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Ted Hughes's Poetry
On the Frontier Between Modernism and Postmodernism

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Abstract

This study examines the poetic evolution of Ted Hughes by analysing his collections *Lupercal* (1960), *Birthday Letters* (1998), and *Capriccio* (1990) through modernist and postmodernist perspectives. While Hughes has often been aligned with the late modernist tradition, his later works – particularly *Birthday Letters* and *Capriccio* – demonstrate a shift towards postmodern concerns with subjectivity, fragmentation, and the instability of narrative authority. Drawing on theoretical insights from Antal Bókay and Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, the study explores how Hughes's engagement with myth, trauma, and autobiographical memory both extends and complicates modernist legacies. Special attention is given to the poet's self-mythologising gestures, including his reflections in "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly," which illuminate a dynamic interplay between personal history and archetypal structures. The analysis also shows that Hughes's later poetry is shaped by his ongoing poetic engagement with Sylvia Plath, whose influence is visible in both the emotional intensity and the spiritual depth of these works. By comparing the formal and thematic strategies of the three collections, the study argues that Hughes's oeuvre occupies a liminal space between modernism and postmodernism, revealing a poetic voice that is simultaneously continuous with tradition and radically self-renewing.

Keywords

Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Assia Wevill, modernism, postmodernism, *Lupercal, Birthday Letters, Capriccio*

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1. Introduction: Theoretical Background

Ted Hughes's significance as an English poet is undeniable, as he was made Poet Laureate, the UK's highest honour in poetry, in 1984. Hughes is widely regarded as one of the leading figures in modern British poetry, primarily for his engagement with myth, nature and the portrayal of human suffering. The scope of this paper is to explore Hughes's poetry from both modernist and postmodernist perspectives through a selection of poems from three volumes: *Lupercal*, published in 1960, *Capriccio*, published in 1990, and *Birthday Letters*, published in 1998. The aim is to introduce the shift in Hughes's poetic voice from modernist to postmodern patterns. The aforementioned volumes represent distinct phases in Hughes's oeuvre: while *Lupercal* focuses on symbolic and mythological structures rooted in universal themes, *Capriccio* experiments with fragmentation and psychological intensity, and *Birthday Letters* adopts a deeply personal, confessional tone interrogating memory, trauma and identity through an introspective lens.

Understanding the evolution of Hughes's poetic voice also requires awareness of the personal influences that shaped his early development. Sylvia Plath played a vital role in the editing, typing and submission of Hughes's debut volume, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), contributing both practically and intellectually to its creation and success. His second collection, *Lupercal* (1960), was dedicated to her with the inscription "To Sylvia," a gesture that not only acknowledges their personal bond but also reflects her influence on his formative poetic development. According to her journals, Plath regularly acted as the first reader of Hughes's drafts, offering structural and stylistic suggestions. Her role combined emotional support with creative engagement, leaving a lasting imprint on Hughes's early work. As Peter Steinberg notes in *Great Writers: Sylvia Plath*, "Plath, still early in her Fulbright, planned to travel and teach. Now, Plath was writing more and, convinced of Hughes' greatness, began to type his poems and send them to American magazines. He appointed her as his agent and typist, two jobs she was more than happy to do" (Steinberg 2004, 62–63).

Hughes's poetic transition reflects broader philosophical and cultural shifts in twentieth-century literature. Nevertheless, modernism and postmodernism are not easily separable, and their boundaries are often blurred. Antal Bókay refers to the distinction as "undecidable" (Bókay 2006, 45-46), while Mihály Szegedy-Maszák emphasises that it is nearly impossible to draw a clear line between the postmodern

and its predecessors since it means the "reorganisation of older methods" (Szegedy-Maszák 1987, 44). Fundamentally, modernism retains a belief in deeper meaning behind chaos, whereas postmodernism questions the possibility of objective truth, embracing fragmentation, pluralism and narrative instability. Jean-François Lyotard characterises postmodernism as a rejection of universal truths and the enforcement of universal values. Instead, he suggests pluralism and diversity (Lyotard 2002, 13-19).

