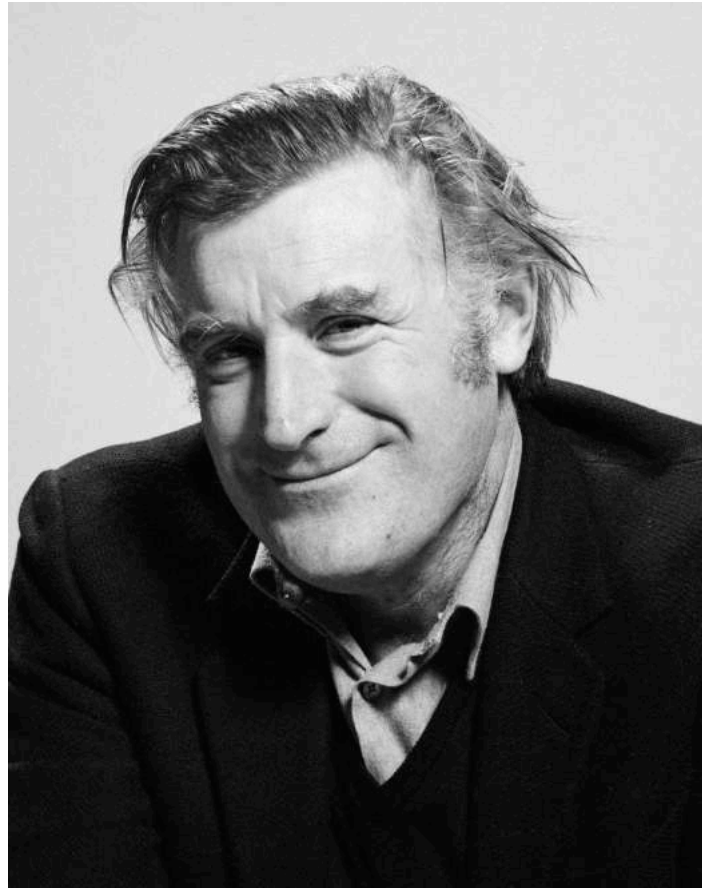


The Ted Hughes Society Journal



Volume V Issue 2



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Editorial

The months since the publication of Volume V Number 1 have seen some notable developments for the future of Hughes criticism and the shape of the Hughes community. First came the very welcome news, in March, of the Ted Hughes Network, an initiative sponsored by the University of Huddersfield and directed by Steve Ely, well known to readers of this journal. The Network aims to promote the development of teaching and research related to Hughes's work through a series of annual lectures, symposia and Visiting Fellowships, to develop archival materials and but also to raise the profile of Hughes's writing among a wider public and to create new opportunities for academic and non-academic audiences to engage with his work and perpetuate and extend his legacy. A major three-day symposium is scheduled for September 2017 on the theme of 'Ted Hughes and Place'.

Then, in April and early May, came another cluster of events proving the diversity of the community of poets and readers indebted to one particular aspect of his work. 2015 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, that 'airport for incoming translations', as Hughes and his co-editor Daniel Weissbort put it in their own first editorial, for poetry from Eastern Europe and from Israel that was, they put simply, 'more universal than ours'. Three current and former successors of Hughes and Weissbort, Sasha Dugdale, David Constantine and Helen Constantine, have edited *Centres of Cataclysm* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2016) a substantial and moving anthology of poems published by the magazine in its first half century, in which generous extracts from Hughes's editorials from the 1960s provide a bracing spine. The discomfort of literal translations, 'the very oddness and struggling dumbness of a word for word translation is what makes our imagination jump', does not just express something of the power of much of Hughes's own poetics. It fits the spare, rough-about-the edges and physically frail feel of the first issues, printed on tissue-thin paper as a deliberate attempt both to cut costs and to avoid more expensive errors: both 'that American translatoresse that's too glib in their way', and 'the menace with English translators', which in a letter to Weissbort of 1964 Hughes identified as 'lack of momentum & flair – they're all stilted + minced up, Senior Parlour consciences'. (*LTH* 231)

Times may just have changed; consciences may just have been pricked. That specific jab at the common room of his Cambridge alma mater, Pembroke, where Daniel Weissbort spent an hour during his own visit to the College, in frail health, in 2010, made it all the more pleasing to be able to welcome the *Modern Poetry in Translation* team and a very broad range of guests, from sixth form students to scholars and poets from across England and Europe, for the first of two study days of workshops and readings organized by the magazine; the second followed a fortnight later, hosted by the Queen's College, Oxford. The two Colleges, each with close connections to the Hughes family, also combined to fund the digitization of the first issue, now presented in brilliant and robust clarity, and the development of an admirable microsite devoted to its poems and contributors. It is full of fascinating profiles, contexts, and responses by contemporary poets to the

first issue, and also provides an opportunity for distraction-free reading of the poetry. The microsite is accessible via the magazine's website.

Re-reading my own first editorial I realise that I billed the current issue both too modestly and inaccurately. I promised that it would be devoted to the second half of the fruits of the Sheffield conference to appear in the *Journal*. But that is not to imply that there is anything secondary about its contents. There are indeed excellent and path-breaking versions of papers presented in Sheffield by new voices in Hughes scholarship. Katherine Robinson writes on Hughes's response to tales and texts of the *Mabinogion*, Jack Thacker on the poet's commitment to animal welfare as a farmer. Ann Henning Jocelyn adds a suggestive and personally inflected overview of Hughes's serious interest in astrology, and Mick Gowar provides a deftly curated commentary of some extraordinary illustrations his students have been inspired to create by encounters with Hughes's poetry. Each of these essays has I hope benefited from some, sometimes significant revision en route from panel and Powerpoint to page.

They are joined by two other substantial contributions and one significant discovery. The poet and critic Gregory Leadbetter's essay on the symbiotic relationship between Hughes's own critical and poetic vision and his own practice of reading began life with a paper at the first Ted Hughes Society gathering in 2012, and before that in a remarkable exchange with Hughes himself in the summer of 1998; Ed Reiss's wide-ranging essay, originally intended as a Sheffield paper, on Hughes's attitude to the social, cultural and linguistic manifestations of Englishness has itself taken advantage of a somewhat longer gestation. And Tony Other's revelatory photographs of Hughes from December 1982, which bookend this issue, represent an important addition to the archive of material that will continue to be made available to the public, with luck in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States, in the months and years ahead.

All are, I think, fine examples of the ever-growing reach and ambition of our engagement, as readers, scholars and interpreters, with Hughes's work, scholarship, adding appropriate detail as well as new perspectives to our knowledge of the poet. And in quiet ways they illustrate how the established and growing network of Hughesians are adjusting to the new conditions established by Jonathan Bate's use of the archive in his recent biography, now published in revised and corrected paperback and ebook editions. It is too early to do more than to note the fourth and saddest change in the air in which Hughes's work will henceforth be read, the death of Gerald Hughes at the age of 95. We can only be grateful for his memoir, *Ted and I*.

In the next issue, expect an ecocritical reading of 'The Gulkana' by Hugh Dunkerley and a reflection on Hughes and the future of biography written by the late Fred Rue Jacobs. I look forward to seeing what else will join them. Please feel free to send in notes of interest and discoveries, and to contact me with ideas for contributions.

Mark Wormald
Pembroke College Cambridge

List of Abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes

<i>CB</i>	<i>Cave Birds</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1978)
<i>C</i>	<i>Crow</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1970)
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i> , ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber, 2003)
<i>E</i>	<i>Elmet</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)
<i>G</i>	<i>Gaudete</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1977)
<i>LTH</i>	<i>Letters of Ted Hughes</i> , ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber & Faber, 2007)
<i>IM</i>	<i>The Iron Man</i> (London: Faber & Faber, illustrated by Andrew Davison, 1985 [1968])
<i>IW</i>	<i>The Iron Woman</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1993)
<i>MW</i>	<i>Moon-Whales and Other Moon Poems</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1976)
<i>PC</i>	Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, <i>Poet and Critic</i> (London: The British Library, 2012)
<i>PM</i>	<i>Poetry in the Making</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1989 (1967))
<i>RE</i>	<i>Remains of Elmet</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1979)
<i>SGCB</i>	<i>Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)
<i>UNS</i>	<i>Under the North Star</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1981)
<i>WP</i>	<i>Winter Pollen</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)
<i>WT</i>	<i>What is the Truth?</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1984)

The Snake, the Goddess and the Poet's Learning: Ted Hughes and the Contentions of Criticism

Gregory Leadbetter

It is a familiar paradox of Ted Hughes's career that his principal works of literary criticism – *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* and the 'The Snake in the Oak: The Mythos of Coleridge's "new principle" of Metre' – were published at the peak of his longstanding discomfort with prose criticism. He had given that discomfort its own myth, which became foundational to the narrative of his life and ethos as a poet: the dream of the burnt fox, from his time as an undergraduate at Pembroke College, Cambridge, which led him to forego university 'Eng. Lit.'. It may be no coincidence that the account of that dream as it appears in *Winter Pollen* (*WP* 8-9) is dated 1993, with the Shakespeare furore – and the anxious drafting of the essay on Coleridge – still fresh.¹ There was the burnt fox once more, as if still saying, forty years on: 'Stop this – you are destroying us' (*WP* 9). Indeed, this thought gnawed its way into an insistent new form in the last years of Hughes's life: as he told Keith Sagar in July 1998, 'That fox was telling – prose is destroying you physically, literally: maybe not others, but you, yes' (*PC* 270). On the face of it, then – from his early twenties onwards, and with increasing intensity – Hughes identified himself as a poet in opposition to the act of criticism.

My argument here is that this narrative – whatever its enabling or disabling effects might have been for him – elides the more complex truth of Hughes's practice as a poet. Here I confess a personal interest. I am both a poet and a critic by calling – and in my university teaching and research interests, literary criticism and creative writing are continuous with each other. From an early stage, I realised that I would have to resolve for myself the tension, so evident in Hughes, between poetry and prose criticism. Moreover, in writing on Coleridge, I was acutely aware of another narrative closely akin to Hughes's own fears about the effects of writing prose – one popularised, in part, by Coleridge's nagging self-accusations: that he had ruined himself as a poet by being drawn into metaphysics and philosophical criticism. As with Hughes, that notion elides the more interesting truth. For anyone reading Coleridge and Hughes as both a poet and critic, the question of how poetry and criticism interact assumes a personal urgency.

In this essay, I explore the dynamics of that question through Hughes's practice and experience as a critic of Coleridge and Shakespeare in particular, which dramatically concentrates the issues and values in play. I consider Hughes's critical methods and the problems raised by their reception, and go on to propose that the act of criticism was in fact fundamental to Hughes's practice as a writer, and the particular cultural agency he envisaged for the poet. Finally – both as a reading of Hughes and

¹ On Hughes's anxiety around the writing of 'The Snake in the Oak', see *PC* 223-34. This essay is revised and expanded from the paper entitled "'The Snake in the Oak": Ted Hughes, Coleridge, and the Contentions of Reading', which I gave at the Ted Hughes Society Conference at Pembroke College, Cambridge in September 2012.

as a working response to the question at the heart of this essay – I sketch the qualities of an imaginatively productive continuum in which poetry and criticism might embody an undivided impulse, with a common source and a kindred cultural purpose, in which *finding* and *making* meet and fuse.

Hughes's essay on Coleridge is continuous with his work on Shakespeare. In February 1993, less than a year after the publication of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he wrote to Keith Sagar: 'I've blundered into the pit of sorting out what exactly is going on in Coleridge's 3 poems – Kubla, Mariner, Christabel' (PC 223). In 'The Snake in the Oak', Hughes reconstructs those three mystery poems as the 'sacred epic' of Coleridge's '*inspired incantatory language*'. The "nativity" (in the sacred drama of his own life and fate) of his poetic "Word" (WP 403). Hughes presents the action of those poems as the shamanic drama of a mythic pattern – in fact, several overlapping mythic patterns – which 'together make a single myth, which is also, as a poet's myths always are, (among other things) a projected symbolic self-portrait of the poet's own deepest psychological make-up' (WP 375). The central event of the myth is presented as a conflict between what Hughes calls Coleridge's 'Christian Self' and on the other hand – following the terms of one of Coleridge's most suggestive self-meditations – his 'Unleavened Self' (WP 377). For Hughes, the mystery poems sing of the call and triumph of the 'Pagan Great Goddess', the victory of Coleridge's 'Unleavened Self' over his 'Christian Self' – at one and the same time 'the myth of what made him a poet' (WP 433) and 'the myth, likewise, of what destroyed him' (WP 375). It destroyed him, because in Coleridge's despairing turn from that mythopoesis in 1800, Hughes sees a rejection of that call and the 'healing wholeness' (WP 453) it offered. As in his reading of Shakespeare, Hughes sees in Coleridge's mythos 'a large-scale, brilliantly concise, diagnostic, luminous vision of England's spiritual/intellectual predicament' (WP 439): that is, the rejection, within English spiritual/intellectual life, of a greater, more holistic inheritance, a more capacious consciousness.

'The Snake in the Oak' is an extraordinary essay. Readers do not have to agree with the entirety of Hughes's argument to find in its exhilarating prose an authenticity of response and a catalyst to further engagement. Hughes's principal gift to readers of Coleridge is to take his visionary life so seriously – and the distinctive terms in which he conveys his own sense of what is at stake in those poems. As his title suggests, Hughes is particularly alert to the mythic and religious import of the snake, and the awkward fact that this figure, so prominent in Coleridge's thinking and imagining, 'in all orthodox Christian contexts is the very incarnation of Evil' (WP 458).² In re-casting the role of the snake and the Goddess in the history of English poetry, Hughes's essay contains within itself a heterodox vision of European art and spirituality – and situates Coleridge within that vision. Hughes's knowledge and insight combine with his power as a storyteller, in what Kathleen Raine called 'the learning of the Imagination'.³

² See also Hughes's *Crow* poem 'A Horrible Religious Error', and its precursor in D.H. Lawrence, 'Snake'.

³ 'Ted Hughes and Coleridge', in Nick Gammage (ed.), *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 135.

