

The Moods of Love

Markus Gasser

Essays

German



How much real life can be found in a book? The literary scholar, essayist and critic Markus Gasser explores the various bonds of love depicted in the works and life experiences of a range of writers, from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Gabriel García Márquez, from Emily Brontë to Sylvia Plath. He shows how they transform their own experiences into literature; how their longing and desire, unions and marital bliss, unrequited love, crisis, betrayal and separation become part of their works, and how literature itself enters and transforms their lives.

“He was there for her and her alone; he fixed his eyes on hers with hypnotic insistence and she felt the very foundations of the universe shaking.”

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Excerpt translated by Alyson Coombes

Chapter IV S. 63-68

I'm only in the world for you to love me

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes

I

One morning, after a visit to her psychiatrist, she came across the new poetry collection by Edward James Hughes. At that very moment, just a few streets away, the trombonist of the jazz band booked for that evening's literary party was cursing as he carried a piano up the steps in Falcon Yard. One of the poems seemed to move her in a particularly strange way. It told the story of two men who, just moments after meeting, fell upon each other over the most trivial matter. Following a vicious fight, one of the men – now the other man's murderer – went to the nearest police station and announced with the gleeful pride of the victor: "I did it, I." These lines spoke brazenly of an ancient violence that afforded her a feeling of security.

Sylvia Plath – who had a reputation in Cambridge for being a pushy, loud American who would probably be more at home in a soap advert than at the university – had for weeks been feeling the onset of yet another "thundercrack of judgment", as she called her outbursts of despair. No psychiatrist could help prevent it; conversations with her therapist seemed only to prolong the agony of her fierce self-criticism. She sought refuge from the internal storm which this time, she feared, would uproot her entirely. She was fed up with being alone, sick of having to face a hostile world and her inner demons by herself. She drew ellipses in her diary, planetary orbits that overlapped one another. "It takes two people to make a whole person" – she had read this sentence somewhere, and throughout that wretched Saturday in February 1956, she held on to it for dear life. Love was the assurance that no one could ever hurt you again. Somewhere out there, someone was waiting for her – someone who would save her and be her

perfect other half. And so it began.

Her senses were dulled by a rotten sinus infection, the meadows were covered in frost. She spent the evening in Miller's Bar, building up Dutch courage by drinking whisky in the company of a deadly dull student, until she was overcome with such a feeling of lightness that she thought she might be blown back outside and lifted up into the icy air to fly over the city's parapets and walled gardens. She stumbled cheerfully over the crunchy snow, bumping into trees that sprang up out of the ground as if on the command of some mad magician. As she climbed up the hellishly steep, crooked staircase to the literary party on the second floor of the Cambridge Women's Union in Falcon Yard, she was struck by the memory of her flu-ridden, nine-year-old self falling in love with a sword-swallower in the circus in Boston and remembered how, in that instant, her flu had vanished.

And now, in exactly the same way, her drunkenness vanished. Wearing red shoes and a red dress, she entered the room in Falcon Yard and walked past hands clutching plastic cups of lethal punch, past jabbering polo-necked jumpers and giggling black cocktail dresses. They were all just ghosts, and she could glide through every one of them. Even up here it smelled faintly of blood, wet, dirty and raw; the ground floor of Falcon Yard was occupied – despite numerous protests by the Cambridge Women's Union – by a fishmonger who took a very liberal approach towards cleanliness. The jazz band blared, while in the middle of the room couples danced the Jitterbug so clumsily that Sylvia Plath resolved to have the dance banned in Britain the very next day.

Then she saw the stupid critic who had dismissed her poems – yes, hers! – in a student magazine as being quaint and fraudulent, and as she looked him up and down she saw what she perceived to be the epitome of a literary critic: a dry soul, pompous and pale with a slapped-on smile that made him look as if he was suffering from toothache. But then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the person for whom she had actually been searching, the only man in the room who at one metre ninety was as tall and powerful as his poems and hand-

some enough for her: "I did it, I." Edward James Hughes. He came towards her, and the boy-critic disappeared like a goblin in a fairy-tale whose part is over. There was Ted Hughes.

He was there for her and her alone; he fixed his eyes on hers with hypnotic insistence and she felt the very foundations of the universe shaking. She could not tear her glance away from his, entranced as she was in that moment, which lasted for an eternity and felt like an awakening. In that second, they both forgot who and where they were. They sensed that they no longer belonged only to themselves. They took possession of each other, and surrendered.

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Ted Hughes generally avoided parties, especially those filled with academics clouded by existentialist ideas, literary critics who knew nothing about literature, and hunch-backed weekend poets in lurid, checked drain-pipe trousers. They rhapsodised about themselves and their poems without ever writing a single forgotten truth which, Hughes believed, could only be found in the subconscious.

Hughes was not cut from their cloth. He came from a village in Yorkshire known for being a criminal hideout, for its suicide epidemics and for Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. He had worked hard to refine his psychic skills – something he had inherited from his mother, who always saw an angel whenever a family member was close to death. He spoke to the dead using a Ouija board and went into raptures over astrology as though it were a forgotten black art, listening to Beethoven symphonies on his ancient gramophone as he did so. Before posting a bundle of poems to a publisher, he would check his horoscope to see which hour was the most favourable for him according to the stars. He prayed to the moon, who was a goddess and the very representation of poetry, and he longed to find a woman who embodied this goddess. A woman must particularly be a muse, or in a poet's eyes she wasn't a woman. In winter, he always wore the same brown military leather coat over his

baggy corduroy jacket, a coat which had belonged to his uncle and gave him the air of someone who had just come off a fishing boat after a week alone on the stormy seas.

Although he had finished his degree and had a job in a London film studio, he felt called to be a poet, and to be "England's poet" at that, as he explained often and to everyone by describing a dream he had had in his second year at Cambridge... One night, a fox as big as a wolf crept into his attic room, upright, the size of a man. The fox laid his scorched, bleeding paw on the mess of pages of an essay over which Hughes was agonising, and ordered him firmly to stop at once. "You are destroying us." The fox was his spirit animal, and it was dying because of all this theoretical drudgery. The merest hint of studying tamed the wilds of his imagination, taking away the air he needed to submerge himself in the dark forest of his instincts and surface again clutching a poem that carried within it the figures, images and melodies of time immemorial: again clutching a poem that carried within it the figures, images and melodies of time immemorial: cave paintings, the rain charms of Celtic priests, the waves of the sea, the weightless steps of a fox in the snow, and the jaguar who was oblivious to the bars of his zoo cage, seeing only the horizons of his homeland throbbing before his eyes.

"I did it, I!" Sylvia Plath screamed now in his ear at the party, as though his poems actually belonged to her. "You like?" he asked. "And how!" she replied, as if banging in a nail, and they ran hand in hand into the next room, the door slamming shut behind them. Deep inside, Sylvia Plath had not stopped running at all, as he poured her another (how many was that now?) glass of brandy. Close up, he seemed to her even more devastatingly handsome: unruly hair, wild eyebrows, a ragged, sharp chin, eyes clairvoyantly dark and heavy. He apologised for the goblin-critic's review, quoted a line from her poems for reassurance, kissed her suddenly on the mouth and ripped off her red hairband and silver earrings, her favourite earrings – "I'm keeping these!" – and kissed her neck. She bit him so hard on the left cheek that blood ran down his face.

And then she was gone.