Nonetheless, modernism and postmodernism are strongly connected to each other and often overlap, since postmodernism emerged both as a reaction to and an extension of the foundations established by modernism. In this context, Hughes's poetry offers a compelling case study. The shift in poetic voice from *Lupercal* to *Birthday Letters* not only traces his individual development as a poet but also encapsulates a broader literary evolution from the modernist search for coherence through myth to the postmodern turn toward subjectivity, fragmentation, and self-reflexivity. While mythology underpins Hughes's early poetry overtly, it continues to operate latently in *Birthday Letters*. In this respect, it is also worth mentioning that Hughes's position in twentieth-century British poetry has often been discussed in the context of major poetic groups that emerged after the Second World War. His early career unfolded in parallel with the Movement poets, such as Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, or Elizabeth Jennings, and also with the Group, which included George MacBeth and Edward Lucie-Smith. As István D. Rácz remarks, Hughes "never really joined any of these literary groups" (D. Rácz 2022, 414), but he was in dialogue with them. The Movement poets, with their emphasis on rationality, clarity, and formal restraint, diverged sharply from Hughes's mythopoetic and symbolic intensity, while the Group provided an alternative space for poetic experimentation. Hughes's unique position outside of these literary circles contributed to his distinctive development as a poet who engaged with yet ultimately transcended the poetic fashions of his time. According to D. Rácz, Hughes "burst into the literary scene with poetry that radically differed from that of the Movement, and this was evident already in his earliest poems" (D. Rácz 2022, 414).

2. T. S. Eliot's Influence and the Mythic Poetic Self

Ted Hughes frequently emphasised the profound influence that T. S. Eliot had on his understanding of poetry. In his essay "The Poetic Self: A Centenary Tribute to T. S. Eliot," Hughes portrays Eliot not merely as a literary innovator, but as a moral and cultural prophet responding to modernity's spiritual crisis with poetic rigour.

According to Hughes, Eliot did not simply describe the collapse of metaphysical systems but internalised it, transforming it into artistic expression. As he observes in the same tribute, originally delivered as a speech at the T. S. Eliot Centenary Celebration in 1988: "We see now that Eliot was the poet who brought the full implication of that moment into consciousness" (Hughes 1994, 269).

Hughes's high regard for Eliot stems from this ability to confront the spiritual void without relinquishing poetic seriousness. Describing the unprecedented nature of this crisis, Hughes writes: "For the first time in his delusive history he had lost the supernatural world. He had lost the special terrors and cruelties of it, but also the infinite consolation, and the infinite inner riches. It was merely a new terror: the meaningless" (Hughes 1994, 269). By transforming this void into a source of creative energy, Eliot became, in Hughes's words, a touchstone for "the poetic self," a construct capable of mediating between personal trauma and broader cultural loss.

This mythic conception of the poetic self would later become a central element in Hughes's own poetics. His work consistently reveals a preoccupation with myth, ritual, and the non-human world. In contrast to Eliot's restrained formalism, Hughes cultivates a visceral engagement with violence and transcendence through symbolic structures. As Ann Skea observes, Hughes "often described poetry as a magical shamanic journey undertaken to obtain some healing energies needed in our world," and saw imagination as a means of reintegrating the fractured inner and outer worlds (Skea 2004, 41). This reading highlights the ritualistic dimensions of Hughes's verse, particularly in collections that explore psychic and collective trauma through archetypal narratives. In his letters, Hughes's references to his father and to Wilfred Owen further underscore his evolving personal mythology, suggesting how biographical elements were transformed into a broader mythopoetic framework. In the appendix to a 1998 letter, Hughes contrasts Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen, writing that Brooke was "gradually eclipsed by the much more slowly emerging work of poets such as Wilfred Owen (whose most famous poem, 'Strange meeting,' lies behind the piece of mine in Birthday Letters titled A Picture of Otto...)" (Sagar 2012, 323). Owen's presence in Hughes's reflection on war poetry underscores his significance in shaping Hughes's awareness of the poetic voice as a witness to trauma. Though Owen is only mentioned briefly, this reflection underscores Hughes's sensitivity to war's poetic legacies. Elsewhere in his correspondence, Hughes reflects on his father's silence and wartime experiences as formative influences on his own poetic imagination. In a letter to Keith Sagar, he describes rereading his father's letters and encountering a mysterious distance: "He was mostly a very