I have written elsewhere of my admiration of these virtues, and those points in Hughes's argument with which I take issue – in particular, his reiteration of the old idea that Coleridge gave up on poetry after 1802, his understanding (in the 'Christian Self') of Coleridge's relationship to Christianity, and the tying of Coleridge's mystery poems so closely to the 'Pagan Great Goddess' as to risk reifying the metaphorical life of that story and narrowing the import of the poems.⁴ There are a couple of minor factual errors in the essay, too.⁵ But Hughes never claims that 'The Snake in the Oak' is the final word on Coleridge: far from it. He knew that the essay said at least as much about him as it did about his subject:

Poems of this kind can obviously never be explained. They are total symbols of psychic life. But they can be interpreted – a total symbol is above all a vessel for interpretations: the reader fills it and drinks. According to that, what I have to say here may be of use only to me. The only value of these remarks to some other reader may be – to prompt them to fill the vessel up for themselves, from their own sources. Like the variety of potential readers, the variety of potential interpretation is infinite. (*WP* 393-4)

In his reading of Coleridge, Hughes discloses his own 'sources', and his own way of thinking about poetry – at the heart of which lies a faith in its revelatory power: the authority of poetic truth.

Despite its interest, Hughes's contribution has yet to penetrate beyond a handful of Coleridge scholars, and only a very few allow it any significance.⁶ J.C.C. Mays concludes that 'what Hughes has to say about Coleridge's prosody is altogether misleading' – though Mays's suggestion that Hughes revived the idea of Coleridge's 'wholesale commitment to stress-metrics, based on "Christabel"' needs to be qualified.⁷ Mays, in a pathfinding study, argues that in 'Christabel' Coleridge was to blend in new ways Classical, quantitative metre with English vernacular stress-patterns.⁸ That modulates – and does not, in fact, wholly oppose – Hughes's own argument in 'The Snake in the Oak' and its companion essay, 'Myths, Metres, Rhythms', that

⁴ See Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 4 *et passim*.

⁵ See Paul Cheshire, 'Review: Ted Hughes, "The Snake in the Oak", in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, *Coleridge Bulletin* NS 7, (Spring 1996), pp. 55-8, 56: 'What matter if it was Bartram, not Purchas, who had written about alligators rutting in the Carolinas; if Wordsworth was not the eldest of five brothers?'

⁶ For one of these exceptions, see John Beer, 'Coleridge's afterlife', in Lucy Newlyn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 241-42, and *Post-Romantic Consciousness: Dickens to Plath* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 139-73.

⁷ J.C.C. Mays, *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 211 n. 56, p. 200.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 191 *et passim*.

Coleridge's poem employs 'a field of flexing, contrapuntal tensions, between two simultaneous but opposed laws – that is to say, between a law of "natural quantities" set in opposition to the law of a fixed, basic metric pattern' (WP 336). While Mays quite rightly puts to flight the notion that Coleridge stopped being a poet around 1802, both he and Hughes argue that Coleridge sought restlessly for a poetry adequate to the urgency of his inner life. For Mays, the poematic fabric of 'Christabel' involves 'something magical: working sound to make things happen, to manipulate and control hidden forces';⁹ for Hughes, not so dissimilarly, Coleridge was compelled 'to search out, within himself, a new rhythm – as if the release of what he had to give depended absolutely on his finding that inner "fountain" of his own music' (WP 374). While there are important differences between Mays and Hughes in detail and emphasis, there are equally important affinities, too.

There is an obvious parallel between the wary reception of Hughes' work on Coleridge and the reception of his work on Shakespeare. Jonathan Bate grants that *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* is '*sui generis*' and in some ways 'prophetic', but concludes that 'the spectacle of Hughes reading Shakespeare is less interesting and important than that of Shakespeare reading Hughes'.¹⁰ Curiously, given Bate's professional interest in his life and work, there is no mention of Hughes in Bate's study of Shakespeare as a *locus* of creativity, *The Genius of Shakespeare* – despite Hughes's book being precisely the kind of 'both/and' criticism Bate rightly admires in Empson.¹¹ In Hughes's reading, for example, the tragic hero sees in his beloved both what he most loves and most fears (unconditional affirmation and utter betrayal in one and the same person); the 'mythic' and the 'realist' plane operate at one and the same time (even if, in order to get his point across, Hughes invites his readers 'to see both together and then, while still seeing both together, to suspend the one'¹²); and the fabric of Shakespeare's 'double language' is illuminated in ways that even Eric Griffiths – otherwise exasperated by Hughes's book – praised as 'wonderful'.¹³ Notoriously, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* was also savaged by other academic reviewers, and John Carey, despite raising some legitimate talking-points, allowed himself to level at Hughes intemperate accusations of 'grotesque, donkey-eared vandalism' and 'mumbo-jumbo'.¹⁴ Over twenty years later, while presented as a more or less sympathetic

⁹ Coleridge's *Experimental Poetics*, p. 104.

¹⁰ 'Hughes on Shakespeare', in Terry Gifford ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 147-8. Bate's essay forms the basis of Chapter 28 ('Goddess Revisited') in his *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015).

¹¹ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, 2nd edn. (London: Picador, 2008), pp. 302ff.

¹² Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), p. 38. Further references to this American edition, published with revisions three months after the Faber and Faber edition, will be to *Shakespeare and the Goddess*.

¹³ *The Times* (9 April 1992). See *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* pp. 129-57 for the passage in question.

¹⁴ 'Shaman Scandal', *The Sunday Times* (5 April 1992).

account, Bate's biography of Hughes is ready to dismiss formative elements of Hughes's thought – such as his interest in occultism – as 'bonkers'.¹⁵ During my doctoral research on Coleridge, a scholar of contemporary poetry – upon learning that I took pleasure in 'The Snake in the Oak' – quietly but emphatically advised me to leave Hughes out of my thesis entirely. Although I would not and did not do that, I had been exposed to a mild but unsettling trace of the withering ray once turned upon *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

It seems, then, that despite the intervening years, many scholars – even those who might be expected to give Hughes more credit – are not ready to engage with his contributions to criticism. How to account for this antipathy?

When he did take on the mantle of critic, Hughes consciously eschewed two conventions of scholarly activity typically regarded as essential to achieving intellectual rigour, as it's fondly termed. He sums up the first this way: 'I haven't cocked my leg at every reference, as Goethe says, and piddled a little scholarly note, to reassure the next dog along' (*LTH* 628). Of course, it isn't that Hughes wilfully disregards the work of others in the field – but he prefers not to play any citation game that might risk cluttering his argument. What's more, Hughes unashamedly declares the 'subjective' basis of his readings – that is, an interpretative dynamic driven by personal vision, or even need: not every academic would concede, as he does in his centenary essay on T.S. Eliot, 'The Poetic Self', that 'even the most rigorous scholarship hardly hopes to get beyond its own space-flights of subjective phantasmagoria' (*WP* 291).

These deviations from academic norms combine with further, more fundamental characteristics of Hughes's critical method, which bring his criticism closer to the conventions of storytelling than of analytical commentary (though these occupy a common spectrum). Throughout his criticism, the impulse towards narrative, and indeed metanarrative, is clear. Each of his essays on Shakespeare, Eliot and Coleridge takes the form of a story: the description of a mythos at work in the fabric of their writing. Robert Graves was Hughes's literary exemplar in this respect: the detective-like manner of his approach, building cumulatively towards an as-if revelatory vision, is ample evidence that Hughes 'soaked up' *The White Goddess* as an undergraduate (*LTH* 679-81). But for Hughes, there was another, intensely personal drive within that narrative impulse: his attempt to make sense of Sylvia Plath's poetic gift and what he came to regard as intimately related to that gift – her death. This drive emerges publicly in his comments on *Ariel* for the *Poetry Book Society* in 1965, where he alludes to the presence, in Plath's poetry, of 'a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her "hood of bone", floating over a landscape like that of the Primitive Painters, a burningly luminous vision of a Paradise. A Paradise which is at the same time eerily frightening, an unalterably spot-lit vision of death' (*WP* 161). This is the crystallised vision within Hughes's reading of what he called her 'supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus',¹⁶ building successively

¹⁵ Bate, *Ted Hughes*, p. 373.

¹⁶ 'Introduction' to Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 16.

through introductions of her work, his 1988 piece on ‘The Evolution of “Sheep in Fog”’, and of course, *Birthday Letters* and its hinterlands. It reveals his need to understand as the need to tell a story: the fundamental need to know and to be known through the narrative and creative act.¹⁷

Hughes often defines his methods in opposition to a putative academic orthodoxy. Of his essay on Eliot, he wrote:

I have suspended scholarly disbelief, and adopted the attitude of an interpretative, performing musician. As he reads the score, the musician imagines he finds the living spirit of the music, the inmost vital being of a stranger, reproduced spontaneously, inside himself (WP 291).

Of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he says in correspondence that ‘the book grew as an imaginative work, or like an imaginative work’: ‘it’s a sort of prose poem, if nothing else’ (LTH 595, 591). In the American edition of the book itself, Hughes attempts to conjure his audience accordingly: ‘The ideal reader would regard my idea as a sort of musical adaptation, a song’.¹⁸ His terms here find an echo in Harold Bloom’s critical contention that ‘the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem – a poem not itself*’.¹⁹ At once an authentic statement of method and a plea, Hughes attempts to disarm the ungenerous response he clearly anticipates – always hoping, as he wrote elsewhere, to find readers ‘with the cooperative, imaginative attitude of a co-author’; ‘creative as well as sympathetic imagination, not just critical attention’.²⁰ This wish, of course, is the reflex of his own instincts as a reader. Neil Corcoran has observed how, in commenting on his own poems, Hughes goes about ‘setting an illuminating lamp of prose’ beside each work, ‘inserting a second co-creative self between poem and reader in a uniquely sympathetic form of close reading’.²¹ Corcoran’s image just as well describes Hughes’s critical method more generally.

From the outset, Hughes was aware that these methods were likely to meet with resistance when he turned to the national poet, and was willing to present his reading of Shakespeare as ‘an imaginative idea rather than a

¹⁷ What I describe here should be distinguished from ‘fictocriticism’, a term coined in Australia, and most often employed to describe more literary ways of approaching problems of ethnography (see Hazel Smith, ‘Creative-Critical Hybrids’, in Steve Earnshaw (ed.), *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 331- 40, 333): Hughes is not as self-conscious in his methods nor as theoretically aligned with poststructuralism as fictocriticism tends to be.

¹⁸ *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn. (1973; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 70.

²⁰ PC 9 (cited from an unpublished introductory paragraph for ‘Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism’ in *Winter Pollen*); PC 27 (on *Crow*: October 1973).

²¹ Neil Corcoran, ‘Hughes as prose writer’, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 123.

scholarly idea'.²² That said, by the time *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* was published, he was also ready to resist academic distaste in decisive terms – with a diagnosis drawn from the paradigms he describes in the book. While publicly defending 'the musical dominance of the mythic substructure' in Shakespeare, in a reply to Carey,²³ he was more frank in his private correspondence. To Keith Sagar, he wrote that 'The Academics identified themselves to a man, (with a kind of naivety) with the Adonis character in his Angelo phase', i.e. the puritanical aggressor and denouncer of Goddess-tinged depravity (*PC* 220). To Derwent May he went further:

they don't know a thing outside their handful of disciplinary texts and nothing has ever happened to them. Those who know more and have learned otherwise keep their mouths shut and creep about, like estate workers among the gentry. The whole outfit stinks of pusillanimity and intellectual disgrace. (*LTH* 604)

For Hughes, the academics' rejection of his work was a symptom of the vast historical conflict played out in the Shakespearean microcosm he described: as he told Ben Sonnenberg, 'I could not expect our humanist post-Anglican secular orthodoxy suddenly to agree that their four hundred year censorship and prohibition of what I am trying to unearth was, as I most emphatically argue that it was, a calamitous mistake' (*LTH* 611).

Hughes's sensitivity to the reception of his ideas signals the crux of his position, both as a poet and critic. 'What English scholars cannot concede', he writes, ('except the real ones') 'is that myth is a collection of facts – . . . psychologically hard data. . . . Lit. Scholars deny me, simply, a different kind of scholarship' (*LTH* 609-10). 'Maybe', he suggests of his work on Shakespeare, 'the novelty of my approach is nothing else but to see that level of the content – for the first time – as important' (*PC* 231). He asks readers of the American edition of *Shakespeare and the Goddess* to accept, if only provisionally, Shakespeare as a 'mythic poet' – 'temporarily lifting away everything that might have been written by a kind of Dickens' in order to do so.²⁴ It is, for Hughes, an act of cultural recovery – in both senses of the word. As he told Simon Jenkins:

Any discussion of the book is not about Shakespeare or me – it's about importance of spiritual tradition versus unimportance of it, importance of imaginative life against censorship of same, sterility of artistic life versus abundance of artistic life, the survival of group culture versus the suicide of group culture, depth and reality of psychological life versus Academic orthodoxy etc etc etc. The issues seem to me important, general. (*LTH* 607-8)

²² Quoted in Bate, 'Hughes on Shakespeare', p. 138 (from an unpublished letter in the Faber and Faber archive).

²³ 'Battling over the Bard', *The Sunday Times* (19 April 1992), reprinted in *PC* 308-10; 308.

²⁴ *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, pp. 38-9.

There, in a nutshell, are the contentions at the heart of Ted Hughes's criticism – which might equally stand as the contentions at the heart of his poetry. The point I wish to emphasise here is that the animating principle that gives Hughes's criticism its distinction and authority springs from one and the same source as his poetry.

To accept this point is to allow poetry and criticism to blend their currents – as they *did*, for Hughes, in practice – but as his later autobiographical narrative precluded, by identifying prose criticism as an existential danger to his life as a poet. Hughes became trapped in his own story, with its terrible threat of fatality. Hughes's sense that writing critical prose might 'destroy' him closely parallels his belief that Coleridge was 'destroyed' by the refusal and displacement of his poetic calling. The irony is that Hughes refused to accept his calling as a *critic* – which, I am arguing, was in fact wholly involved in his calling as a poet. It may even be that *that* refusal actually caused the psychological and physiological damage that he feared – producing a tragic pattern: in denying the critic for the sake of the poet, Hughes was denying a vital constituent of the poet.

