

LAST RESPECTS: THE POSTHUMOUS EDITING OF VIRGINIA
WOOLF AND SYLVIA PLATH

by Wayne K. Chapman

When I delivered the rudiments of this article as a paper at Smith College in 2003, the topic was an outgrowth of my interest in the reception and influence of writers, especially writing couples such as W. B. and Mrs. Yeats, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, and Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. The paper was partly an answer to the conference's Call for Papers, subsection "BOOK AND BODY," "Hogarth Press . . . Woolf's revisions and self-censorship; Leonard's role as Virginia's editor and literary executor." As an editor myself and director of a small university press, I thought I'd consider how a writer's intentions might be perpetuated in a kind of "afterlife" with the posthumous editing of his or her work by a literary executor. Of course, one's intentions might not be perpetuated but altered in the process. Because of the paper's attention to Plath, I might have argued that Virginia Woolf influenced Plath's work in various ways, as I'm sure is true. As Leonard Woolf kept Virginia's novels and essays going at their press after her suicide in 1941—actually, she divested herself of her interest in the Hogarth Press in 1938 (Willis 295-96)—one might allow that her public was indebted to Leonard by the 1950s, when the author of *The Bell Jar* must have first encountered Virginia's depiction of the abortions of patriarchy in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). A similar instance of such influence is suggested in *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham's recent novel (1998) and more recent film, in which an American housewife in Los Angeles chooses not to commit suicide after reading Virginia Woolf's classic of 1925, *Mrs Dalloway*, a book kept in print during the war, when Leonard Woolf and John Lehmann otherwise "cut down . . . drastically" on production at the Hogarth Press (*Journey* 107). Indeed, I propose to make a comparative judgment on the services of Leonard Woolf and Ted Hughes as they contributed much of themselves to the respective *afterlives* of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath.

To state one of my conclusions up front, I argue that, while resemblances between the two cases are uncanny in several respects, the relation between Leonard's role as the preservationist of Virginia's literary properties and the perpetuation of her reputation as a writer is generally a salutary one. Conversely, Ted Hughes's role as executor and editor of Plath's work is notorious, especially for the degree to which his self-serving intervention in the editing of *Ariel* and *The Collected Poems* is supposed to have taken place in the time after her suicide. Just to suggest how strong the reaction has been, since he revealed his procedures in her *Collected Poems* and began taking heat for it from Alvarez and other critics more than twenty years ago, Clemson University has contributed two theses to the literature of indignation (Brown, McFann), the second, in my time, inspired by Marjorie Perloff's illuminating essay "The Two *Ariels*: The [Re]making of the Sylvia Plath Canon" (1984). My method here is to summarize, in a nutshell, the accounts the two men have made of themselves as their wives' editors. Then I'll give you an archival case in point that I discovered in the Ted Hughes Papers at Emory University, six weeks after first speaking to Karen Kukil about offering a paper *not* primarily about Leonard Woolf. By inductive logic, I find that the manuscript evidence disputes the "good angel" versus "bad angel"

paradigm that I'd expected to find in comparing the two men. In other words, when the public consensus has been so damning for Hughes, it may be that many of the posthumous textual alterations blamed on him originated from a complicated process beyond anything hitherto supposed and might have been partially anticipated by Plath in handwritten notes that Hughes failed to mention in any of the few self-defenses he contributed to the controversy or in the scholarly commentary he wrote for *The Collected Poems*.

In *Downhill All the Way*, Leonard Woolf draws a characteristically detailed profile of himself, his wife, and their press from the standpoint of their earnings. His account of the 1930s in that respect shows that it was a period of affluence for them both despite the Depression and some fluctuations. He argues that "sudden success of the Hogarth Press" (143) in fact paralleled his wife's "career as a successful novelist" after 1928 and *To the Lighthouse*. He was strongly committed to his particular theory and practice of running a small press on the narrowest margins of the marketplace (or publishing on the *niche*, as we say now), so her success was a measure of his own as a publisher. Supporting her work by publishing it (as well as the work of others in which he believed) before it was profitable would prove a good investment but was not foreseen as such; the public eventually caught on. And when it did, there were not only her novels but essay anthologies such as the two *Common Reader* books (of 1925 and 1932) to bear witness to the editor's good sense. Since Virginia Woolf's successful career is also part of the story of Leonard's life, he goes on to report sales as far as he had figures—into the 1960s. He died in 1969.