silent man" (Sagar 2012, 105). In another, he refers to his paternal grandfather as a "mystery man" – a figure remembered only vaguely yet imbued with mythic resonance: "Said to be a great singer. No photo left my Dad a 3 year old orphan... Mystery man" (Sagar 2012, 275). These impressions contribute to what the critic identified as Hughes's evolving personal mythology, where family history, silence, and loss merge with poetic expression. Elsewhere in his correspondence, Hughes recalls rereading his father's letters and feeling an unsettling sense of overdrive: "He was mostly a very silent man" (Sagar 2012, 105). The difficulty of articulating experience, whether inherited from his father's taciturn nature or absorbed through broader cultural trauma became a psychological undercurrent in Hughes's poetics. This tension between silence and expression permeates his myth-making.

3. The Modernist Framework of *Lupercal*

After the First World War, modernism emerged as a literary and cultural movement in response to the tragedy of the war, aiming to express the widespread sense of disillusionment. Rejecting Victorian-era conventions, modernist authors depicted chaos and fragmentation, features that are also present in postmodernism. However, within the modernist context these elements reflected a search for deeper truths and underlying meanings, unlike the postmodern embrace of inherent relativism. Considering this, Hughes's *Lupercal* (1960) exemplifies this modernist approach. Its use of myth, also a feature of postmodern literature, functioned within a modernist framework. Hughes employed mythological structures not to deconstruct established narratives but rather to explore universal themes of human experience and the enduring power of archetypal figures. Furthermore, in the poem "Lupercalia," Hughes juxtaposes the ancient Roman festival Lupercalia to reflect contemporary chaos. While the essence of the ancient context is the ritual of purification, the celebration of health and fertility, Hughes contrasts this with the turmoil of the modern world by depicting a scene in which these rites are replaced by confusion:

> The dog loved its churlish life,
> Scraps, thefts. Its declined blood
> An anarchy of mindless pride. (Hughes 2010, 67-68)

It is important to note that while the use of myth is prominent in this modernist work, postmodernism also engages with myth, often in more ironic, deconstructive, or self-reflexive ways. Furthermore, postmodern literature is also distinguished by its

frequent use of intertextuality, hypertextuality, quotation, adaptation, and pastiche. Through this sharp contrast between ancient rites and modern chaos, the poet emphasises the collapse of traditional values and the fragmentation of the modern condition. The phrases "declined blood" and "anarchy of mindless pride" illustrate this decline, emphasizing the loss of values in the modern world. "Declined blood" may suggest moral or cultural deterioration, while "anarchy of mindless pride" evokes the chaos and ideological conflicts of contemporary society, particularly in the context of war and political turmoil. Further modernist motifs, such as the estrangement from society, nature and self are depicted in the following lines:

> This woman's as from death's touch: a surviving
> Barrenness: she abides; perfect,
> But flung from the wheel of the living,
> The past killed in her, the future plucked out. (Hughes 2010, 67-68)

Here, the image of the woman recalls the modernist theme of emotional detachment, highlighting the fragmentation of identity through her isolation from both past and future. Expanding on this idea, the incorporation of Shakespearean elements serves as a distinctive feature of modernism, particularly in its attempt to impose structure on an increasingly disordered world. Hughes's admired modernist predecessor, T. S. Eliot, exemplifies this approach in *The Waste Land*, where references to *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* function not merely as intertextual play but as part of a broader effort to engage with cultural memory and continuity amid the anxieties of modernity. Similarly, Hughes incorporates Shakespearean elements into his work to examine, for instance, language and authority. Herbert Lomas in his essay "The Poetry of Ted Hughes" compares "Thrushes" to *King Lear* and states that "Hughes's language … almost out-Shakespeares Shakespeare" (Lomas 1987, 414). By referring to Shakespeare, Lomas must have been referring to Hughes's use of dramatic intensity and linguistic richness, which is evident in "Thrushes." In this poem, Hughes describes the bird as "Terrifying … / More coiled steel than living … / Dark deadly eye" (Hughes 2010, 56-57). The bird's features embody natural, instinctive power. The poet also describes humans by denying nature's abilities: "No indolent procrastinations and no yawning states, / No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab / And a ravening second" (Hughes 2010, 56-57). Through the sharp contrast between nature and human beings, Hughes emphasises the limitations of human consciousness and highlighting modernist ideas such as self-doubt and hesitation compared to the instinctive purity and strength of nature.