Seamus Perry observes that Hughes is 'a poet broader than his defining myth',²⁵ and the truth of this applies as much to Hughes's relationship with prose criticism as it does to his poetry. Neil Corcoran's illuminating commentary suggests that prose was 'a kind of *pharmakon*' for Hughes, 'both poison and cure':²⁶ at once implicating him in what he called 'the inevitable crime of Civilization, or even the inevitable crime of consciousness',²⁷ yet nonetheless serving a 'quasi-shamanic function' that might draw its poison, even at 'the risk of being, himself, poisoned'.²⁸ For Hughes, however, the double nature of the *pharmakon* lay not just in prose, but in *language* – and therefore in poetry no less than prose: language, he told Kenneth Baker in 1988, is 'an artificial, human invention' that 'has to be learned', and as such it is the troublous medium of civilization and consciousness itself (*LTH* 547). Language can be liberating, transformative, magical – or disabling, obstructive, evasive. The coinherence of this potential and this risk within language is what makes it so important to Hughes – a matter charged with political, psychological and spiritual significance. Once again, the existential distinction he imposed between poetry and critical prose breaks down. As Corcoran notes, for Hughes the 'human risk of poetry' is 'almost appallingly high', and as a critic he teases out the significance of that risk by adopting the role of 'both the intuitive diviner and the practised investigator of the occult secret of the individual oeuvre'.²⁹ In his reading of Sylvia Plath's life and work – which set the pattern for his subsequent criticism – he saw 'in the most literal sense a life-and-death emergency trying to communicate itself'.³⁰ The task of the critic, in Hughes's treatment of Plath, Shakespeare, Eliot, Coleridge and others, was to act in sympathy with the poems in order to

²⁵ 'Hughes's Urbanity': keynote lecture delivered at the Ted Hughes Society Conference 2015, Sheffield University.

²⁶ 'Hughes as prose writer', p. 127.

²⁷ *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 43.

²⁸ 'Hughes as prose writer', p. 129.

²⁹ 'Hughes as prose writer', p. 130.

³⁰ *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 42.

achieve that communication. In this sense, Hughes's practice is akin to what Pater identified as 'imaginative criticism': an act of 'creation' that 'penetrates, through the given literary or artistic product, into the mental and inner constitution of the producer'.³¹ If this sounds a little like telepathy, then the implicit qualification must be that as a 'creative' act, such criticism constitutes an imaginative work in its own right, which aspires to a value distinct from mere speculation upon the nature of the author in question. The critic both receives and transmits, on their own terms, the intellectual, imaginative and emotional energy ultimately embodied in the forms of their response. Authentic prose criticism will conduct the constitutional signature of the author no less than his poetry.

Without being written for publication during his lifetime, Hughes's letters bear out the same point. They convey the distinctive critical life of a mind in dialogue with itself and the materials to which its manifold appetites were drawn. As with Coleridge and Keats, the letters witness and describe a process of self-education that achieves fruition in the act of communication. The critical prose of the letters is at the service of the poet, impelled by a common purpose, ramifying through the struggles of self-illumination. At the same time, the letters are both unique to Hughes and – as examples of this order of criticism – transcend the individual, in being devoted to ideas that speak to the common good of human society, and of course the idea of poetry itself.

The burnt fox may have been telling Hughes that *one kind* of prose criticism was destroying him – the kind, perhaps, that swerved 'the depth and reality of psychological life', as he saw it, or otherwise failed to accommodate 'imaginative life' (still common enough) – but not *all* prose criticism. While, on my reading, poetry and prose criticism flourished in symbiosis in Hughes's practice, he was still trying to work out the problem in his own terms (the terms of the burnt fox) to the end of his life. Hughes delighted in Tom Paulin's *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style*, and told him so: he relished its reading of 'the wars of the proses', the 'psycho-genetics' of English prose, and how 'prose rhythms' relate to 'the electrograph of the writer's whole sensibility' (*LTH* 727). This was in early August 1998: Hughes's response shows how urgent his need was to find the wavelength on which his concerns in poetry and prose might meet and amplify each other. Around two weeks later, considering '(Eng. Lit.) Academic life', he wrote to Marina Warner, still in pursuit of an answer:

Something about the nucleus of our sense of the tragic: – in the world of rational, suppressive moral order, the pre-verbal body of individuality, subjectivity, must die. At least must suffer a form of death. It struck me that might explain the Fox dream I tell in my book *Winter Pollen*. . . . Marina, do you experience anything like this? I think of it in your case, because you write such powerfully intellectual surveys and critical pieces – then come

³¹ Cited in M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 235 (which in turn cites this comment by Pater in A.C. Benson, *Walter Pater* (New York, 1906), pp. 48-9).

out with this story [‘Lullaby for an Insomniac Princess’] in such a beautiful flow of feeling and music – so natural and flawless, like the opening of an orchid. Not a jagged crackle of intellectual interference anywhere in it. (LTH 730)

Warner seemed to Hughes to embody a possibility beyond his own experience, and his own narrative. Despite still being driven to regard critical prose, academia, and the tragic fate of the inner life in terms of the burnt fox, Hughes’s letters to Paulin and Warner reveal his implicit recognition that it need not be that way – that prose criticism and poetry (with all that it involves) need not *necessarily* cancel each other out. The tragedy that he discerns may have been that of his own identity as a critic, cast – by his own conception – in the role of suppressor and murderer of the inner life.

It need not have been that way. Hughes’s critical prose, at its best, takes up the flame at the heart of his poetry. Its atmosphere of urgent pursuit precipitates a distinctive vision. For all the agony he associated with *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* at one time or another, Hughes told me – in a letter written the day after he wrote to Warner – that it ‘wrote itself, if ever anything did’.³² In that letter, Hughes found a figure that communicated his sense of the task he had set himself, as a critic, and what he invited the reader, in turn, to do – one related to his first attempt to explain his methods. Hughes conceived of his own criticism as an attempt to bring into focus the mythic plane he saw at work in his exemplary texts – to achieve, as he put it, ‘the radical yet simple shift that Wittgenstein illustrated with the rough drawing of a bird’s head with open beak which can also be seen as a baby rabbit’s head with its ears back’ (SGCB 38). The figure for this perceptual problem that occupied his mind in the last few months of his life is revealed by its triangulation with at least three correspondents. When Hughes wrote to me – in reply to a letter of mine relating chiefly to his essay on Coleridge – he enclosed a copy of the American edition of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* from which this essay quotes, and made the following remarks:

One difficulty[. T]he human eye finds it difficult to focus on two different planes simultaneously – and see the quite different but related patterns in both. Like staring at those trick pictures of random-seeming coloured jigsaw-style patterns that suddenly – sometimes only after a very long time – reveal a distinct detailed familiar object in the foreground, against a distinct detailed landscape in the background. Once you’ve seen the separate planes, it’s difficult not to see them for a while. But then the single dimension jumble comes back, and you have to stare again. If that’s so difficult, how is anybody going to see what I’m talking about – which is very similar, physically.³³

³² Unpublished letter to me (20 August 1998): © The Estate of Ted Hughes, with permission from Carol Hughes.

³³ Unpublished letter to me (20 August 1998): © The Estate of Ted Hughes, with permission from Carol Hughes.

A few weeks later, on 6 October 1998, he used the same image to reach out, movingly, to his academic nemesis – John Carey:

I regret our misunderstandings. Something keeps prompting me to tell you so.

Do you know this visual riddle – where you have to divine the other distinctly different image hidden within and behind the surface image – three dimensional and just as real. (Because it's 3 dimensional it seems more real).

Do you think – asking viewers to divine this hidden image is a good metaphor for what I was asking readers to do in my Shakespeare book (and in my Coleridge Essay)? (*LTH* 733)

And then, on 10 October, Hughes wrote to Keith Sagar: 'I'm sending you a visual riddle' – of the same kind, of course – and again, as a metaphor of the intellectual leap he's looking for in his readers (*PC* 284). In these late comments, Hughes returns not to his poetry, but to 'the difficulty of acquiring the double vision, then holding onto it', upon which (as he saw it) the success of his criticism depended (*LTH* 733). To Sagar, he wrote that he would like '2 years to rewrite the Shakespeare simply & more briefly' (*PC* 285).

Defending the priorities of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in the reworked Introduction of the American edition, Hughes made clear the multi-planar nature of his reading: he did not deny 'any part of Shakespeare', but only wished to 'open up the crypts and catacombs that have been – in our cultural enthusiasm for the upper architectural marvels of the realistic Shakespeare – somewhat ignored and neglected'.³⁴ For those who could not entertain his approach, 'in imagination, playfully – then my book must remain closed'.³⁵ In the 'magic eye' metaphor he described to me, to Carey and to Sagar, Hughes found an image for the Empsonian plurality and polysemy of his own practice, in which more than one truth may be read in the very same language, without collapsing into mere relativism. In this respect, Hughes's criticism operates in ways akin to poetry – as an act of imaginative inducement: what Coleridge described, in an 1808 lecture on Shakespeare, as 'the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others'.³⁶ Hughes the critic and Hughes the poet are at work at one and the same time.

When they refused to 'play', imaginatively, on the terms Hughes proposed, Carey and Griffiths seemed to him to prove correct his own diagnosis of the truncated psychological condition of contemporary England. What Hughes tended to interpret as a psychic schism between poetry and prose criticism, however, is more accurately regarded as a controversy that runs through criticism itself. In the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, for example, Bloom turns his wit on the 'current School of Resentment', which for him comprised 'Neo-Marxists, New Feminists, New Historicists, French-influenced theorists' and other acolytes of that 'cultural materialism' for whom

³⁴ *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, p. 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁶ S.T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, ed. R.A. Foakes, 2 vols (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), vol. I p. 81.

'state power is everything and individual subjectivity is nothing'.³⁷ The methods, no less than the inferences of criticism, are constantly in contention – and Hughes might have more consciously and deliberately accepted his place as a critic within that ongoing contest of ideas and values, without telling himself that something so fundamental, in practice, to his cultural endeavours was antithetical to his life as a poet. As (at times) Hughes recognised, and – below the noise of battle – as his letters show, prose criticism *per se* need not be the enemy.

It is the condition of human culture to be permanently contested. That said, contentiousness need not equate to outright hostility; as Leavis once disarmingly observed: 'Collaboration may take the form of disagreement, and one is grateful to the critic whom one has found worth disagreeing with'.³⁸ An essay such as this, with its revisionary intent, is of course a constituent of an ongoing controversy. The revisionary reading of Hughes that I am pursuing is also intended to reconcile, however, by opposing the view – bound up in Hughes's militant sense of identity – that poetry and criticism are necessarily at odds. The irony here, I have argued, is that Hughes's own prose criticism transcends that very dichotomy, and on the contrary testifies to the impulse it shares with his poetry.

In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde proposes that criticism is itself creative: '...there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms'.³⁹ Wilde's claim on behalf of the 'critical faculty' – itself founded on the idea that the 'artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always'⁴⁰ – deserves pause. It identifies the 'critical' with the 'inventive', i.e. the creative. To remix William Carlos Williams's famous line, 'no ideas but in things': the ideas and the things of the human habitat involve each other. It is another irony of literary history that the rallying cry of Williams's 'thing'-based poetics is very clearly *critical* in nature. Williams's famous red wheelbarrow, on which 'so much depends',⁴¹ itself depends upon the intellectual and imaginative activity in which poetry and criticism are coeval. Poetry is powered by critical ideas: critical ideas are powered by poetry.

Despite the burnt fox, Hughes lived his own version of this continuum. His letters disclose the moment in 1956 that he felt he had discovered his 'secret': 'I only write poems when I am busy writing prose at the same time' (*LTH* 34).⁴² He may have had prose fiction rather than critical prose in mind here, but in a much later record – a journal note written just after the publication of *Birthday Letters* in January 1998 – Hughes makes a striking observation upon his entire career as a writer. He accuses himself of 'simply

³⁷ *Anxiety of Influence*, xv, xvii.

³⁸ F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. v.

³⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (1969; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 357.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

⁴¹ William Carlos Williams, 'The Red Wheelbarrow', in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. I: 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991), p. 224.

⁴² See also Corcoran, 'Hughes as prose writer', pp. 125-6.

not exploring deeply and tenaciously enough, not writing voluminously and experimentally enough, in the forbidden field. Ironic that I have done this only with the Shakespeare book and the Coleridge essay'.⁴³ The 'forbidden field' was that of his own inner life, as he now conceived it – not just concerning his relationship to Sylvia Plath, though that of course was inseparable from it, but of the elusive entirety of intuition and experience that impelled him to utterance. The irony that (in his view) he had realised something so fundamental to his poetic vision in works of prose criticism was not lost on him. Writing to Seamus Heaney earlier in the month, on New Year's Day, he 'wondered if that Shakes tome wasn't the poem I should have written – decoded, hugely deflected and dumped on shoulders that could carry it' (*LTH* 704).

From his teen years under the tutelage of John Fisher, who gave him Graves's *White Goddess* as a gift on going to Cambridge, Hughes's poetic impulse was blended with his reception of poetic, intellectual and spiritual tradition.⁴⁴ Being a poet *now* involved a reading of tradition: the creative and the critical acting in concert. Like Coleridge, Eliot, Graves and Yeats (among many others), Hughes's practice extends the cultural agency of the poet beyond the making of poems, and the expanded sphere of that activity is essentially 'critical': that of judgement, evaluation, and *reading*, in the fullest sense of the word. Eliot related the role of criticism to 'the time when poetry ceases to be the expression of the mind of a whole people'.⁴⁵ In other words, the time when nothing in poetry (nor perhaps much else) can be taken for granted, on the basis of common assumptions, and its substance emerges as a matter of contention. Criticism, in this sense, is a condition of social plurality. If special claims are made for the poet and the poet's role, they are made as part of a social dialogue that links past, present, and future.