In my view, the Woolfs were one of the *workingest* writing couples ever to live—hence the irony to Leonard's point that their work only really began to pay on the way "downhill to Hitler," when, as he later wrote in his autobiography, "the erosion of life by death began for Virginia and me in the early 1930s and gathered momentum as we went downhill to war and her own death" (250). To keep the work alive after March 28, 1941, "with very little paper for new writers" (*Journey* 107), the Hogarth Press nevertheless published posthumously *Between the Acts* (1941), *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), and *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (1944). The wonder of it was that, by 1945, due to the scarcity of paper and the length of the war, one found such great hunger for reading that one "could sell anything which could be called a book . . . apparently in any quantities [and] . . . one could sell all one's old stock" (*Journey* 107). When this happened at the Hogarth Press, Leonard gave us *A Writer's Diary* in 1953 (extracts from Virginia's wonderful diary), and it was his idea to edit, in 1956, a volume of selected correspondence, *Virginia Woolf & Lytton Strachey: Letters*. What one finds in the fourth edition of *A Bibliography of Virginia Woolf*, by B. J. Kirkpatrick and Stuart Clarke, is of course a litany of titles: *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (1950), *Granite and Rainbow* (1958), and the four-volume *Collected Essays* (1966, 1967), to cite the ones most often attached to Leonard's name in electronic author/title searches. "Will you destroy all my papers," Virginia Woolf wrote without question mark—the last words of the suicide note she left him. Aren't we indebted to him for choosing to interpret the sentence in the interrogative, rather than the imperative, and to have given her the *afterlife* that enjoins us today as her public. She becomes her admirers, as Auden might have said.

I'm not an expert on Sylvia Plath, but I'll wager that Ted Hughes was never left a love note such as the ones Virginia left Leonard and her sister Vanessa Bell when she decided to end her life. Reading *Ariel* and *Birthday Letters* in apposition to each other is a complicated,

darkly romantic experience I recommend to the uninitiated. The climate is stormy, often psychologically violent in the extreme. As a couple, at best, the poets grip their hearts, as Hughes writes in verses of 1957 called “Winds,” but they “cannot entertain book, thought, / Or each other” (20-21). Forty years later, in “Suttee,” Hughes recalls Plath’s “frightened” “labour” to deliver the new poetry that suddenly leaped from her rage and despair “like dark flames and screams / That sucked the oxygen out of both of us” (82-83), and he, “bowed there, as if over a page, / Coaxing it to happen” (33-34). Like so often in *Birthday Letters*, he takes credit and blame for something that excites and terrifies him, complicating the life story her poems tell by interjecting his own story in dialogue with them. (Moreover, Erica Wagner provides a gloss for the conversation called *Ariel’s Gift*. See also Alvarez 31-35 and Hughes’s account of the making of “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” a pivotal poem that he found “appall[ing]” when Plath first asked him to read it.) After *Wise Virgins* (1914), Leonard Woolf learned not to play with dynamite by competing with his wife in fiction. Arguably a better poet than Plath, Hughes should not have asserted himself so much into the work he aspired to improve in the posthumous editing of it. In the “critical heritage” of Sylvia Plath (see Linda Wagner), we speak of Plath “revised” (Hall) and of the “Other Plath” (Brain), meaning either the Sylvia Plath that Hughes constructed from her poems and papers or the deconstructed, actual person that we try to extrapolate from the inferred textual-genetic process, which seems the enterprise of Susan Van Dyne’s *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems*. The method is largely the same as Hughes used in his famous account of the evolution and “real meaning” of Plath’s “Sheep in Fog,” especially of the so-called “suicidal” about-face the poem took in her revision dated “January 28, 1963” (in *Winter Pollen*). Right or wrong, his interpretation was consistent with the rearranged *Ariel* poems, which give the impression that Robert Lowell observed in his Foreword to the American edition in 1966: “These poems are playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder” (viii). In the book’s plot as in the poet’s life, suicide was inevitable.

