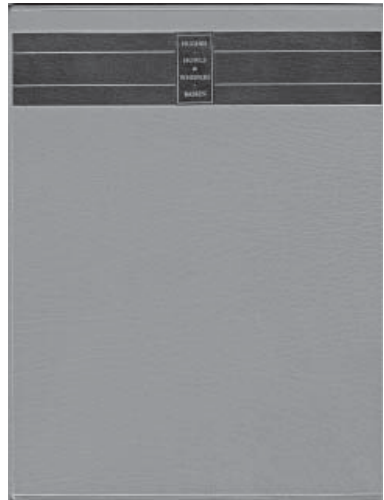
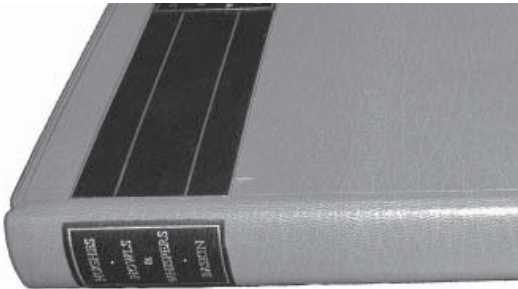


MASKS AND WHISPERS: THE COMPLEMENTARY POETRY OF RICHARD MICHELSON AND TED HUGHES

by Elizabeth A. Stansell

Artist Leonard Baskin and poet Ted Hughes first met at Smith College in 1958, and their friendship and creative collaboration continued until Hughes's death in 1998. Throughout the duration of their relationship, Baskin and Hughes published several books together, including *A Primer of Birds*, *Crow*, and *Cave Birds*. At times Baskin would provide an image for one of Hughes's poems; at other times, Hughes would supply a poem for one of Baskin's etchings. In 1998, Baskin and Hughes privately published a work of collaboration entitled *Howls and Whispers*, which contained poems that Hughes had refrained from including in his somewhat controversial collection of poetry, *Birthday Letters*, published earlier that same year by Faber and Faber.



Ted Hughes, Howls and Whispers, illustrated by Leonard Baskin (Rockport, Maine: The Gebenna Press, 1998) [40] p., [11] leaves of plates, interleaved: col. ill.: 30 cm. Photographs courtesy of Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

While the tumultuous marriage of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath has long been fodder for speculation and gossip, the publication of *Birthday Letters*, which chronicles the couple's relationship, brought Hughes's perspective to the forefront of literary public opinion. Hughes had long been vilified by many Plath fans and critics who blamed his marital infidelity for driving her to suicide, and this book of poetry—his personal, unguarded reflections on Plath's life and suicide as well as the breakdown of their marriage—was, to some readers, a long-awaited elucidation; to others, a weak and dissatisfactory self-defense. Either way, for a poet who had long prided himself on his ability to refrain from personal exposure in his work, Hughes revealed his private self in a devastatingly raw and vulnerable fashion through poems largely addressed to his dead first wife.

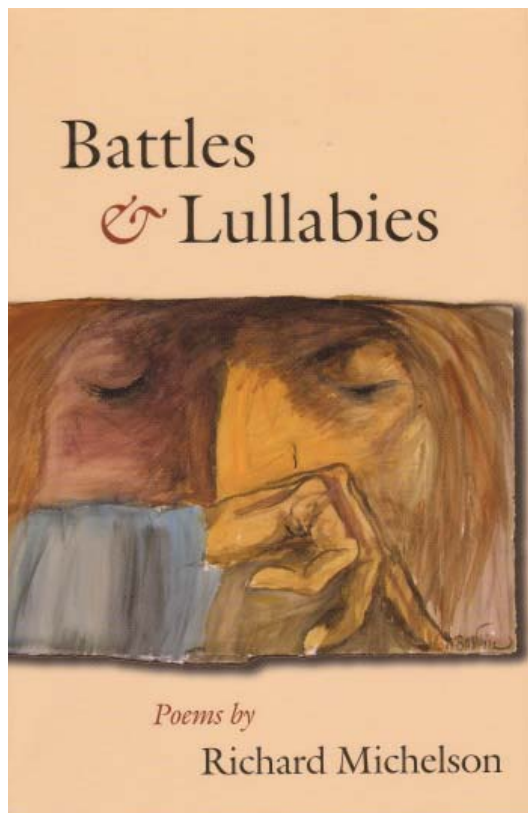
As astonishing as *Birthday Letters* is regarding its insight into the relationship of Plath and Hughes, the Baskin-Hughes collaboration *Howls and Whispers* offers an even keener glimpse into Hughes's life with Plath. Diane Middlebrook writes of *Howls and Whispers*

that “Hughes had reserved [these] eleven poems from the manuscripts that became *Birthday Letters*, as a winemaker sets aside the choicest vintage for special labeling” (xvii). The copy of *Howls and Whispers* examined for this article is number seven of the deluxe edition and is housed in Emory University’s Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. The special nature of this production is conveyed by its colophon, which reads in part:

One hundred & ten copies of *Howls & Whispers* were printed at The Gehenna Press during the promising Spring of 1998. The paper was handmade in Italy. The letterpress in Centaur types was achieved by Arthur Larson of Hadley, Mass. The etchings were printed in color from the copperplates by Michael Kuch. The book has been bound by Claudia Cohen of Easthampton, Mass. Copies number 1-10 comprise the deluxe edition & contain three watercolor drawings by Leonard Baskin, a second suite of the etchings (the ones originally printed in black are hand-touched in color by Baskin), one copperplate & a leaf of Ted Hughes’ manuscript. Copies number 11-110 constitute the regular edition.

With only 110 copies of the volume published worldwide, it is little wonder that it received far less critical attention than its predecessor, *Birthday Letters*. However, the work continues where *Birthday Letters* left off, and it reiterates the point that Hughes, the man and particularly the poet, has become inseparable from Plath and her legacy.

After publishing *Howls and Whispers* with Hughes, Baskin continued to create images for a future collaborative work entitled *Masks*. Unfortunately, Hughes passed away before he was able to write poems to complement Baskin’s illustrations for *Masks*, and this circumstance posed a problem: who could possibly take Ted Hughes’s place? Ultimately, Baskin invited poet and art dealer Richard Michelson to fill Hughes’s shoes. Michelson had known Baskin through the art world for approximately a dozen years by this time, and Baskin had previously commissioned Michelson to write accompanying poetry for some sketches of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. In fact, Michelson’s latest collection of poetry, *Battles and Lullabies*, features not only these poems but also one of Baskin’s haunting paintings as the cover image.



Upon Baskin's request to write poems for *Masks*, Michelson took great care to reread and study all of the Hughes-Baskin collaborations to get a sense of how the poet and artist worked together. For instance, Baskin's illustrations for *Howls and Whispers* are striking and raw, very much in keeping with Hughes's poetry. Images of pain and chaos, of monsters and skulls, of tormented souls: these characterize the vast majority of the book's visual fare. Representative of this dark imagery is the sketch juxtaposed to "Paris 1954," which consists of a simple, stark outline of a human face, mouth open, screaming in anguish—an image that evokes a visceral reaction of despair before one even begins reading the text beside it. Similarly, the image accompanying the title poem, "Howls and Whispers," depicts four ghoulish, bestial faces huddled in a sneering circle—a visual extension of Hughes's indictment of Plath's meddling friends and family. Occasional glimpses of order and beauty do appear in Baskin's illustrations, much like the welcome moments of empathy and transcendence in Hughes's poetry, but these moments of respite are few and far between.

The contorted and often bestial faces in *Howls and Whispers* evolve into the death masks and grotesque visages in *Masks*. Indeed, Baskin's illustrations of the latter—including "Scavengers in Love" and "About Face" (see Michelson essay above)—evoke the same feeling of darkness and gloom as *Howls and Whispers*, with perhaps even fewer moments of levity throughout the collection. The consistent feel of the images in both collaborations is evident, for instance, in the way "Scavengers in Love" conflates the human and bestial natures of the beak-nosed subject—reminiscent of several half-human, half-animal images from *Howls and Whispers*. Furthermore, "About Face" focuses on a mass of intertwining tentacles that fittingly serve to obscure the face of the subject but also bring to mind a strikingly similar image of "The Laburnum" in *Howls and Whispers*.

Whereas Baskin's artwork may have taken a secondary role to Hughes and his poetry in *Howls and Whispers*, the poet-artist relationship changed significantly during the creation of *Masks*. If poetry had served as the foundation for *Howls and Whispers*, the tables were turned in this new collaboration: Michelson and his poetry would have to adapt to Baskin and his art. Suddenly, the poet would have to live up to the artist's reputation. The etchings may have been produced with Hughes's voice in mind, but Michelson would have to absorb the spirit of the images and render them according to his own poetic voice. Indeed, a close examination of *Howls and Whispers* and *Masks* proves that Michelson was worthy of the task that Baskin assigned him as a stand-in for Ted Hughes. In *Masks*, Michelson carries on the spirit of *Howls and Whispers* without resorting to mimicry or imitation; he brings his own perspective and talent to the page in a unique re-envisioning of the themes and purposes of *Howls and Whispers*.