The symbiosis of Hughes's poetic calling and his critical engagement with the cultural inheritance says much about the kind of poet he is. While Hughes was always wary of the 'jagged crackle of intellectual interference' getting between the poet and the making of a poem (*LTH* 730), he is not, in practice, an anti-intellectual poet. While he may have laid claim to 'a different kind of scholarship', it was 'scholarship' nonetheless (*LTH* 609). Coleridge identified 'Energy, depth, and activity of Thought' as one of the 'characteristics of original poetic genius', going as far to say that 'No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language'.⁴⁶ Coleridge's contention here has never quite caught on – despite (or because of) the force and subtlety he invested in developing this principle, which was fundamental to his poetics. While not everyone will follow Coleridge to the heart of that labyrinth, however, Ben Jonson makes a related point when he writes that 'a good

⁴³ British Library Add. MS 88918/1, as quoted in Bate, *Ted Hughes*, 505.

⁴⁴ See Bate, *Ted Hughes*, 65.

⁴⁵ T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 22.

⁴⁶ Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819*, I 68; and S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), II 19, 25-6.

poet's made, as well as born': the making of a good poet is bound up with the poet's *learning*, and the nature of that learning. In the 1820s – by which time (in popular misconception) he is supposed to have abandoned his poetic calling – Coleridge became engrossed with that 'most pregnant and sublime Mythos and Philosopheme', the myth of Prometheus, which he projected as a work of poetry 'in which the Thinker and the Man of Learning appears as the Base of the Poet'.⁴⁷ Late Hughes wondered if his critical prose on Shakespeare was somehow the great poem he should have written, and late Coleridge projected the poem on Prometheus onto his son Hartley (who never pursued it): like *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, however, Coleridge's work 'On the Prometheus of Aeschylus' was a consummate flowering of his poetics and metaphysics, and a vision of their fusion.⁴⁸ Hughes, haunted by the now outdated notion that Coleridge's powers had been diverted from his poetic calling by (broadly speaking) his critical concerns,⁴⁹ missed the chance to construct an alternative view – more apt, in fact, to his own practice – in which the poet and the critic combine in shared endeavour.

'Eng. Lit.' now operates in a context quite different from the academy Hughes damned in the 1990s. The rise of creative writing within universities presents, at least, an opportunity to break down false barriers between the creative and the critical in intellectual and artistic life. Practice-led research – or artistic research, as it is commonly called on the continent of Europe – is now an established and growing field, pursuing fresh ways of understanding and articulating the continuum between scholarly and artistic practice, reasoning and imagining, and the methodological pluralism with regard to learning that this implies. We are still in the early days of these developments, but – in the terms of my argument here – the notion of a mutually exclusive relationship between poetry and criticism is increasingly recognised as an obstacle to both.

An alternative to the false schism (and of course, a contention in its own right) would be to propose that both the creative and the critical are founded on the impulse of *zetesis*: curiosity, questioning, seeking – the desire to know and to realise, especially as they fuse in the desire to *make*. The perpetual origination and motion of *zetesis-poiesis-gnosis* comprise the productive continuum I have in mind. Poetry, criticism and the learning they mutually imply involve 'the welling up of unknown life into consciousness' that D.H. Lawrence identified as authentic 'Thought'.

Here as elsewhere, Hughes's own meditations resonate with Lawrence's. Taking up Keats's famous distinction between the 'poet' who 'pours out a balm on the world' and the 'dreamer' who 'vexes it', Hughes articulated his own view that whereas the writings of the 'dreamer' are composed of 'the symptoms of the malady – the symptoms, that is, as distinct from the healing response', while those of the 'poet' enact a 'healing energy', as if produced, 'in a natural and spontaneous way, by the psychological

⁴⁷ S.T. Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), vol. V pp. 142, 143.

⁴⁸ See Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonical Imagination*, pp. 3, 81-2, 91-2, 159, 198, 202, 229n, 231n.

⁴⁹ See 'Contexts' (WP 1-2) for an early instance of this.

component of the auto-immune system' (*WP* 249). For Hughes, it was not the 'materials' of poetry that mattered, but its 'source in the biological core of an individual', that is the source of that healing energy – whose works 'make us feel as if we were being healed', and which we seek out 'like the sick animal searching out the specific healing herb'. The materials of poetry 'can be anything at all that the healing energy feels like using', he goes on to say in his essay on Keats, but

if those materials are not selected by the healing energy itself, if they are selected instead by the cerebrations of ego, or by any impulse from any other corner of us, then the proper power and beauty of the 'healing' substance will be that far vitiated. (*WP* 250)

Hughes makes no mention of prose criticism here, but it's fair to infer that Hughes's angst over the form derives from a suspicion that criticism did not flow from this healing energy. My point has been to suggest that on the contrary – depending on the direction and the substance of its learning – it can. In this respect, Hughes's use of Keats's distinction may be useful in discriminating not just between differing qualities in poetry, but between competing forms of criticism.

Ted Hughes contended, both as a poet and a critic, that the life of the mythopoeic imagination is fundamental not just to the history of our species, but to the possibility of wisdom. His works are proof against his own sense of conflict between poetry and criticism. My aim has been to show that poetry, criticism, and the learning they embody can share a common source, impulse and agency – and combine in the task of invoking new orders of insight, sensitivity and intelligence.

Ted Hughes on England and the Queen's English

Ed Reiss

Ted Hughes' feelings for his mother country are strongly and strangely conflicted. This paper examines that conflict through a reading of 'Crow's Song about England' in relation to Hughes' account of 'how England lost her soul'. It then explores his antagonism to the 'Queen's English' alongside his 'fanatic patriotism'. Finally it considers the ways in which England is represented both in *Birthday Letters* and in Hughes' wider correspondence.

'Crow's Song about England'

'Crow's Song about England' is a 27 line poem without traditional rhyme or punctuation but strongly patterned by repetition. It conceives of England as both an abused girl and a male abuser.

Once upon a time there was a girl
Who tried to give her mouth
It was snatched from her and her face slapped (*CP* 269)

In the first verse the girl tried four times to give parts of her body; in the penultimate verse, four times she tried to keep those body parts. Both behaviours are met with cruelty. The poem hinges on the middle sections (lines 10 to 18) with their double sex-change: the girl first 'humped' into a violent male beast and then 'shrunk to a little girl'. The repetition of corresponding near-symmetrical clauses creates a cyclical effect as if underscoring the cyclical character of abuse. Something curt or quasi-diagrammatic is crossed with barracks-talk.

She tried to keep her cunt
It was produced in open court she was sentenced

She did life (*CP* 269)

One obvious objection to this poem is that it mugs the reader with sadism. A second is that it seems misogynistic in relishing the girl's dismemberment and the violation of innocence. A third objection is that this poem is third-rate. By Hughes' standards it may be. It was not in *Crow* (1970), but first appeared as 300 copies from a small press publication, Rainbow Press, in 1971, (*CP* 1257). Reprinted in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, it can also be found in the *Collected Poems* (*CP* 269).¹ In Hughes' own schema, this could be a poem where 'a scrap of inspiration is really no more than the occasion for a routine display of the poet's prosody.' (*WP* 208).

¹ Keith Sagar, ed. *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983, p. 338.

Better perhaps to flout it, 'on the principle that the bad man calls the misses, the good man the hits'.²

Whatever its literary merit, 'Crow's Song about England' still sheds light on Hughes' ideas about England. Before examining this, however, it is worth making some general points about the poem. Its opening words invoke a fairy tale beginning, perhaps 'Beauty and the Beast',³ or a post-Freudian tale of Innocence and Abuse. Thereafter, the use of parallelism and anaphora, along with minimal punctuation, is typical of Hughes's style at this time, and reveals the influence of folk tale. The repeated 'she tried' (seven times) meets 'he stabbed' (three times). The lexis too is representative of the collected *Crow*. The word 'stabbed', for instance, is used four times within eight lines in 'Crow Tyrannosaurus' (*CP* 215).⁴ That said, it is unusual for Hughes to use what the OED calls the coarse slang word for the female genitals.

'Crow's Song about England' is open to various interpretations, including (the bane of Hughes and Plath studies) the autobiographical. The poem, perhaps, 'stole everything back' from Plath's 'The Detective', written on 1 October 1962. That was 'a case of vaporization' ('The mouth first... The breasts next.')

⁵ The open-hearted girl could also be an early attempt to show a young Sylvia giving freely of herself, as Hughes would later portray her in *Birthday Letters* 'as a toddler'

When you rushed at every visitor to the house
Clasping their legs and crying: 'I love you! I love you!' (*CP* 1059)

In 'Crow's Song about England' Hughes may, as Jonathan Bate suggests, have 'gestured obliquely' towards 'the debased England of tabloid sex-crime headlines and a macabre national obsession with Myra Hindley and the Moors Murders'.⁶ On the basis of Bate's biography, one could also hazard a more confessional (even impertinent) reading and scrutinise that phrase 'her face slapped' for self-accusation or regret, since Bate reports Hughes' telling his American editor, Fran McCullough, that 'sometimes when Sylvia was in a blind rage, all he could do was slap her, and that once "she turned into his

² Keith Sagar, 'A Poet and a Critic', in Nick Gammage, ed. *The Epic Poise*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 237. See also Olwyn Hughes: 'Those who point out failures fill up with failure' (*PC* 41), and – for Hughes's own version of this idea -- *PM* 23.

³ Hughes had written a play called 'Beauty and the Beast' in 1968 and would write another script with that same title in 1974. Ann Skea, 'A Timeline of Hughes's Life and Work', in Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. xxii, xxiv.

⁴ The association of crows with stabbing recurs in Hughes' children's verse.

'At meals whatever she sees she'll stab it –
Because she's a crow and that's a crow habit.'

'My Sister Jane' from *Meet My Folks!* [1961] in Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems for Children*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 39.

⁵ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp 208-9.

⁶ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), pp. 390, 295. The 'Moors Murders' refer to the torture, murder and burial of children from 1963 to 1965.

slap and got a black eye, and went to the doctor and told him Ted beat her regularly".⁷

Taking a longer view, the poem could be viewed through a Judaeo-Christian lens, with the abused girl as oblation or scapegoat, a female equivalent to the 'man of sorrows', despised and rejected, bruised for our iniquities, in the Book of Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.⁸

The spirit of the girl, so brutally rejected, could be seen as the Holy Spirit, symbolised by a dove. In a later poem, the dove comes three times, 'Her breast big with rainbows', and each time 'She was knocked down':

She gave the flesh of her breast, and they ate her
She gave the milk of her blood, they drank her (CP 449)

The dove then withdraws, much as the spirit does, according to Barth, 'when it is not listened to for its own sake'.⁹

Now deep in the dense body of thorns
A soft thunder
Nests her rainbows. (CP 449)

In Shakespeare's tragedies, Hughes attends to the silence of Cordelia and other 'Lucrece figures' who are 'afflicted, abused, misunderstood, but inviolate'. He suggests that 'the silent truth (of Divine Love) cannot be dramatized and demonstrated at all, except as a creature suffering in a world where the egomaniac [sic] voices of the tragic error reject it, violate it, exploit it.' (SGCB 278)

Along with rejection and violence 'Crow's Song' turns on metamorphosis, or what Hughes, following Jung, calls 'enantiodroma' (SGCB 40): the process by which one dominant psychological attitude becomes its opposite. It is especially applied to the adoption of attitudes opposite to those held at an earlier stage (as, for example, Saul the persecutor turns into Paul the Christian evangelist). In this poem the abused girl changes sex and comes back as the violent male. Lobotomised, he then changes sex and comes back as the girl who tries to 'keep' her body intact.

The title – 'Crow's Song about England' – sets the whole poem under the sign of Crow: unreliable narrator and Trickster, but also teller of difficult truths. Hughes wrote that 'my Crow is Bran of the Tower Ravens, Bran who was Apollo (a Crow god) plus his son, the Crow demi-god Asclepius the Healer (whose mother was the white Crow goddess Coronis), was the god-

⁷ Bate, *Ted Hughes*, p. 173.

⁸ King James Bible, ['Authorised Version'], Isaiah 53:7.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, cited in Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 296.

king, a Crow god, of early Britain, where he was also the Llud who was Llyr who was Lear.¹⁰

The title is not 'Crow's Account of Sexual Abuse' or 'The Poet Dramatizes his Violently Divided Feelings about Womankind': it is 'Crow's Song about England'. How or why is this poem a 'Song about England'? Does Hughes conceive English history as a drama of sexual abuse? The answer lies in the prose he was writing at the time since he 'attacked and explored his themes and compulsions on all fronts, discursively and analytically as well as 'poetically', just as Coleridge and Eliot did'. (*WP* xi).¹¹ To illuminate 'Crow's Song about England', we must turn to Hughes's view of English history: a mix, or synthesis, of Blake, Freud, Jung, Lawrence, Tillyard, Graves, Reich, Frances Yates, R.D. Laing and more beside.

How England Lost her Soul

In 1971, the year in which 'Crow's Song of England' appeared, Hughes also published his *Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, with an accompanying 'note', the germ of his critical *magnum opus*, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). He told Peter Redgrove: 'Noone ever went to more trouble to write an apologia for a selection of verse. I sweated musk, ambergris, and skunk-fat.' (*LTH* 321) This 1971 essay first considers Shakespeare's two long poems, 'Venus and Adonis' (1592) and 'The Rape of Lucrece' (1593). Hughes notes that these show a shift from loving female (Venus) to angry male (Tarquin) and suggests that:

the two poems are, in fact, the two unjoined halves of a single story. And the story these two halves make is Shakespeare's fable – his major discovery, the equation on which all his work is based.¹²

In Hughes's reading, this fable was 'Shakespeare's poetic powerhouse'.¹³ The virgin Queen, head of the Reformed Church, 'representative of the old goddess – the real deity of medieval England, the Celtic pre-Christian goddess' who 'had been naturalised into the old Catholicism as Mother Mary and Satan', was now 'dragged into court' by the radical Calvinists, accused of being 'something papist and presumptuous, something to do with the whore of Babylon'.¹⁴ This conflict between Puritan

¹⁰ Hughes, *Sunday Times*, 19 April 1992. Reprinted in *PC* 310. See also *SGCB* 458; *LTH* 339, 606; *CP* 1217.

¹¹ William Scammell, 'Introduction' (*WP* xi). Hughes also explores his intellectual interests 'conversationally', through his letters.