Here, please note the differences between the American edition of *Ariel* and the draft Contents that Plath drew up and that Hughes disclosed, to his credit, in the notes to her *Collected Poems* (295). First, I give Plath’s own prepared collection of poems, the so-called *Ariel* manuscript:

1. Morning Song (19 Feb. 1961)
2. The Couriers (4 Nov. 1962)
3. The Rabbit Catcher (21 May 1962)
4. Thalidomide (8 Nov. 1962)
5. The Applicant (11 Oct. 1962)
6. Barren Woman (21 Feb. 1961)
7. Lady Lazarus (23-29 Oct. 1962)
8. Tulips (18 Mar. 1961)
9. A Secret (10 Oct. 1962)
10. The Jailer (17 Oct. 1962)
11. Cut (29 Oct. 1962)
12. Elm (19 Apr. 1962)
13. The Night Dances (6 Nov. 1962)
14. The Detective (1 Oct. 1962)
15. Ariel (27 Oct. 1962)



16. Death & Co. (14 Nov. 1962)
17. Magi (1960)
18. Lesbos (18 Oct. 1962)
19. The Other (2 July 1962)
20. Stopped Dead (19 Oct. 1962)
21. Poppies in October (27 Oct. 1962)
22. The Courage of Shutting-up (2 Oct. 1962)
23. Nick and the Candlestick (29 Oct. 1962)
24. Berck-Plage (30 June 1962)
25. Gulliver (6 Nov. 1962)
26. Getting There (6 Nov. 1962)
27. Medusa (16 Oct. 1962)
28. Purdah (29 Oct. 1962)
29. The Moon and the Yew Tree (22 Oct. 1961)
30. A Birthday Present (2 Oct. 1962)
31. Letter in November (11 Nov. 1962)
32. Amnesiac (21 Oct. 1962)
33. The Rival (July 1961)
34. Daddy (12 Oct. 1962)
35. You're (Jan./Feb. 1960) -
36. Fever 1030 (20 Oct. 1962)
37. The Bee Meeting (3 Oct. 1962)
38. The Arrival of the Bee Box (4 Oct. 1962)
39. Stings (6 Oct. 1962)
40. The Swarm (7 Oct. 1962)
41. Wintering' (9 Oct. 1962)

The following is the arrangement Ted Hughes made of the poems collected in *Ariel* (Harper and Row, 1966), which he also edited:

1. Morning Song (19 Feb. 1961)
2. The Couriers (4 Nov. 1962)
3. Sheep in Fog (2 Dec. 1962/28 Jan. 1963)
4. The Applicant (11 Oct. 1962)
5. Lady Lazarus (23-29 Oct. 1962)
6. Tulips (18 Mar. 1961)
7. Cut (29 Oct. 1962)
8. Elm (19 Apr. 1962)
9. The Night Dances (6 Nov. 1962)
10. Poppies in October (27 Oct. 1962)
11. Berck-Plage (30 June 1962)
12. Ariel (27 Oct. 1962)
13. Death & Co. (14 Nov. 1962)
14. Lesbos (18 Oct. 1962)
15. Nick and the Candlestick (29 Oct. 1962)

16. Gulliver (6 Nov. 1962)
17. Getting There (6 Nov. 1962)
18. Medusa (16 Oct. 1962)
19. The Moon and the Yew Tree (22 Oct. 1961)
20. A Birthday Present (2 Oct. 1962)
21. Mary's Song (19 Nov. 1962)
22. Letter in November (11 Nov. 1962)
23. The Rival (July 1961)
24. Daddy (12 Oct. 1962)
25. You're (Jan./Feb. 1960)
26. Fever 2030 (20 Oct. 1962)
27. The Bee Meeting (3 Oct. 1962)
28. The Arrival of the Bee Box (4 Oct. 1962)
29. Stings (7 Oct. 1962)
30. The Swarm (7 Oct. 1962)
31. Wintering (9 Oct. 1962)
32. The Hanging Man (27 June 1960)
33. Little Fugue (2 Apr. 1962)
34. Years (16 Nov. 1962)
35. The Munich Mannequins (28 Jan. 1963)
36. Totem (28 Jan. 1963)
37. Paralytic (29 Jan. 1963)
38. Balloons (5 Feb. 1963)
39. Poppies in July (20 July 1962)
40. Kindness (1 Feb. 1963)
41. Contusion (4 Feb. 1963)
42. Edge (5 Feb. 1963)
43. Words (1 Feb. 1963)

Hughes cut 11 poems from the *Ariel* manuscript, 8 from Oct./Nov. 1962, reflecting his desertion. The British edition (Faber, 1965) also lacks "Lesbos," "Mary's Song," and "The Swarm" (see Perloff 10-18).