4. Postmodern Readings of *Birthday Letters*

The emergence of postmodern literature is generally dated to the late twentieth century as a reaction against modernist ideas, particularly the search for absolute truth. This perspective aligns with theorists like Jean-François Lyotard, who described postmodernism as marked by a disbelief toward grand narratives. It emphasises the break from modernism through techniques such as metafiction, intertextuality, and unreliable narration, rejecting fixed identities, chronology, and the coherence of linear narratives, favouring instead fragmented and fluid constructs of meaning. In 1998, Hughes published *Birthday Letters,* a collection of poems he had written "without any intention of publishing them" over twenty-five years, after discovering he was ill, and his death was imminent (D. Rácz 2022, 417–418). Unfortunately, this turned out to be the case, as he passed away a few months after the publication of this volume. Although Ted Hughes is commonly identified as a modernist poet, a view supported by several critics, for instance Keith Sagar, postmodern characteristics, such as fragmentation, the subjective nature of truth and a rejection of stable personal identity can be identified in his work, especially in *Birthday Letters*. Hughes wrote these poems about his wife, Sylvia Plath, who took her own life in 1963. After her death, Hughes remained silent about the circumstances, which led many to believe he was the primary cause of his wife's death.

As mentioned above, the questioning of truth and identity is a defining characteristic of postmodern literature. From this perspective, Hughes's work corresponds to Antal Bókay's view that postmodernism denies the possibility of a stable self or personal identity, instead treating it as a metanarrative reconstruction (Bókay 2006, 173). The fragmented depiction of self and identity in Hughes's *Birthday Letters,* especially in "The Blue Flannel Suit," highlights the postmodern view that truth and identity are fluid, ever shifting, and open to continual questioning. Through his fragmented and shifting poetic voice he reflects the uncertainty and ambiguity of both personal and collective memories, which is a key aspect of postmodern interpretations of time and memory.

> I had let it all grow. I had supposed
> It was all OK. Your life
> Was a liner I voyaged in. (Hughes 1988)

In this retrospective start of the poem, the speaker recalls their past in a way similar to a memoir, and by admitting that he supposed everything was "OK" he reveals his naivety, which sets the ground for the unravelling of his understanding

of both self and truth, strongly connected to the postmodern concept of fragmented identity. The "liner" metaphor might refer to a predetermined journey, symbolising Hughes's perception of life as something fixed, suggesting a preordained life path.

> You waited,
> Knowing yourself helpless in the tweezers
> Of the life that judged you, and I saw
> The flayed nerve, the unhealable face-wound
> Which was all you had for courage. (Hughes 1998)

The quoted passage portrays Hughes as an immobile observer of Plath's suffering, "helpless in the tweezers" of life. This immobility, while not exclusive to postmodernism, resonates strongly with postmodern themes such as powerlessness and the passivity of the self, which is unable to act or change its circumstances. The repetition of "I saw" in the following lines highlights the distancing observer's awareness of Plath's struggle, as well as the futility of intervention. The line "the lonely girl who was going to die" reflects a recognition of inevitability and helplessness, echoing not only postmodern concerns but also modernist preoccupations with the individual's inability to alter their fate. Yet, in Hughes's work, this immobility takes on a more fragmented, subjective form of narrative, which is characteristic of postmodernism.

> I saw that what gripped you, as you sipped,
> Were terrors that had killed you once already.
> Now, I see, I saw, sitting, the lonely
> Girl who was going to die. (Hughes 1998)

By emphasising "I saw … Now I see, I saw," Hughes may be evoking confessional poetry, a hallmark of the poetics of Sylvia Plath, to whom these poems were addressed. Moreover, the confusion between the past and present reflects a representation of fragmented time, which is a feature of both modernist and postmodern literature. However, the nature of this fragmentation differs between the two movements. In modernism, fragmentation often reflects a sense of disillusionment, with the aim of reconstructing meaning from the brokenness. In contrast, postmodern fragmentation embraces the instability of time and narrative, highlighting the impossibility of a fixed or coherent meaning, and foregrounds the disintegration of traditional structures. This further strengthens the postmodern reading of Hughes's work, as it focuses on the fluidity and subjectivity of time, rejecting a linear or unified narrative.