¹² Hughes, ed., *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971) [Hereinafter, *CSV* 1971], p. 190.

¹³ *CSV* 1971, p. 183.

¹⁴ *CSV* 1971, pp.185-7. That phrase 'dragged into court' recalls the line 'It was produced in open court she was sentenced', repeated in 'Crow's Song about England'. Later, the phrase is given a more personal context relating to Ted and Sylvia. 'Helpless / We were dragged into court'. 'Brasilia', *Birthday Letters* [1998] (*CP* 1157).

and medieval goddess, which simmered during Shakespeare's life and boiled over in the Civil War, is really, Hughes claims, the account of how 'England lost her soul'.¹⁵

How would that illuminate 'Crow's Song about England'? At the risk of being over-schematic, the girl who tries to give herself may be a Venus figure, symbolic of pagan or Roman Catholic Merrie England. Rejected and abused by Adonis (the ascetic Puritan), she transforms into a rapacious, stabbing Puritan (Tarquin), before shrinking back to the little girl who 'tried to keep' her body unviolated (Lucrece).

The Queen's English

T.S. Eliot had posited a 'dissociation of sensibility' in seventeenth century England.¹⁶ Hughes agreed, but thought Eliot's term an understatement.¹⁷ To Hughes mind, most modern poetry lacks the 'wholeness' of Shakespeare.

You get the rope solid in Proverbs, ballads, songs, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Skelton, Webster – but never after 1688 (the Restoration) except maybe in Burn's dialect poems. This lack is what Eliot calls "dissociation of sensibility", but being American he didn't perceive that the causes for this apparent dissociation of sensibility are in the inter-conflict of upper & lower classes in England, the development of the English gentleman with the stereotyped English voice (and the mind, set of manners etc that goes with the voice) & the tabu on dialect as a language proper for literary men. (*LTH* 146)

The history here is careless, even cavalier, since the Restoration is 1660, not 1688. Even allowing for broad polemical brush-strokes, a 28 year error is tantamount to stating that the Second World War ended in 1973 or that Thatcher fell from power in the year 2018. In defence of Hughes it might be countered that he meant the Glorious Revolution (1688) and his pen slipped, or he was clowning. But Hughes makes the same mistake in an article about the English class system, published in 1963. 'To understand the obsessive way the English fight their Class War,' Hughes writes, 'one needs to go over a bit of essential history'.¹⁸ But again his essential history is 28 years adrift. He says that 'Democracy struck a deep root of hope under Cromwell' and mentions the death of Charles I. Then the chronology blunders:

When his son Charles II ascended the throne in 1688, and Cromwell's honourably buried body was dug up and hung in chains, there began a Civil War of prejudices, revengeful

¹⁵ CSV 1971, p. 197.

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 288.

¹⁷ CSV 1971, p. 197. See also *LTH* 327-8.

¹⁸ Ted Hughes, 'The Rat under the Bowler' *Saturday Night* Vol: 78 (40) (November, 1963), pp. 21-7, 22. [Hereinafter 'Rat']

passions, and slow purpose, behind the agreeable smiles of Englishmen, which is only now reaching its crisis.¹⁹

Of course Charles II had died in 1685 and James II was deposed in 1688. The error may be symptomatic. If the Restoration happened in 1688, that would extend the Commonwealth and Protectorate for an extra 28 years – time for Democracy to strike its root of hope more deeply in the English psyche. Perhaps the editor spotted the error and let it stand for the article was prefaced ‘It is published here, exactly as submitted’.

Shakespeare, according to Hughes, recorded ‘the most horrible of all disasters – the declaration of war against the natural (real) world and natural fellowship with it and in it, by a pseudo intelligence which is now on the point of culminating its logics and natural bent in destruction of the world and all life.’(*LTH* 336) As in many conspiracy theories, the truth is suppressed by an all-powerful, sinister Establishment ‘them’:

...I could not expect our humanist post-Anglican secular orthodoxy suddenly to agree that their four hundred year censorship and prohibition of what I am trying to unearth was, as I most emphatically argue that it was, a calamitous mistake – and in fact a human crime that has by now virtually destroyed English Society, English Education, English Individual life (all with the most rigorous and concerted application of the best minds in each generation). (*LTH* 611)²⁰

The Restoration and its aftermath brought linguistic, moral, social and intellectual disaster. Henceforth the rulers ‘derived from the Frenchified, rotten court of Charles II which hated and despised the English. That is the great point – that hatred and contempt of the lower classes.’²¹ In Hughes’s (or Dully Gumption’s) view, the Restoration restored ‘venomous elegance’, ‘Clip-lipped fear’ and ‘glazed evasion’. The rhyming words in the last two stanzas of Gumption’s course on ‘Semantics’ (1961) force the reader to choose between the long ‘ā’ of Received Pronunciation, or the short ‘a’ of Northern English and some dialect. And, arguably, the poem contradicts itself and crashes if read in RP.

Thus came language and manners to the ruling class:
Charles’s stuffed head oracular under glass.

Now the bull learns that dead head’s speech and glance,
And so England falls, finally, to France. (*CP* 98)

¹⁹ ‘Rat’, p. 22.

²⁰ The last six words quoted from this letter to Ben Sonnenberg in May 1992 resonate curiously with the opening of Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’: ‘I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness’.

²¹ ‘Rat’, p. 22.

In the Interregnum, 'Charles II sat in Paris turning himself and all his entourage into members of the French court'.²² It was 'a court that imposed the mid-century tastes of the French Court on the literacy and manners of a nation whose radical Englishness it had every reason to fear.'²³

It was even worse bad luck for Shakespeare's language that the crippled court-artifice of Restoration speech should have been passed on to the military garrison of the Empire, where the desirable ideal of speech for all Englishmen became the shrunken, atrophied, suppressive-of-everything-under, bluffing, debonair, frivolous system of vocal team-calls which we inherit as Queen's English.²⁴

That's a striking claim from the Queen's future Poet Laureate. It goes back to his first year at Cambridge. The 'vocal team-calls' of the Queen's English recall the 'vocal displays' of ex-public-schoolboy undergraduates, displays whose cultural origin Hughes located in the Restoration and the ascendancy of French style.

... Gradually, I came to think of the aesthetic mode of modern England – really the public school aesthetic mode ... – as a state of psychologically arrested post-Restoration attitudes. (LTH 680)

In calling the Queen's English a 'system of vocal team calls', Hughes deploys six scathing adjectives. This is a 'shrunken, atrophied, suppressive-of-everything-under, bluffing, debonair, frivolous' system of vocal team-calls.

The first qualifier, 'shrunken', may recall the Tarquin figure in 'Crow's Song about England' who 'shrunk to a little girl'. Hughes had also written (in 1960) of the 'shrinkage and forlorn rottenness of the national id' (punning on 'national grid'). This 'shrinkage' is caused by 'the awful inadequacy of the public school ego-kit, the do-it-yourself perfect gentleman kit' and means that the national id now 'resembles the stuffed head of a white walrus mounted on the tail of a bad herring.' (LTH 162)

The second adjective – 'atrophied' – might recall Robert Graves who had written that 'in England, as in most other mercantile countries... the poetic faculty is atrophied in every educated person who does not privately struggle to cultivate it'.²⁵

That quadruple-compound epithet 'suppressive-of-everything-under' recalls Lawrence's war against suppression. R.D. Laing, then a fashionable figure, argued that the ordinary man must daily 'suppress his normal instincts and conform to an abnormal society': an exercise at which the 'schizophrenic'

²² 'Rat', p. 22.

²³ CSV 1971, p. 198.

²⁴ CSV 1971, p. 198.

²⁵ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961 [1946]), p. 223.

fails.²⁶ Hughes himself had written that 'the product of the big expensive Public Schools' is designed for 'the semi-military, semi-diplomatic job' of 'suppressing and exploiting (as well as regimenting)' a 'large mutinous empire'.²⁷ And later he would note how the Celts and Anglo-Saxons 'were suppressed' by the Normans (*CP* 1223); and claim, or complain, that '400 years of cultural suppressive dismissal aren't going to be lifted willingly simply to indulge me.' (*LTH* 596)

The Queen's English is further described as 'bluffing, debonair, frivolous'. Here Hughes is confronting parts of upper class Southern English culture which are 'camp' or seem so to an outsider. Perhaps that style was then more prevalent and dominant. Susan Sontag noted how the camp sensibility 'converts the serious into the frivolous.... One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.'²⁸ In describing the upper class English, Hughes often returns to that word 'frivolous'. So he asks 'just why a company director, himself of lower class origins, will regularly select for his executive posts a frivolous idler of mediocre talents, and no university, but from Eton'. And he claims that 'the effect of overcrowding and idleness on the upper established men is paralysis of energy, frivolity, triviality, deep, demoralizing boredom.'²⁹ Hughes identifies frivolity and superficiality with Southern, upper class mores, contrasted implicitly with the more serious Dissenting culture of the North.

Hughes again uses that word 'frivolous' in a chain of six or more often-hyphenated adjectives in a 1979 letter to Keith Sagar, to nail Auden's 'solemnly-intoned, shuffling, high-minded, pedantic, frivolous, tea-and-biscuits Oxford High Anglicanism, dignified with whiffs of the old incense and murmurous latin [sic]...' (*LTH* 426).³⁰

This polemical flourish – half a dozen pejorative epithets – recalls Alvarez's depiction of the average 'Movement' poet as 'the image of the post-war Welfare State Englishman'. Having shown him as shabby and poor, and 'gauche but full of agnostic piety', Alvarez hammers the hapless creature with the adjectives 'underfed, underpaid, overtaxed, hopeless, bored, wry'.³¹

Hughes's criticisms of the Queen's English are no shallow insult, but arise from deep-seated principles about writing:

You sacrifice nothing to the consensus of approved syntax – which is the translatores, the compromise with middle of the

²⁶ R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967). Back cover blurb. Laing said that Hughes 'treated me with great respect as a writer'. Bob Mullan, *Mad to be Normal: Conversations with R.D. Laing* (London: Free Association Books, 1995), p. 360.

²⁷ Hughes, 'Rat', p. 26.

²⁸ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' [1964], in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), pp. 105, 116.

²⁹ Hughes, 'Rat', p. 27.

³⁰ That word 'high-minded' is again used pejoratively when Hughes refers to 'the high-minded authority of the torturer and the executioner' (*CP* 1220).

³¹ Al Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966 [1962]), pp. 24-5.

road English, which nearly all poetry is written in, and which – via a thousand petty opinions – will try to drag you to its elocution class. [...] The great thing is to have confidence in what cannot be proved, in your own sense of what is true (why Keats called sense of ‘beauty’ the only radar for the kind of truth that counts).³²

When Hughes, now Poet Laureate in Ordinary to Her Majesty, returned to his writings on Shakespeare, he re-wrote his essay to accompany his *Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse* (1991).³³ In this new essay – and in his magnum opus *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992) – the denunciation of ruling class English disappears. And when in his ‘occasional prose’ he came to ‘reprint’ his original (1971) ‘Note’ on Shakespeare, he softened it with some deft, unannounced revisions. Thus his sentence on Received Pronunciation was discreetly toned down. The original idea about the Queen’s English as a ‘system of vocal team-calls’ – implying two teams, in opposition, one speaking the Queen’s English, the other dialect – was dropped, along with the six adjectives qualifying it. In the new version, ‘the desirable ideal of speech for all Englishmen became the officers’ mess and parade-ground system of vocal controls which we inherit as Queen’s English’ (*WP* 119).

Refashioned thus, the sentence sounds more measured and restrained, as if the Laureate has shed the intemperate prose of Milton for that of Addison. Though moderating his original denunciation, he does not entirely revoke it. This ‘system of vocal controls’ can be seen as a component part of what Hughes elsewhere calls ‘the English psycho-social control system (as that’s coded into voices, faces, the general look of things)’ (*LTH* 615). The reference to ‘the officers’ mess and parade-ground’ tips the sentence slightly away from the Queens’ English and back towards the antecedent ‘military garrison of the Empire’. The focus is now on the Home Counties officers with their posh, loud voices, as galling to Hughes as the ‘Oxford Voice’ was to Lawrence.³⁴ In 1965, writing to Richard Murphy, Hughes had imagined a Todmorden weaver ‘nagging at his ulcer caused by the strange foreignly Southern braying of the officers’ (*LTH* 241). The associations of the ‘Officers’ Mess’ are amplified in a letter from the last year of Hughes’s life.

The guests are a particular middle-class to fringe-aristocracy mixture who inherit the basically public school but heightened by Military Officer’s Mess Tradition of – addiction to a unique form

³² Letter to Tony Griffin, 6 July 1975, Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library: BC MS Misc. letters 2 GRI. As the Calvinists ‘dragged into court’ Mother Mary, so middle of the road English would ‘drag’ the poet to its elocution class.

³³ Ted Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, (London Faber and Faber, 1991). [Hereinafter, CSV 1991.]

³⁴ ‘The Oxford Voice’. *Pansies*. [1928]. In D.H. Lawrence, *Complete Poems* (ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts), vol. 1 (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 433.

of social banter of incredible mutual cruelty, used almost as the norm for dinner party conversation. (*LTH* 696)

The 'parade-ground' is a square of 'instant obedience and fear', controlled by the voice of what Hughes called the 'slave-ruling military aristocrat'. 'And notice', he writes, 'the accent with which he speaks – that is very important ... The aloof, condescending superiority, the dry formality, the implicit contempt, the routine thought and extinction of feeling – above all, that pistol-shot, policing quality.'³⁵ In a reproach to Derwent May (1992), Hughes writes: 'Even poor old Crow, you would have him trudge out on your parade-ground as a salt of the earth half-literate scouse' (*LTH* 605).