Stylistically, Michelson's poetry differs vastly from Hughes's. Where the *Howls and Whispers* poems have no regular rhyme scheme or structure, Michelson's poems in *Masks* embody various rhyming patterns and more traditional stanzaic formations. "Death's Dog," for instance, contains a recurring rhyme scheme and consistent stanza structure. Moreover, the poems of *Howls and Whispers* are apostrophic, portraying the poet as he addresses his dead wife. In contrast, Michelson adopts different voices and personae (surely appropriate for a work entitled *Masks*), and this tactic allows him to inject a good deal of humor and occasional sarcasm into his writing.

Regarding the title of the Baskin-Michelson book, the theme of the mask itself had emerged already in *Howls and Whispers* because for Hughes, *masks* seem to symbolize what



he felt had come between himself and Plath, resulting in the collapse of their marriage. For instance, in “Paris 1954,” Hughes writes of the encroaching dreadful scream—his relationship with Plath—that it “resembles a white mask with spread fingers / That will grab and drub and wring his heart.” This scream, this mask, does not reveal itself for what it is but rather tries “to sound like laughter and hope”; however, it is in reality a “panther / That will find his soul and tear it from him.”

Hughes later associates Plath once again with a mask in “The Offers,” which recounts a dream Hughes has of his dead wife. In this vision, he sees Plath herself come back from the dead, but it is a Plath who never married him and never became a poet. Hughes realizes that this vision is not the true Plath, and he tries desperately “to separate the memory / Of your face from this new face you wore.” Even as he is writing poems dedicated to his wife’s memory, Hughes acknowledges the inherent problems of remembering and presenting someone accurately, for it involves both discerning and acknowledging any masks the person may have adopted in life, and also recalling the truth even through the obfuscating mask of death. As shown in these two poems, masks, whether worn in life or in death, are a barrier to proper sympathy and understanding.

In addition to the masks that Plath and Hughes may have donned themselves, in the title poem, “Howls and Whispers,” Hughes bitterly comments on outside influences—family, friends, psychiatrists—that he believes also tainted his relationship with Plath. Hughes views the advice of these people as nothing but howls and whispers that inhibited proper communication between the couple in question: “Pretty, innocent-eyed, gleeful Iago. / And her friends, the step-up transformers / Of your supercharged, smoking circuits, / What did they plug into your ears / That had killed you by daylight on Monday?” Hughes continues, “These were the masks that measured out the voltage / That they wired so tenderly / With placebo anaesthetic / Into your ear, and that killed you / Even as you screamed it at me.” In this case, the mask refers to the probably well meaning but nonetheless misleading friends and family members who misrepresented Hughes to an already fragile-minded Plath.

In his own collaboration with Baskin, Michelson presents a variety of ways to view masks, as opposed to the largely negative conception of them in *Howls and Whispers*. “About Face” is one poem that is compatible with Hughes’s representation of masks. Michelson writes, “Twenty years married, I can’t tell / anymore if these masks mask us / or are us”—nearly the same sentiment Hughes expresses in “The Offers,” when he has trouble discerning the real Plath from the mask of her. “3 Ways” is another serious exploration of how we choose to portray ourselves, or, in this case, which hat we should buy. Here is the full text of the poem:

“That hat becomes you,” the sales boy says.
I’ve no reason to doubt his unseasoned face.
I’m listening with half an ear, looking in the 3-way,
trying to decide which side of me, is me.

I can see both ears at once and this boy’s thinking
Sale. No sale. Sale, his bright eyes blinking
red and green. He’s sixteen, my son’s age
and it’s his first summer away. “You have a way



with words,” I say, but already he’s tight lipped,
 feeding this bird nested on my head.
 Maybe it’s a crow—I don’t know—and I don’t know
 the size of the boy’s ambition. “There’s 3 ways

of looking at it,” my father used to say.
 He was a simple man buried beneath a fancy French beret.
 “Or perhaps,” the boy says, that cap was his permission
 to become the bird he always wanted to be.”

“HmMMM,” I say, “but didn’t he spend his whole life hiding
 under his hat, and no one, when they gave him notice,
 noticed.” Another working stiff on commission,
 he’d call himself, which is to say he never got rich.

