ruin it, so I left it as I wrote it.<sup>76</sup>

In a typical Hughesian stance, the emphasis falls on the poems as self-generating acts of creation that "spring directly out of themselves", as if they have a life and identity of their own; and yet simultaneously coming at the command of the writer – "when I write the next central pieces". More important, is Hughes's suggestion that *Wodwo* arrived as a "complete" entity in control of its own verse-patterning and punctuation, which to meddle with would have ruined. Perhaps this is what Hughes means when he argues that "it's a mystery how a writer's imagination is influenced and altered".

For Plath, even though there may be influences "not so visible", there is no issue of "mystery" with reference to Roethke. According to Anne Sexton, she acknowledged openly that his voice was central to *Poem For A Birthday*:

I remember writing to Sylvia in England after **The Colossus** came out and saying something like... "if you're not careful, Sylvia, you will out-Roethke Roethke", and she replied that I had guessed accurately and that he had been a strong influence on her work... No doubt of it – at the end, Sylvia burst from her cage and came riding straight out with the image-ridden-darer Roethke.

However, Sexton simultaneously hints at the wider claims that Hughes makes about the issue of influences, and concludes like Hughes that what is important is the individual life of the poems:

But maybe she buried her so-called influence deeper than that, deeper than any of us would think to look, and if she did I say good luck to her. Her poems do their own work.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, p. 211

<sup>76</sup> **Letters of Ted Hughes**, p. 181. While *Gog* was published by the *Observer*, (16 April, 1961), the first publication of *Wodwo* was in the *New Statesman*, (15 September).

<sup>77</sup> *The Barfly Ought to Sing*, p. 178