For Hughes, the 'officers' mess and parade-ground' are part of what he had told Donald Hall in 1963 was 'the prevailing English repressive outlook, our military army-of-occupation heritage.'³⁶ (*LTH* 226) He had written the same year of 'that English brigadier voice barking for porters on a station platform' and said that it was 'just such an episode that triggered my brother's decision to emigrate to Australia, and he only overhearing it.'³⁶ Writing to Gerald in the 1980s, Hughes explains that he has 'met a troop of Tory politicians'. ('Troop' as a collective noun for Tory politicians is both alliterative and apt: body of soldiers, troop of actors, troop of baboons.) He has, he says, been introduced to 'that whole army of occupation – invisible, pretty well, to the common Englander, except as Park walls and great ornate gates & stormy voices in the House of Parliament.' (*LTH* 526)

The 1994 reprinting of the (1971) 'Note' on Shakespeare replaces the colloquial 'muffed'³⁷ with the more technocratic 'mismanaged' (*WP* 109). More significantly, it omits the paragraph which begins 'Any Elizabethan theology was top politics' and which finishes 'In the end, when the quarrel got utterly out of hand, the Puritans hardly knew what made them chop off the King's head.'³⁸

Fanatic Patriotism

Hughes's 'boyhood fanatic patriotism' (*CP* 1216) carries far and deep. Note in 'Pike' how the word 'England' plays chiasmically off its near-anagram 'legendary':

Stilled legendary depth:
It was as deep as England. (*CP* 85).

That depth hosts the pike: predator and prey.³⁹ Hughes wrote that his own horizon was closed 'by the dead of the First World War and the legend,

³⁵ Hughes, 'Rat', p. 26.

³⁶ Hughes, 'Rat', p. 27.

³⁷ Hughes, *CSV* 1971, p. 185.

³⁸ Hughes. *CSV* 1971. pp. 185-6.

³⁹ Paul Bentley argues that the pike pond is as much social and cultural as natural. The poem is Swiftian and may refer to English atrocities in Ireland. Bentley, *Ted Hughes, Class and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 65-73.

beyond them, of the slavery of the nineteenth century in the great industrial camps.’(CP 1220) In ‘the tribal lands of the north’, the First World War was ‘felt as a national *defeat*,’ a ‘shattering, all-inclusive, grievous catastrophe’ (CP 1219), sealed by the Great Depression. There followed the Second World War, loss of India and retreat from Empire.

In ‘The Retired Colonel’, the word ‘English’ half-rhymes with the word ‘vanish’ (CP 77). ‘A Motorbike’ twins ‘England’ with the word ‘dwindled’ (CP 547). ‘Out’, a tripartite poem about the First World War and its traumatic aftermath, closes with an appeal for closure.

Let England close. Let the green sea-anemone close. (CP 166)

The image of the sea-anemone may be a marine equivalent of the traditional emblem of England as a rose, but the sea-anemone’s poisonous tentacles fire a harpoon-like filament into their victim and inject a paralyzing neurotoxin. The line may evoke both Blake’s dream (‘England’s green and pleasant land’) and Owen’s nightmare: the soldier gassed in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’.

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.⁴⁰

The gassed soldier is drowning – perhaps ‘under a green sea’ – but the syntax indicates that it is Owen (the witness) who is ‘under a green sea’. Either way, Hughes picks out Owen’s ‘green sea’ and metamorphoses it into ‘green sea-anemone’. The anemone recalls the close of ‘Venus and Adonis’ in which the young man becomes an anemone.⁴¹ The sound of ‘anemone’ may acoustically conjure ‘anamnesis’ or ‘amnesia’.

The after-trauma of the 1984-5 Miners’ Strike was addressed by Hughes, now Poet Laureate, in his tripartite poem ‘On the Reservations’ (CP 776-780). Part 1, ‘Sitting Bull on Christmas Morning’, mediates the desolation of the South Yorkshire coal-belt through the absolute defeat of the Sioux and the Plains Indians. ‘Part 2, ‘Nightvoice’ has a woman sleepwalking, lamenting disaster. Part 3, ‘The Ghost Dancer’, features a millenarian punk in crazed frenzy, ‘Bomblit, rainbowed, aboriginal’ (CP 780). Although the country is ‘split like a schizo with nine minds’, Hughes maintained that at the level of Monarchy, ‘the primitive, instinctive level’, the ‘ritualised dream-symbol made real, helps us to stay one. Something like that.’ (LTH 530)

Compared with, say, the richness of myths about Ireland and Irishness, England has gaps in its national mythology; gaps through which Hughes reaches into the shamanistic traditions and folk tales of other traditions such as the Native American. But he also reaches for myths, such as they are, about Britain. His children’s poem ‘Nessie the Mannerless Monster’ can be interpreted as a Unionist fantasy in which Nessie, the Scottish monster,

⁴⁰ Wilfred Owen, *Complete Poems*, ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), p. 55.

⁴¹ Shakespeare has it as a purple flower chequered with white (‘Venus and Adonis’, line 1168). In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* it takes its name from the wind (Greek, *anemos*) and in Hughes’ ‘Venus and Adonis (and Atalanta)’ ‘We call it “wind-flower”’ (CP 963).

having wreaked mayhem and devoured Sir Mimms Culdimple Bagforkhumberly-parse, is guided by 'a wretched Scots writer of verses' to Buckingham Palace, where she is made Vice-Regent of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and ends up reigning in Loch Ness.

And whenever the Queen visits Scotland, she visits this Loch,
Then she and Nessie sit sipping tea and have a really good
talk.⁴²

The Scottish monster is befriended, the menace neutralised and the United Kingdom consolidated. Having seen the illustrations for the story in August 1963, Hughes recorded in his journal a dream of 'making love to the Queen on a carpet in the palace. – This assoc[iation] with the illustrations to Nessie which I saw yesterday, when Nessie, after eating Sir etc, lies on carpet.'⁴³ Arise Sir Ted, monster and courtier: fanatic patriot indeed.

Representing England in and around *Birthday Letters*

The drabness of post-war England recurs as a motif in *Birthday Letters*. For Plath, England was 'part / Nursing home, part morgue / For something partly dying, partly dead.' (CP 1074) To her affluent American eyes, post-war England is 'filthy':

London a morgue of dinge – English dinge.
Our sole indigenous art-form – depressionist! (CP 1143)

After this play on 'indigenous dinge' the poem continues with free indirect thought, attributed to Plath.

And why were everybody's
Garments so deliberately begrimed?
Grubby-looking, like a camouflage? 'Alas!
We have never recovered,' I said, 'from our fox-holes,
Our trenches, our fatigues and our bomb-shelters.' (CP 1143)

Hughes's literary 'Alas!' introduces an explanation and apology in terms of national identity. His 'I' exists between the first person plural 'we' and four first person plural possessive pronouns (our), owning the British war experience of the first half of the twentieth century, when survival was threatened and 'nothing was listened to but the bulletin from the private crystal set under the breastbone' (CP 1221).

Her husband wants to lift Plath out of disappointing conventional appearance into a more mystical dimension,

Into an altogether other England –

⁴² Hughes, *Collected Poems for Children*, 65. The detail about 'sipping tea' shows that on occasion Hughes let himself write within Alvarez's 'gentility principle'.

⁴³ Bate, p. 228.

An Avalon for which I had the wavelength,
Deep inside my head a little crystal. (*CP* 1144)

That crystal in the head calls to mind the crystal brought by the great bird in Elmet, the Celtic kingdom which, he wrote in the preface to *Elmet*, was 'centred, in my mind, on Heptonstall' (*CP* 1201), the spot where Sylvia now rests.

Its song brought a crystal from space
And set it in men's heads. (*CP* 490)

As for Hughes's letters, his wide correspondence shows him to be surprisingly ambivalent about England and what it stands for. He speaks of the 'dim muddy glow... lighting this goldfish bowl of the English intelligentsia' (*LTH* 157); 'our particularly English brand of stupidity' (*LTH* 222); and 'this rotten English civilisation' (*LTH* 250). Often he wants out: '...we have had a beautiful May – the one month I would not happily spend outside England.' (*LTH* 162)

What is the great plastic megaphone mask of English, that gets jammed over the head of all English writers, & that [Lawrence] avoided? He is the only one quite free of it. Maybe what helped him – apart from the talent, the nerve etc – was marrying a German, & staying out of England. (*LTH* 487)

Grumbling and burlesque can mix with seriousness. 'England plunges into another three hundred years of catatonic stupor.' (*LTH* 330). Or England 'is a vicious doghole for the most part. One half has a bellyful of acid and old iron, that's the articulate part, and the mass, the proletariat, is a great senile toothless hairless white ape, blind, tied, etcetera.' (*LTH* 115).

A letter to the same friend, Daniel Weissbort, twenty-four years later (in 1982), complains of 'some sort of poison gas pouring out of all English Institutions – numbing, smartening, trivialising, finally paralysing.' (*LTH* 453). Writing to a Labour councillor, Jack Brown, in 1982, Hughes blames class privilege:

It occurs to me more and more often that the prolonged Tory dominance – the gradual consolidation of the Eton/Oxford/Tory axis in all positions of social influence – is beginning to have a narrowing and shallowing effect on the cultural atmosphere. Many symptoms. (*LTH* 462).

Though, here as elsewhere, Hughes is entertaining and humouring a friend, dishing up what the correspondent wants, it is reasonable to suppose that he is also expressing some part of himself.

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Sean O'Brien has criticised Hughes's 'foundationalism', his 'resolute pastness' and 'rural conservatism'. The poems, he claims, are 'shadowed by

what they exclude': namely, 'the developing social and political reality of the British Isles in his adult lifetime'.⁴⁴ This may be true of *Rain-Charm for the Duchy: and other Laureate Poems* (1992) – the collection to which O'Brien most refers – but it fails other and better work.

Hughes's discussions of the pillage of the countryside amount to more than simply 'rural conservatism'. In 'The Environmental Revolution' He condemns 'the mindless greed of big industry, and the shameless dealing of the government departments who promote and protect it', along with 'the opportunism of some farmers' and 'the cynicism of the chemical industries' (*WP* 130, 131-2). And in the Preface to *Moortown Diary* he regrets that 'technological revolutions and international market madness' have plunged farmers 'into a jittery, demoralized, industrial servitude, in effect farming not stock and land but grants and subsidies, at the mercy of foreign politicians, big business conglomerates, bank managers and accountants.' (*CP* 1204).

Hughes's sense of England is profound, troubled and contradictory. He creates an imaginative space almost outside culture, a space which is at times associated with a deeper, mythical, more authentic England, pagan, primeval and impolite. But his England is divided by historical particularity, class and regional difference. He is the poet, not of the metropolis, but of Calderdale (*Elmet*) and Devon (*Moortown*). *Gaudete*, that tale of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, begins in 'the North of England', moves to 'the sterile gentility of a Southern English village' (*PC* 59) and on, in its epilogue, to the West Coast of Ireland. Seamus Heaney has remarked that there is in Hughes ('a poet of the land and of England') 'something of Arthur Scargill's England'.⁴⁵

All this can be related to Hughes' early years in 'the last ditch of Elmet, the last British Celtic kingdom to fall to the Angles' (*CP* 1200). What he calls 'the insularity of the valley' was also the waterline 'between the Scandinavian pressures of the North Sea and the Celtic pressures of the Irish Sea, between Mersey and Humber; this was the top of the tide, from both seas – where the wrack washed up and stayed.' (*CP* 1201). The poet eventually went to live in North Devon, which again 'felt like an island'.

The breed was so distinct, so individualized and all of a piece, they seemed to me almost a separate race. I could believe they were still that Celtic tribe the Romans had known as the *Dumnoni*, 'the people of the deep valleys' (*CP* 1203).

But he never quite *settled* in Devon: he was drawn back to the bustle of the metropolis.

As Heaney remarked, Hughes takes his place in a tapestry extending from Caedmon to Wilfred Owen.⁴⁶ But Hughes's own work is also woven from Yeats and Eliot, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, John Crowe Ransom and (through Plath) a range of their American contemporaries. Hughes translated

⁴⁴ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), pp. 37, 40.

⁴⁵ Seamus Heaney, in BBC tribute to Hughes, broadcast 25/12/1998.

⁴⁶ Seamus Heaney, Address at Ted Hughes's Memorial Service. Reprinted in *The Observer Review*, 16 May 1999.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Euripides' *Alcestis*, Seneca's *Oedipus* as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He translated Racine, Pushkin, Eluard, Wedekind, Lorca, and Yehuda Amichai.⁴⁷ He had a special interest in East European writers: Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert, Ferenc Juhász. There are essays on Vasko Popa (*WP* 220-8); János Pilinszky (*WP* 229-236); and Isaac Bashevis Singer (*WP* 60-67).

So Hughes' literary genesis, his genius, is both deeply English and wide open to the world. And this too is his idea of Shakespeare: one whose 'wild home-made poetry' derives from 'the dialect instinct to misuse latinisms',⁴⁸ but one too in the great Indo-European tradition of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism, linked to the Cabbala and Rosicrucianism, as exemplified by the magi, John Dee and Giordano Bruno (*WP* 293-309).

The British themselves are 'genetically the most mixed-up gallimaufry of mongrels on earth' (*CP* 1224).⁴⁹ During the Cromwellian Commonwealth the one unity to which they could cling was 'God and the common language'. Since the Restoration, 'the red beast and the white, the Lion and the Unicorn, have supported the constitutional monarchy as the God-consecrated shrine of democracy, where the Unicorn is the divine aspect of the Democratic Idea, and the Lion the sacred reality.'*(CP* 1224) Compared with 'Crow's Song about England' or the world of 'Pike' or 'Hawk Roosting', this lion and unicorn fable may ring hollow: tamed, shrunken, atrophied, suppressive-of-everything under.

'And it is a fact, as everybody knows,' Hughes had written in 1963, 'that never since [the Restoration] has the royal line reverted to blood that owes any loyalty to English soil.'⁵⁰ But by 1992 he had found the blood-link or bloodline. 'The modern transfusion (through Queen Victoria's family) from our Germanic sources, and again (through Her Majesty the Queen Mother's family) from our Celtic sources, can be seen as a consistency, an obedience to the archaic pattern, with a real effect on the dreams that supply the blood to our ideas.'*(CP* 1224). Whether that is the royal 'our' or the national one, Ted Hughes had completed his own enantiodroma.

⁴⁷ *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations*, (ed. Daniel Weissbort), (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.)

⁴⁸ Hughes, *CSV* 1971, p. 11.