“Well,” my nestling says, “that’s one way of looking at it,”
 but I can tell his wings are already beginning to itch.
 There’s a line at the register and I’m taking all day.
 “O.K.,” I say, “I’ll take that hat.” But I can’t say which.

Do we listen to the opinion of the disinterested sales boy, or do we choose a hat for ourselves after deciding “which side of me, is me”? On the other hand, Michelson has some fun with his sonnet “The Actor,” told from the perspective of a Shakespearean actor turned porn star who will don the mask of anyone or anything to make a living. And the so-called disguise that death wears in “Death’s Costume” is actually no mask at all: “The rumor’s true. I am who others claim.” Sometimes the greatest illusion of all is that there is no illusion to be found.

Thus, in terms of tone, *Howls and Whispers* is decidedly darker and more somber than *Masks* and even *Birthday Letters*, which covers similar thematic terrain. *Howls and Whispers* opens with the aforementioned “Paris 1954,” in which Hughes observes himself as a young man in Paris, remarking that this earlier self is blissfully unaware of the “scream that approaches him . . . / A scream / Resembling a nuclear melt-down.” This scream is “Already looking for him, as he sits there, / And that will certainly find him, coming closer / Now in the likeness of a girl”: Sylvia Plath. This first poem sets the tone for the remaining ten, which pick up on several of the themes of *Birthday Letters*, especially that of Hughes and Plath being thrown together by the universe and fulfilling a tragic destiny, always together in spirit even after death.

In fact, *Howls and Whispers* operates on the central notion that the dead often are not truly dead, at least from the perspective of the living, and Michelson picks up on this strain in *Masks’* “Two Harvests.” A social studies teacher, the central figure in this poem, attempts to harvest knowledge in his uninterested students. But after his death, “He rises in the dark . . . / . . . passing out pomegranates, / . . . sowing its seeds / In the pavements’ cracks and everywhere knowledge is growing like weeds.” This concept of death as a second harvest is perhaps a more positive viewpoint than that presented by Hughes, who did



not seem always to appreciate the legacy his wife left behind.

Indeed, Plath seems to consume Hughes's consciousness in *Howls and Whispers*. He writes in "The City" that her poems "are a dark city centre . . . / Sometimes I drive through . . . pondering what you did." It is in Plath's writing that Hughes can sometimes take refuge, finding Plath alive and well. It is there that he can attempt to interact with her, whether she is fully aware of his presence or not. "The Offers" also reveals Plath's continual resurfacing in Hughes's mind, as his dead wife returns to him three times in different forms. On the first visit, he runs into Plath on the train. She looks like she did in the morgue, and when he gets off at his stop, she stays on the train and disappears. The second visit is from a pseudo-Plath, a woman who looks like his wife but ultimately leaves Hughes to suffer in the land of the dead. On the third visit from the underworld, as Hughes is vulnerably stepping into a bath, a younger, more vibrant Plath comes up behind him and admonishes her husband, "This time / Don't fail me." Middlebrook interprets this line as "the voice of poetry itself" (xviii), which requires Hughes to embrace his poetic persona as it has developed—as that of Plath's husband. In other words, Hughes no longer needs to dwell in the land of the dead; he can reclaim the failure of his marriage by mythologizing his relationship with his dead wife, embracing her as his muse, and succeeding as a poet.

The most significant difference between the poetry of Michelson and Hughes in these two Baskin collaborations is that Hughes limits his scope to focus primarily on his and Plath's love affair as a disastrously fated occurrence, while Michelson widens his perspective of dangerous love and life-and-death affairs to a larger frame of reference. For example, Michelson's "Scavengers in Love" (see reproduction in his essay) is certainly not expressly about the relationship between Plath and Hughes; rather, it showcases the viewpoint of a scavenger in love who is all too willing to annihilate his prey-lover if necessary: "Walk out on me, I'll tear you limb from limb. / I'll peck your eyes out." Moreover, Michelson discusses death not in relation to just one ill-fated couple, but as the great equalizer of all: "There's equal opportunity around my dinner table," Death declares in "Death's Dinner Party."

Michelson cleverly structured *Masks* so that it captures many of the same thematic elements and nuances of *Howls and Whispers*, yet in an entirely original way. Hughes was interested in revealing what had occurred during his marriage and after Plath's death in order to mythologize the entire experience. But Michelson uses those same concepts of death, legacy, and false pretense as a foundation on which to create his own work of art in *Masks*. In this way, he manages to universalize what Hughes had particularized in *Howls and Whispers*, and thus the two collections of poetry complement rather than conflict, corroborate rather than reiterate.

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