As I looked at you, as I am stilled
Permanently now, permanently
Bending so briefly at your open coffin. (Hughes 1988)

The final lines of the poem highlight the fluidity of time through the repetition of "permanently" and the fleeting nature of Hughes's actions. Moreover, the poet often uses shocking imagery and powerful vocabulary in his works, drawing attention to the depth of the emotions and the intensity of the experiences he intends to convey.

According to Alex Davis, Ted Hughes's poetry can be considered postmodernist in the sense that it expands on modernist patterns, especially in its exploration of the limitations of language and fragmented identity. *Birthday Letters* illustrates this through its "searing-confessionalism" (Davis 2014, 35).

5. Comparative Analysis of *Lupercal* and *Birthday Letters*

Lupercal was published early in Hughes's poetic career, and the collection is written in a symbolic, mythic style, rich in imagery drawn from nature and ancient rituals. In contrast, *Birthday Letters* shifts to a more personal, confessional tone through which Hughes recalls his memories and emotions, reflecting on his thoughts and behaviour from his past with Sylvia Plath. Hughes's early works, such as *Lupercal*, align with T.S. Eliot's modernist approach of universalising individual experiences through myth. This approach can be seen in Hughes's use of mythic imagery to reflect human struggles and the search for meaning, much like Eliot's use of myth in *The Waste Land* to articulate the fragmented and desolate modern world. Hughes's work, much like Eliot's, transforms personal experiences into universal themes, emphasising a shared human condition. In contrast, his later works, such as *Birthday Letters*, break with the modernist tradition by adopting a more fragmented and subjective point of view. This shift reflects a postmodern rejection of grand narratives, emphasising individual perception and the instability of truth, a departure from the more structured and universalising fragmentation often found in modernist works like those of T.S. Eliot. While the former volume relies on mythological imagery to explore universal themes and historical events, the latter delves into his private life and inner thoughts. For instance, death in *Lupercal* is presented symbolically, primarily linked to war and the breakdown of cultural and existential frameworks, whereas in *Birthday Letters*, it becomes deeply personal, with the narrator directly confronting loss and grief.

In "A Woman Unconscious," the representation of death is not only symbolic but also apocalyptic, engaging with Cold War anxieties, particularly the looming threat of nuclear annihilation. While earlier wars were also framed in apocalyptic terms, this poem explicitly situates its imagery within the standoff between Russia and America, emphasizing the existential dread of destruction.

Russia and America circle each other;
Threats nudge an act that were without doubt
A melting of the mould in the mother,
Stones melting about the root. …

And though bomb be matched against bomb,
Though all mankind wince out and nothing endure –
Earth gone in an instant flare –
Did a lesser death come

Onto the white hospital bed
Where one, numb beyond her last of sense,
Closed her eyes on the world's evidence
And into pillows sunk her head. (Hughes 2010, 14–15)

Passing is portrayed through various images in Hughes's poetry, for example through animals, nature, strangers, and close relationships which are significant in investigating his portrayal of death. In *Birthday Letters*, by contrast, death is demonstrated from a more personal viewpoint, if we recall the lines from "The Blue Flannel Suit": "As I looked at you, as I am stilled … Bending so briefly at your open coffin" (Hughes 1988). Both poems depict the death of a woman. However, in "A Woman Unconscious," the narrator keeps his distance and the woman remains unknown. To support this with further examples, the poem "Life after Death" from the volume *Birthday Letters* displays a personal tone:

What can I tell you that you do not know
Of the life after death? …
By night I lay awake in my body
The Hanged Man …
We lay in your death,
In the fallen snow, under falling snow,
As my body sank into the folk-tale
Where the wolves are singing in the forest

For two babes, who have turned, in their sleep,
Into orphans
Beside the corpse of their mother. (Hughes 2010)