Let me explain how something of "*Ariel 2*"—Hughes version—might have been suggested inadvertently by Plath. One allows, of course, all the evidence of textual hanky-panky that has been asserted, persuasively, by Perloff and others concerning poems for the collection that Plath's executor removed because they personally offended him or other people. He chose to leave in "Daddy" and several other lyrics only because they had already appeared elsewhere, their injury to him a matter of public record. He also conceded that one objective was to make money from her work. But as her executor, his obligations were more complicated than those of a scholar—involving family interests (mainly their children's) and an "obligation to *her*" and her "best work." "I follow her principle," he said, "and try to manage the writing in ways that will earn as much income as possible. If that worries Mr Alvarez, I only wish there were more to worry him with" ("Publishing Sylvia Plath," *Winter Pollen* 163). That was in 1971, the year in which *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* first appeared, edited by Hughes and bearing his arrangements of the unpublished poems she had written

between *The Colossus* and *Ariel* besides a number of uncollected ones of that period. He claimed fidelity to the growth of Plath's art by arranging *The Collected Poems*, over a ten-year period, according to a strict chronology of composition—which erased *Ariel 1* and *Ariel 2* as organizing principles, as well as all other collections of Plath's poetry. Was the procedure dishonest?

From an editor's standpoint, *Ariel* was always a problem because of its unfinished state. Around Christmas 1962, Plath filed most of the lyrics of *Ariel 1* "in a black spring binder, . . . in a careful sequence," beginning intentionally with the word "Love" and ending with the word "Spring"—the first arrangement shown above. In Hughes's working papers for Plath's *Collected Poems*, at Emory University, Subseries 3.3 "Posthumous books," one finds a typescript Contents (a photofacsimile of the original at Smith College) to match the one he transcribed in the notes; in addition, there are typed and holograph lists on which are recorded the dates and names of journals in which Plath's poems had appeared. (She was fastidious in her penchant for the typewriter, even typing her diary.) Some of this has now been collected by Frieda Hughes in an appendix to *Ariel, The Restored Edition*. But one extraordinary typescript list, annotated in Plath's hand, queries "Daddy" as the title of a possible book, as this was indeed one of several titles before *Ariel* became the final one. Beside this otherwise helpful chronological list of 37 poems, she inscribed abbreviated titles of magazines to which they had been sent, later highlighting those abbreviations when notices of acceptance had been received and underscoring the respective lyric titles. "Daddy," "Morning Song," and "Tulips" were conjecturally penned above the 37 poems and out of sequence, no doubt because of the fledgling idea that gave rise to the *Ariel 1* arrangement. However, to the left of "Sheep in Fog," poem 26 in the typed list, Plath drew a short stroke, then typed the year 1963 and a column of 11 titles from "Totem" to "Contusion," all bound for *The New Yorker*. This list might have encouraged Hughes and his sister Olwyn, a literary agent whose hand is evident in a number of research notes and commentaries on the unpublished poems, including two pages (the first and second pages of two typescripts) that anticipate without exactly defining *Ariel 2* by extending the authorized sequence of *Ariel 1*.

Considered with variations that we know were Hughes's own by his testimony, the ten-poem addendum he and his sister worked out in the latter Contents list compare with the twelve-poem addition Hughes made in *Ariel 2*—closing with Plath's self-effacing "Totem," "Kindness," "Contusion," "Edge," and "Words"—a swerve marking *his* reversal of the optimistic flight of bees at the end of *Ariel 1*: "Will the hive survive . . . ? / The bees are flying. They taste the spring." Since we know from Plath's record-keeping that the latest title typed on the list dates from February 5, 1963, we might think that these thoughts, if only they were her own, reflected a changed artistic judgment from the last six days of her life. As a change of heart, it would have the significance of marking Plath's final progress on *Ariel* as a book, conferring to Hughes a degree of authority he never claimed in his defense. But, even so, her afterlife, like her tragedy, is forever bound to him. An executor's obligations, as he said, "are not so simple." And the multiple drafts of his introduction to her *Collected Poems* certainly testify to that. Public outrage compounded by incomprehension he thought best to acknowledge parenthetically: "(Several advisers had felt the violent contradictory feelings expressed in [her late] pieces might prove hard for the reading public to take. In one sense, as it turned out, this apprehension showed some insight . . .)" ("Introduction" 15).

Surely, the unsimple truth lies somewhere between *Ariels 1* and *2* and, I believe, beyond the scope of sensational feature films on the relationship of Hughes and Plath such

as Christine Jeffs's *Sylvia*. My thanks go to Steve Enniss and his staff at Emory University and to Karen Kukil at Smith College. Posthumous editing poses intriguing textual puzzles. In his way, Hughes, like Leonard Woolf, seems to have done what he thought best to carry out the unfinished work, if not precisely the intentions, of his gifted wife.

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