⁴⁹ 'Gallimaufry' is a French word of unknown origin, rare except in dialect, meaning 'a dish made by hashing up odds and ends of food'. OED online. Falstaff 'loves the gallimaufry'. *Merry Wives of Windsor*, II.i.112.

⁵⁰ Hughes, 'Rat', p. 22.

The Remains of Something: *Mabinogion* Tales as Poetic Substructures in Ted Hughes's *Crow* and *Cave Birds*

Katherine Robinson

Ted Hughes first encountered retellings of tales from *The Mabinogion*, a Welsh myth cycle recorded in the Middle Ages, when he received a copy of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* as a prize in grammar school.¹ Although Hughes's published letters contain no mention of *The Mabinogion*, he owned two different translations of it as well as three books of criticism about it – ranging from a depth-psychology analysis to more occultist explorations of the tales.² These books, now housed in Hughes's archive at Emory, attest that he was familiar with *The Mabinogion* and compelled enough by the stories to compare translations and to read various commentaries. Sequences of distinctive images in Hughes's poems – uncannily similar to imagistic progressions in *Mabinogion* tales – suggest that Hughes also used these myths as substructures for some of his poems, particularly in *Crow* and *Cave Birds*.

In a variety of letters, Hughes refers to King Bran the Blessed, a central figure in *The Mabinogion*, and claims him as an important progenitor for *Crow*, statements which indicate that the *Mabinogion* myths were in his mind as he wrote *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow*. Images and ideas in the *Crow* poems themselves suggest that another, lesser-known figure from *The Mabinogion*, Morfran – whose name means “great crow” – was an equally important inspiration for the book.

Ted Hughes writes in a letter to Alan Bold that “Crow is the bird of Bran, is the oldest and highest totem creature of Britain...”³ In *The Mabinogion*, King Bran the Blessed, whose name means “crow” or “raven,” is

¹ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), p. 65.

² Hughes owned a 1949 edition of a translation by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones as well as a 1902 reprint of Lady Charlotte Guest's nineteenth century translation of *The Mabinogion*. He also owned *Mabon and the Mysteries of Britain: An Exploration of the Mabinogion* by Caitlin Matthews (London: ARKANA, 1987), *A Celtic Quest: Sexuality and Soul in Individuation, a Depth-Psychology Study of the Mabinogion Legend of Cullwch and Olwen* by John Layard and Anne Bosch (Zurich: Spring Publications, 1975), and *The Mabin of The Mabinogion* by Morien (London: Research into Lost Knowledge Organization, 1984).

³ Alan Bold quotes this letter, dated 27 February 1973, in his note to ‘A Childish Prank’, in Bold, ed., *The Cambridge Book of English Verse 1939-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 234. See also Ann Skea, ‘Ted Hughes and Crow.’ <http://ann.skea.com/Trickstr.htm>. Retrieved 25 March, 2016. With permission of Ann Skea. Website and Ted Hughes pages: <http://ann.skea.com>.

killed in battle; before he dies, he instructs his grieving men to carry his head to London and to bury it under a white hill – reputedly the site of the Tower of London – where the severed head would, he promised, protect the isle from invasion. In a letter to Derwent May, Hughes links the ravens at the Tower of London – with their wings superstitiously clipped – to Bran’s buried head, and declares that Bran “gave us his ravens to protect Britain – i.e. the little chaps hopping about there at this moment.” In the same letter, he writes that Crow, in his book, is the voice of Bran who is “fallen, like King Lear destitute and naked on evil modern times.”(LTH 606)

Another “Crow” lurks at the outskirts of a central Welsh myth about the birth of poetic inspiration often also included in *The Mabinogion*⁴ – the story of a young boy Gwion Bach’s transformation into the bard Taliesin. Ceridwen, the goddess of transformation, destruction and renewal, gives birth to a son who is, as “The Hanes Taliesin” succinctly says, “the most ill-favoured man in the world.”⁵ Because of his hideousness, she names him Morfran, which means “great crow”. As he ages, Morfran’s ugliness increases steadily until she changes his name to “Afangddu” which means “utter darkness”.⁶ Ceridwen brews a potion which will make Morfran so wise that his ugliness will become irrelevant. Through a series of mishaps, however, the boy Gwion Bach ingests the potion instead, receives the wisdom meant for the goddess’s son, and becomes the bard Taliesin.

In the *Crow* poems, Hughes forges a poetic representation of the part of the psyche that, like the goddess’s unsightly son, does *not* receive bardic eloquence and is left untransformed and ugly. He creates a poetic register for evoking what eludes articulation.

Writing to Keith Sagar, Hughes gives a catalogue of sources for *Crow*. One entry in this catalogue simply reads, “Crow in early Celtic literature.”(LTH 339) In the letter, Hughes explicitly names two Celtic progenitors for Crow – the god Bran and the Irish warrior goddess Morrighu. The categorically sweeping phrase “Crow in early Celtic literature” suggests, however, that an array of Celtic crow figures – probably more than two – informed the book. I will argue that an additional inspiration for the *Crow* poems, in which, as Hughes famously said, he coined a “super-simple, super-ugly language,”⁷ could have been the staggeringly ugly Morfran, or “Great Crow.”

The narrative of Hughes’s poem “Crow Goes Hunting” is remarkably similar to the story about Taliesin’s theft of the magical potion brewed for the ugly Morfran. In the myth, Ceridwen boils herbs in for a year and a day to distill them into three drops of “awen,” the Welsh term for poetic inspiration, which Morfran will drink. She hires a boy, Gwion Bach, to tend the cauldron.

⁴ This tale, “The Hanes Taliesin,” is not part of the group of tales that comprise *The Mabinogion*. When Charlotte Guest translated *The Mabinogion* into English for the first time in 1838, however, she included the tale in her edition. Some contemporary translators such as Patrick Ford have followed suit. Hughes owned a 1902 reprint of the Guest translation.

⁵ Guest, Lady Charlotte, *The Mabinogion* (Newtown: Sandycroft Publishing, 2014), p. 249.

⁶ Matthews, p. 14.

⁷ Faas, Ekbert. *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Boston: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 208.

When a year and a day have almost elapsed, Ceridwen and Morfran come to sit by the fire, but they fall asleep just as the potion finishes boiling. The three drops of awen leap out of the cauldron and scald Gwion Bach's thumb. To ease the burn, he sucks his thumb and swallows the wisdom meant for Morfran.

Ceridwen and her son wake and, seeing what has happened, Ceridwen tries to kill Gwion Bach. Gwion Bach, however, is newly in possession of infinite wisdom, so he turns into a hare and bounds away. The goddess turns to a greyhound and chases him. He transforms into a fish and leaps into the river; she becomes an otter and swims after him. He changes into a sparrow and flies away, only to be pursued by Ceridwen in the form of a hawk. Finally, Gwion Bach becomes a grain of wheat and hides in a heap of winnowed grain. The goddess becomes a black hen and eats the wheat, believing she has finally killed the boy. Nine months later, however, she births Taliesin who becomes – according to the legend – one of the greatest bards of all time.

Not only is the story of “Crow Goes Hunting” similar to this Welsh myth – Hughes's poem recounts a chase filled with rapid-fire shape changes – but the images themselves are also strikingly analogous to the series of transformations catalogued in the myth.

“Crow Goes Hunting” begins by describing Crow's decision to go hunting, using a pack of words to pursue a quick-witted hare. This pursued hare echoes the hare whose shape Gwion Bach initially adopts in order to escape the Goddess's wrath. Likewise, Hughes describes this pack of words with language that evokes the sleek greyhound into which Ceridwen transforms. Like a greyhound, the words are “well-trained” and boast “strong teeth;” like a greyhound's bark, they are “resounding”(CP 236). The second stanza ends with a final question: “Crow was Crow without fail, but what is a hare?” This question recalls the mercurial nature of Taliesin who changes rapidly from a boy to a hare to a fish to bard. His identity cannot be established because the knowledge the awen has given him is the knowledge of transformation – a power comparable to that of poetry which is itself a new shape created out of transmuted experience. In contrast, Hughes tells us that Crow is Crow without fail. He can instigate transformation – he can order the world around him to change – but he himself cannot be changed, just as Morfran remains stolidly ugly, unredeemed by the wisdom his mother tried to give him.

Like the hare in the Taliesin myth, Hughes's hare transforms because it needs to escape; it changes itself into a stolid bunker. The frustrated words circle the bunker. Unable to catch the hare – now an unmovable, concrete fort – the words transform themselves into bombs and destroy the bunker. Demolished by bombs, the bunker becomes bits of rubble which shoot skywards and turn into starlings. Outwitted again, the words turn themselves into shotguns and shoot the birds. The starlings, in turn, fall out of the sky and become a “cloudburst.”

Although Hughes's bunker bears little resemblance to the fish Taliesin turns into, the rest of the transformations Hughes's hare undergoes are remarkably imagistically faithful to Taliesin's shape changes. Blasted by bombs, the bunker turns to starlings, just as Taliesin changes from a fish to a bird. Gunned down, Hughes's starlings turn to a cloudburst, and a raindrop's

shape evokes the grain of wheat into which Taliesin changed before falling into a heap of grain.

Next, Hughes writes that Crow transforms the words into a reservoir, which, in turn, absorbs the cloudburst as it rains down out of the sky. The (presumably dark) reservoir, as it swallows the cloudburst, perhaps echoes the black hen into which Ceridwen changed in order to eat the grain of wheat Gwion Bach had become. The reservoir also evokes Ceridwen's womb where Gwion Bach spends nine months before being reborn as the bard Taliesin. Likewise, both rain and seeds are emblems of fecundity.

At the end of Hughes's poem, in a notable reversal of the myth, the water (the cloudburst, which was originally Hughes's elusive hare) rises up in the form of an earthquake and subsumes the reservoir, which had previously consumed it. Indeed, Hughes uses the verb "swallowing" to describe the earthquake's consumption of the reservoir, and this word choice harks back to Gwion Bach's sucking the three drops of *awen* (or inspiration) off his thumb, swallowing the goddess's wisdom. The boy Gwion Bach is ultimately devoured by the ferocious goddess, but, on a metaphoric level, he is the one who absorbs her powers. A bard turns experience and history into poetry – a skill Taliesin takes from Ceridwen, goddess of transformation. Interestingly, a cloudburst and a reservoir are, ultimately, the same thing – they are both water – even as they alternately consume each other in Hughes's poem. Taliesin's bardic powers are fundamentally the same as the goddess's creative powers.

At the end of "Crow goes Hunting," Hughes's hare triumphs:

The earthquake turned into a hare and leaped for the hill
Having eaten Crow's words.

Hughes's diction here once more recalls how Gwion Bach literally ate the words – or *awen* – meant for Morfran, "Great Crow."

The poem ends by describing how Crow watches the leaping hare, "speechless with admiration."

In the Mabinogion tale, Taliesin, like the hare in Hughes's poem, embodies the mimetic properties of poetry. He can change forms and imitate the world around him. Morfran, in contrast, embodies the inchoate part of the psyche that does not receive inspiration or eloquence, remaining untransformed and "super ugly." The unresolved and unarticulated parts of experience create a restlessness that sometimes spurs insight, partly as a way of tempering confusion. Taliesin would not have turned into a bard without the instigating, ugly presence of Morfran – "Great Crow" – just as Crow's decision to "try words" initiates the chase that ensues, although Crow himself remains "speechless."

In his essay "Trauma Theory Readings," Daniel O'Connor argues that *Crow* is Hughes's attempt to create a language that can deal with what he described to his son Nicholas as "the unmanageable event" (*LTH* 711) of Plath's suicide. O'Connor claims that, "As Lacan argues in his seminar on Hamlet, the rites of mourning account for a hole created by the inadequacy of "signifying elements" to cope with loss. As such, mourning requires a new

symbolic register to deal with the loss – that is what Hughes is searching for through *Crow*.⁸

The *Crow* poems confront and evoke what resists articulation partly through creating a character who never masters language. The first section of the collection's opening poem, "Two Legends," catalogues images of Crow-like blackness and ends with the lines, "black also the soul, the huge stammer/ of the cry that, swelling, could not/ pronounce its sun," (*CP* 217) and the poems repeatedly portray Crow's speechlessness.

Crow's power arises, however, partially from his indifference to language. In "The Battle of Osfrontalis," words try to win Crow's attention and fail. He doodles cartoons on the blank cheques they give him, and he donates their final offering, "a wreathed vagina pouring out Handel" (*CP* 214) to the museum. Neither threats, money, nor sex can move Crow. Words then attack him, but he remains unflustered. To the words – and to those who rely on language – Crow's indifference is more terrifying than ferocity, and the words flee:

Words retreated, suddenly afraid
Into the skull of a dead jester...

And Crow yawned – long ago
He had picked that skull empty.

The most famous dead jester is, of course, Yorrick, whose skull Hamlet cradles, asking, "Where be your gibes now? Your / gambols? Your songs?" All Yorrick's words have retreated into his skull. The terror of death, as Hamlet succinctly says, is that "the rest is silence."⁹ If personality is communicated through language, then death's erasure of identity is particularly connected to the cessation of speech. What terrifies Hamlet, however, leaves Crow yawning. To Crow, death is not mysterious – nor is the silence it brings alarming because he has never adopted speech.

Crow's survival in "the Battle of Osfrontalis" and his implicit survival in an earlier poem, "Crow's Account of the Battle," are paralleled by *The Mabinogion's* final reference to Morfran, Ceridwen's ugly son. *The Mabinogion* briefly states that Morfran is one of the three survivors of the Battle of Camlan the massacre in which King Arthur is killed. Morfran survived, not because of his fighting skills but because he was so blindingly ugly that his enemies fled in terror. *The Mabinogion* includes Morfran in a catalogue of Arthur's men, saying, "Morfran... (no one placed his weapon in him at the battle of Camlan, so exceedingly ugly was he; all thought he was a devil helping. There was hair on him like the hair on a stag.)"¹⁰

Morfran's curse is what saves him. His ugliness damns him to be an outsider and simultaneously allows him to escape the carnage of Camlan

⁸ Daniel O'Connor, 'Trauma Theory Readings,' in *Ted Hughes*, ed. Terry Gifford (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 135.