In this poem, Hughes portrays himself as the symbol of suffering, "The Hanged Man," and further intensifies the image of grief by depicting their children as "orphans." This shocking imagery strengthens the confessional tone and parallels with postmodern perspectives, emphasising fragmented identities and the subjective nature of personal perceptions. The allusion to "The Hanged Man" in the poem "Life After Death" is not incidental. It refers back to Hughes's own essay "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly," where he reflects on the archetype of the Hanged Man as a symbol of psychic dismemberment and transformation. In this essay, Hughes associates the figure with the state of visionary paralysis and rebirth, connecting it to the Tarot card imagery, the Grail legend and the archetype of the shamanic healer. He writes: "The Hanged Man holds a special place among Baskin's graphic works. It was his first fully mature, large-scale piece... and it was like the herald of everything he has done since. One might say, it was the whole new thing itself, like a tight-wrapped seed" (Hughes 1994, 90). Hughes further interprets the Hanged Man as an archetypal image of "absolute pain, pain beyond flesh: ineffable, infinite affliction of being, from the dumb mouth of which the foetus hangs like some roping coagulation" (Hughes 1994, 91). This overwhelming pain becomes a form of transcendence through sacrifice, a sacramental operation in which "the Hanged Man has become the Dragonfly without having ceased to be the Hanged Man" (Hughes 1994, 98).

Through this lens, the narrator's self-identification as "The Hanged Man" deepens the poem's engagement with postmodern fragmentation, grief and the limits of articulation. The speaker's immersion in mythic symbolism does not offer resolution, but rather emphasises the disjointedness of memory and the paradoxical nature of transformation through suffering. It illustrates how Hughes's mythopoetic imagination, rather than offering consolation, confronts the uncanny stillness and estrangement at the heart of loss. The dragonfly, appearing later in the same essay, becomes a parallel image of metamorphosis and liminality: "The Hanged Man is a symbol of the first phase: mana nursed from agony. And the Dragonfly is a symbol of the last phase: the agony wholly redeemed, healed – and transformed into its opposite, by mana" (Hughes 1994, 98–99).

This dual imagery affirms that for Hughes, psychic suffering is not only inevitable but also constitutive of spiritual metamorphosis. The wound becomes the womb of

meaning, and the silence of pain the precondition of poetic voice. Ultimately, the dual image of "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly" encapsulates Hughes's belief in the transformative potential of suffering, aligning his late poetics with a deeply personal yet archetypally resonant postmodern vision.

This comparison also highlights the ambiguous boundary between modernism and postmodernism in Hughes's oeuvre. While the mythic structures and universal archetypes of *Lupercal* exemplify a modernist search for coherence, *Birthday Letters* foregrounds the fractured, personal, and reflexive qualities typically associated with postmodern writing. Yet the two are not in strict opposition: rather, Hughes's poetic vision often oscillates between these modes. His use of mythology persists in both volumes, albeit with differing emphasis—external symbolisation in the former and inner psychic mapping in the latter. This suggests that Hughes's work does not transition neatly from one paradigm to the other but continuously negotiates between them. In this respect, his poetry resists rigid classification and embodies a distinctive lyrical voice shaped by both continuity and disruption.

Additionally, lesser-discussed poems in both volumes offer further nuance to Hughes's poetic trajectory. In *Lupercal*, the poem "View of a Pig" presents a stark meditation on death and materiality, where the speaker's detachment from the slaughtered animal evokes a confrontation with violence stripped of sentiment. The carcass is described as "less than lifeless, further off. / It was like a sack of wheat", and "too dead now to pity. / To remember its life (...) / Seemed a false effort, and off the point" (Hughes 2005, 76). The speaker's inability to mourn or even assign symbolic meaning to the body underscores Hughes's unflinching portrayal of physical reality and anticipates the recurring theme of ritualised suffering found throughout his work. The pig is not idealised but rendered in viscerally factual terms: "They were going to scald it, / Scald it and scour it like a doorstep" (Hughes 2005, 76), expressing an almost brutal acknowledgment of the body's utilitarian end.

In *Birthday Letters*, poems such as "Setebos" delve deeper into psychological ambiguity and trauma. By drawing on Shakespearean archetypes from *The Tempest*, Hughes blurs personal and mythical registers. Caliban becomes a metaphor for the speaker's repressed anguish, while Prospero and Sycorax are invoked to articulate competing forces of control and chaos. The line "Your bellowing song / Was a scream inside a bronze / Bull being roasted" evokes mythic torment, while the surreal question "Who has dismembered us?" reflects the fragmentation of identity within the poem's confessional context (Hughes 2005, 1128–1129). These images serve to underscore Hughes's postmodern preoccupation with moral disorientation

and the crisis of self-definition in the aftermath of trauma. "The Tender Place" offers another poignant example of the subjective reworking of suffering and psychological vulnerability. In this poem, Hughes explores the neurological and emotional trauma associated with Sylvia Plath's electroconvulsive therapy. The lines "They crashed / The thunderbolt into your skull" and "The nerve threw off its skin / Like a burning child" convey intense physical pain and psychic violation (Hughes 2005, 1050). Through this visceral imagery, Hughes not only documents Plath's suffering but also confronts the brutal reality of mental illness and its treatment. The speaker's gaze is no longer detached; it is haunted and helpless, embodying the emotional fallout of witnessing another's pain. These lines align with postmodern concerns regarding the limits of empathy, the fragmentation of identity, and the challenge of articulating trauma through language.

6. Fragmentation and Emotional Turmoil in *Capriccio*

Capriccio, published in 1990, is often seen as a continuation and deepening of the confessional mode that Hughes would further explore in *Birthday Letters*. However, *Capriccio* departs from the more elegiac and reconciliatory tone of that volume by adopting a starker, more fractured style. The poems in *Capriccio* are brief, impressionistic, and fragmented, reflecting a psyche under duress. The emotional and structural fragmentation of the volume contributes to its overall atmosphere of estrangement and anguish, marking it as one of Hughes's most postmodern poetic works. The collection reflects on the collapse of Hughes's relationship with Assia Wevill and the tragedy of her suicide, yet avoids straightforward storytelling or explicit autobiographical disclosure. Instead, it approaches trauma obliquely, using fragmented imagery and abrupt tonal shifts to convey emotional disorientation and unresolved tension.

The poem "The Error" exemplifies this indirect and disjointed poetic method. Opening with a confrontation at the grave, the speaker addresses a woman, presumably Assia Wevill, with a haunting series of rhetorical questions: "Why didn't you just fly, / Wrap yourself in your hair and make yourself scarce?" (Hughes 2005, 795–796). This accusatory tone quickly shifts into a fragmented meditation on guilt, miscommunication, and spiritual dislocation. The lines "You were always mishearing / Into Hebrew or German / What was muttered in English" (Hughes 2005, 795–796) evoke a collapse of understanding between speaker and addressee and suggest that the titular "error" may lie in the inability to interpret or communicate emotional

reality, a classic postmodern impasse. On a deeper level, the mention of Hebrew and German may also allude to Assia Wevill's own heritage, her German-Jewish father and multilingual upbringing, suggesting that their estrangement was not only emotional, but also shaped by cultural displacement. Language, in this context, becomes not merely a failed medium of intimacy, but a landscape of emotional bareness and fractured expression, an inherited dissonance where personal trauma intersects with broader historical and diasporic ruptures. The poem moves through a range of emotional registers, from grief to anger, sarcasm to helplessness, which reflect the erratic and non-linear nature of trauma. As the speaker watches the woman "feed those flames" over "six full calendar years," her suffering is likened both to martyrdom and to a slow, deliberate ritual of annihilation. The maternal image, "as if you were feeding a child," is subverted, exposing a grotesque transformation of care into self-destruction. The poem offers no closure. Only the final chilling image remains: "Finally they made a small cairn," a mute and minimal memorial that mirrors the poem's own refusal of narrative consolation (Hughes 2005, 795–796).

In "Fanaticism," Hughes probes the psychological atmosphere of obsession, emotional collapse, and sacrificial surrender. The speaker evokes the beloved's loss of self through mythic and religious imagery: "You had lifted off your future and laid it lightly / Before the door of Aphrodite's temple / As the drowned leave their clothes folded" (Hughes 2005, 788–789). This haunting metaphor, likening self-abandonment to a ritual offering, frames the woman's fate as one of fatal devotion and identity erasure. Aphrodite's temple, emblematic of beauty, love and destructive desire, becomes the site of annihilation rather than fulfilment. The image of the "drowned" underscores both passivity and finality, suggesting that the surrender was irreversible. In its brevity and symbolism, the poem encapsulates the destructive potential of erotic obsession, presenting emotional turmoil not through narrative progression but through mythic compression. Here again, Hughes's postmodern poetics refuses psychological resolution, instead portraying trauma through allusive fragmentation and symbolic resonance.

In "Shibboleth," Hughes develops the motif of linguistic exclusion and cultural estrangement with particular historical resonance. The title itself evokes a biblical episode in which language is used as a marker of identity, separating friend from foe, a metaphor for the way in which belonging is policed through speech. The poem explores the complex intersections of language, heritage and alienation: "Your German / Found its royal licence in the English," while "Your Hebrew /

Survived on bats and spiders / In the guerrilla priest-hole / Under your tongue" (Hughes 2005, 794). These lines gesture towards Assia Wevill's Central European Jewish background and her culturally hybrid identity, fractured between languages, histories and geographies. The poem situates emotional disorientation within a diasporic and translingual matrix, where ancestral voices survive in hidden, uncanny forms. The inherited tension between English, German and Hebrew suggests not only cultural displacement but also internal fragmentation. Hughes weaves personal trauma into broader narratives of historical rupture and forced assimilation. The final lines "Tangled in your panic, tripped you. It was / The frontier glare of customs. / The gun-barrels / Of the imperious noses" (Hughes 2005, 794) conjure images of surveillance, suspicion, and enforced otherness, blending geopolitical checkpoints with emotional borders. In this context, language becomes not only a failed bridge, but a shibboleth, an instrument of estrangement that recasts the private wound within a collective history of exile and erasure.

Taken together, these poems reveal a shattered lyrical voice navigating the debris of personal catastrophe. *Capriccio* does not seek resolution or redemption. Rather, it enacts the recursive logic of trauma by replaying, refracting, and resisting assimilation. The affective texture of the poems, with their abrupt tonal changes, fractured imagery, and spiritual allusions, reflects not only the emotional turmoil of the speaker, but also the broader postmodern condition of fragmented selves and unstable truths.

In contrast to the mythic universality of *Lupercal* and the retrospective tenderness of *Birthday Letters*, *Capriccio* advances Hughes's poetic vision into a terrain of raw exposure and linguistic dissonance. It exemplifies a phase in which language itself becomes suspect, a faulty vessel for mourning. Yet it is precisely in this fractured landscape that Hughes articulates the unspeakable, allowing pain and ambiguity to remain unresolved, and thus unflinchingly real.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the poetic evolution of Ted Hughes through a comparative reading of three key collections: *Lupercal* (1960), *Birthday Letters* (1998) and *Capriccio* (1990). By examining the stylistic and thematic shifts across these volumes, the analysis has traced Hughes's negotiation between modernist and postmodernist poetics. His early mythopoetic style, influenced by modernist principles such as

impersonality, universal archetypes, and structured symbolism, gradually gave way to more personal, fragmented and emotionally charged writing that aligns with postmodern sensibilities.

Lupercal demonstrates Hughes's alignment with the modernist tradition, relying on mythic structures, animal symbolism and ritualised violence to reflect on human nature and historical trauma. In contrast, *Birthday Letters* marks a significant departure from this impersonal tone. The confessional mode, direct address to Sylvia Plath and fragmentary narrative structure reveal a more subjective and emotionally vulnerable voice. This volume embodies a postmodern turn not only in its rejection of linear storytelling and stable meaning but also in its focus on personal perception, emotional immediacy and the instability of memory.

Capriccio further intensifies this postmodern sensibility. While *Birthday Letters* seeks moments of clarity and elegiac reconciliation, *Capriccio* remains jagged, elusive and unsettling. Its impressionistic and formally experimental poems delve into grief, guilt and psychic disintegration. The fragmentation of *Capriccio* is not only structural but thematic, manifesting in the speaker's disoriented attempts to articulate trauma and loss. Through symbolic compression and liturgical allusion, the poems in *Capriccio* enact the emotional and linguistic breakdown that characterises much of late-twentieth-century poetics. Hughes's refusal to provide closure or redemption in these texts aligns his work with postmodern literary strategies while preserving his enduring concern with suffering, transformation and the limits of expression.

Thus, rather than representing a linear progression from modernism to postmodernism, Hughes's oeuvre offers a nuanced interweaving of these modes. His poetics reflect an ongoing tension between the desire for mythic coherence and the acknowledgment of emotional fragmentation. In this light, Hughes emerges not only as a transitional figure between poetic eras, but also as a singular voice whose work engages deeply with the spiritual, psychological and linguistic challenges of his time.

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