⁹ Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, ed. T.J.B. Spencer, Penguin Classics. (London: Penguin Books, 1980), V.1, pp. 186-187.

¹⁰ Jones, Gwyn and Jones, Thomas, *The Mabinogion* (London: Everyman's Library, 2000), p. 91.

unscarred. Similarly, in Hughes's poem, "The Battle of Osfrontalis," Crow's immunity to normal desires and fears makes him seem monstrous yet frightens away the attacking words.

Just as Morfran's blinding ugliness saves him at the Battle of Camlan, Bran's dismemberment brings Britain mythic protection. Both these Celtic Crow figures – Bran and Morfran – draw protection from a seeming curse. Similarly, Hughes's Crow continually survives because, on a metaphoric level, he already *is* an embodiment of absence.

In the Crow poems, Hughes evokes the tension between the mimetic properties of poetry, exemplified by Taliesin's fluent shape shifting, and that which defies linguistic expression, exemplified by Morfran's unchangeable ugliness. That ugliness, despite its immunity to change, is what instigates the poetic creation represented by Ceridwen's cauldron of awen, or inspiration, which transforms Taliesin into a bard.¹¹ The Crow poems grapple with the origins of poetry and with what instigates its creation as much as they deal with evoking what escapes language, suggesting that what spurs poetry and what escapes it are often the same thing.

Another *Mabinogion* tale, "Math Son of Mathonwy," which recounts the story of Llew Llaw Gyffes and his wife Blodeuedd, weaves through Ted Hughes's 1978 book *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Drama*. This story creates a narrative substructure for *Cave Birds*, which exists in fascinating tension with Hughes's stated superstructure. In the *Mabinogion* tale, Llew Llaw Gyffes is murdered by his wife, Blodeuedd, turns into an eagle and is subsequently reborn. Blodeuedd, in turn, becomes an owl. Hughes wrote that *Cave Birds* tracked the alchemical transformation of a man who is tried and executed for a crime against a female victim before finally being reborn. In *The Mabinogion* tale, the genders of the dramatis personae are reversed: a woman murders her husband and is accused; both undergo transformation and rebirth.

Through using the myth of Blodeuedd and Llew as a substructure for *Cave Birds* poems, Hughes begins to evoke obliquely some of the concerns that return in *Birthday Letters* and later confessional writing. According to Jonathan Bate's dating of the composition of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes was already working on this book-length elegy for Plath at the time he was writing *Cave Birds*,¹² and Hughes's narrative in this collection prefigures one of the elements of *Birthday Letters*: the construction of a posthumous persona for himself. Through the slain figure of Llew, Hughes creates a voice for the part of himself that psychically follows Plath to the underworld and is symbolically and poetically killed in "Daddy."

Cave Birds originated as a collection of poems Hughes wrote to accompany spectral drawings of birds by Leonard Baskin. Writing to Ann Skea, Hughes states:

"The plot consists of two parallel 'stories.' In the one, the dramatis personae are birds. In the other, a man and a woman. My starting point was the death of Socrates. The crime for which

¹¹ For a discussion of Ted Hughes's relationship to the bardic tradition in Britain, including his relationship to Taliesin, see Ann Skea, "Ted Hughes and the British Bardic Tradition." <http://ann.skea.com/cairo.html>.

¹² Bate, pp. 511-512.

he is judged, and which he expiates... is... the murder of the Mediterranean Goddess (as Mother and Bride.)" (*LTH* 491-2)

In other words, the male protagonist is tried, judged and executed for a crime against an archetypal female deity. By cleaving to Cartesian dualism, the man gives rationalism sovereignty over nature and mysticism, thus effectively "murdering" the primal goddess. After spending a period of time in the underworld, Hughes's protagonist is reborn as a falcon, a transformation which mirrors the ending of the tale of Llew Llaw Gyffes in which he and Blodeuedd become an eagle and an owl respectively.

Ann Skea argues that the book's penultimate poem, "Owl Flower," and an earlier poem, "The Plaintiff," both evoke Blodeuedd.¹³ Imagistic parallels to the story of Llew Llaw Gyffes are also woven throughout the poetic narrative, culminating in "The Risen," which obliquely and hauntingly depicts Llew's transformation.

Because he is born out of wedlock and destroys her reputation, Llew Llaw Gyffes's mother, Arianhrod, curses him, declaring that he will never get a wife. The magician Gwydion adopts Llew and, to circumvent the curse, moulds a wife for him out of flowers – meadowsweet, oak and broom. Gwydion names her Blodeuedd, which means "flowers." After being married for several years, Blodeuedd, however, falls in love with a hunter who chases a stag across her lawn while Llew is away. She and the hunter plot to kill her husband, and ultimately do so by throwing a spear at him while he climbs into a bathtub. As retribution, Gwydion turns Blodeuedd into an owl.

Hughes's "The Plaintiff" combines botanical and avian imagery in a way that evokes Blodeuedd's transformation. For example, he describes the plaintiff as a bird who is the "bush of your desert," and he states that "her feathers are leaves". (*CP* 423) Hughes describes the plaintiff, finally, as a "humbling weight" lodged in the heart of the speaker, making it difficult for him to breathe. The poem's final lines read:

Your heart's winged flower
Come to supplant you. (*CP* 423)

This evocation of a "winged flower," as Skea argues, encompasses Blodeuedd's dual nature: she is made of flowers and becomes an owl. Skea writes that, "Just as Blodeuedd was responsible for the death of her consort, Llew Llaw Gyffes, so the Plaintiff has 'Come to supplant' Hughes' hero who will subsequently, like Llew, be reborn."¹⁴ The weight "buried in your chest" is reminiscent of the spear that finally kills Llew, flying into him – like a bird – and supplanting his life.

Instead of dying from the wound, however, Llew turns into an eagle, a transformation echoed in Hughes's "The Gatekeeper," a poem that marks a turning point in the narrative between the protagonist's death and his recreation. The poem ends with the lines:

¹³ Skea, Ann. *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University of New England Press, 1994), pp.81, 129-130.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.81.

And a wingspread

Nails you with its claws. And an eagle
Is flying

To drop you into a bog or carry you to eagles. (*CP* 428)

In this final image, destruction and deliverance are held in suspension; he will be transfigured, living among eagles, or he will be dropped into a swamp where, with dubious chances, he will fight drowning.

The book's penultimate poem, "The Owl Flower," continues the melding of plant and bird imagery that "The Plaintiff" began. Leonard Baskin's illustration depicts a circular bird with the beaked face of an owl. Its feathers splay out spherically like close-packed petals. The poem, as Ann Skea has demonstrated,¹⁵ likewise melds flowers with birds. The poem describes a dead woman beginning to move and then describes ensuing rebirth:

A mummy grain is cracking its smile
In the cauldron of tongues.

The egg-stone
Bursts among broody petals. (*CP* 438)

While much of the poem's imagery evokes Blodeuedd, the phrase "cauldron of tongues" recalls the boiling awen that gave Taliesin the gift of bardic eloquence. The grain contained in the cauldron is reminiscent of Taliesin's entrapment in Ceridwen's womb after she, in the form of a hen, swallows him in the form of a grain of wheat. In her womb, the grain slowly becomes human – develops a face and a smile – as the kernel turns into the bard Taliesin. Like Lleu, Taliesin is destroyed by a primal goddess, but that destruction ultimately leads to rebirth.

Raised by a magician as he was, Lleu Llaw Gyffes's life is charmed and he can only be killed through a very specific, odd congruence of conditions, conditions which are imagistically recreated with uncanny faithfulness – in *Cave Bird's* final poem, "The Risen." When Blodeuedd and her lover decide to murder Lleu, Blodeuedd feigns concern for her husband's wellbeing, saying she fears he might die before her. In doing so, she tricks Lleu into revealing exactly how he can be killed; he assures her that killing him would be all but impossible. "I cannot be slain within a house... nor can I outside," he assures her.¹⁶ When Blodeuedd is puzzled by this paradox, Lleu explains that he can only be killed:

By making a bath for me on a river bank and making a vaulted
frame over the tub, and thatching it well and snugly too
thereafter, and bringing a he-goat... and setting it beside the
tub, and myself placing one foot on the back of the he-goat and

¹⁵ Skea, p. 129.

¹⁶ Jones and Jones, p. 63.

the other on the edge of the tub. Whoever should smite me when so, he would bring about my death.¹⁷

Accordingly, Blodeuedd builds a roof-frame, drags a tub to a riverbank, corrals a billy goat and convinces Lleu to demonstrate the strange pose that makes him mortal. As, beneath the roof-frame, Lleu steps out of the bathtub and puts one foot on the goat, her lover throws the fatal spear. When the spear hits him, Lleu screams and flies away in the form of an eagle. “The Risen” begins with the lines:

He stands, filling the doorway
In the shell of earth.

He lifts wings, he leaves the remains of something,
A mess of offal, muddled as an afterbirth... (CP 439)

The doorway at the beginning of the poem evokes the vaulted roof Blodeuedd constructs, and the “shell of earth” imagistically recalls the bathtub.

The image of “A mess of offal, muddled as an afterbirth” is, however, the line which most convincingly connects this poem to the story of Lleu Llaw Gyffes. The magician Gwydion finds Lleu (in the shape of an eagle) because he follows a pig who, when let out of her sty each morning, always runs straight to the same spot in the forest. When the pig stops and starts eating, Gwydion examines what the sow is devouring, and “he could see the sow feeding on rotten flesh and maggots.” He looks up into the trees and sees an eagle shedding offal: “And when the eagle shook himself the worms and the rotten flesh fell from him.”¹⁸

Later in the poem, Hughes again uses this same image of offal falling from a bird: “A skin sloughs from leafless apocalypse” (CP 439). At the end of the poem, Hughes asks when the bird will alight on a human wrist. Finally Gwydion, the magician, recites englyns¹⁹ to the eagle, luring him to land on his knee and transforming him back into a man. Poetry is what turns the transmuted, alchemized man human again.

Strikingly, the imagery that surrounds Lleu Llaw Gyffes’s death – a bathtub, a river, a particular stance that turns a man suddenly helpless –

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁹ A Welsh englyn follows a variety of strict rhyme patterns and metrical rules and employs cynghanedd within the lines. Cynghanedd – a complex pattern of rigidly mapped alliteration, rhyme and metre – fascinated Hughes. He even suggested to Moelwyn Merchant that Shakespeare had learned about cynghanedd from his Welsh schoolmaster and had intentionally utilized an adapted form of it in lines such as “Our dreadful marches to delightful measures” which contain regular patterns of alliteration. (LTH 669) In “The Gypsy,” Hughes describes a fortuneteller who, slighted by Plath, prophesies that she will die soon. Hughes writes, “For days I rhymed / Talismans of power in cynghanedd, / To neutralize her venom” (CP 1117). Notably, in both these instances a poet uses cynghanedd (or englyns) to reverse a curse and to either safeguard—or restore to safety— someone he loves.

returns in the last poem Hughes published, “The Offers,” which appeared in the *Sunday Times* less than two weeks before his death.²⁰ In the poem, Plath’s ghost appears three times, leaving him, always, with the shock of fresh loss. In the final encounter (based on a dream Hughes had)²¹ Plath stands behind the speaker as he prepares to climb into the bathtub:

.... You came behind me
(At my helpless movement, as I lowered
A testing foot into the running bath)
And spoke—peremptory, as a familiar voice
Will startle out of a river’s uproar, urgent,
Close: ‘This is the last. This one. This time
Don’t fail me.’ (CP 1180)

The image of a woman standing behind a man in a bathtub evokes, as Bate suggests, Clytemnestra treacherously poised behind Agamemnon,²² but Hughes’s parenthetical description of this position also evokes Lleu Llaw Gyffes’s death.²³ The words “helpless movement” are particularly salient because the movement of putting one foot on the bathtub is what renders Lleu mortal, defenceless and helpless. (Interestingly, Lleu can only be killed beside a river, and, in these lines, Plath’s voice rises out of a river.) In this poem, however, the moment of helplessness leads to a reversal – a new chance to dodge loss.

Blodeuedd kills Lleu by throwing a spear at him, a weapon imagistically reminiscent of the “stake in your fat black heart” which Plath envisions lodged in her father’s chest – and, by extension, in the heart of her imagined, vampiric version of Hughes. In “Daddy,” Plath writes:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy you can lie back now.

²⁰ Bate, p. 562.

²¹ Ibid., p. 565.

²² Ibid., p. 564.

²³ Andrew Derek Armitage argues in his thesis, *The Birthday Letters Myth*, that “The Offers” represents Hughes’s attempt to mythically sacrifice himself and replace Plath in the underworld. He ties it, via Robert Graves, to traditions of the sacred, sacrificed King. Armitage quotes Graves’s *The White Goddess*: “The bath in the story of Llew’s murder is, as I have said, familiar. Sacred kings often meet their end in that way: For example.... Agamemnon, the scared king of Mycenae at the hands of Clytemnestra.” (Andrew Derek Armitage, “The Birthday Letters Myth” (doctoral thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), pp. 269-270. <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/1565/thesis.pdf?sequence=1>)

There's a stake in your fat black heart... ²⁴

In "A Picture of Otto," Hughes responds to "Daddy," imagining himself trapped in a vault with Plath's father in a kind of waking death. He tells Otto,
I never dreamed, however occult our guilt
Your ghost inseparable from my shadow
As long as your daughter's words can stir a candle. (CP 1167)

Two decades before he published *Birthday Letters*, however, Hughes was already crafting the voice of a man killed with a stake (a spear) and confined to a psychologically posthumous world.

Many poems in *Cave Birds* and *Crow* achieve a tone of surreal cohesion. Poems such as "Crow Goes Hunting" and "The Risen" do so partially through unfolding submerged myths. Divorced from their textual context, imagistic progressions become fabulist and collage-like, yet – because they are distilled out of highly structured tales – they maintain a sense of narrative momentum. In these books, Hughes attempts to poetically evoke inchoate (untransformed) mental states and to forge a representation of parts of the psyche that undergo symbolic death. His oblique retellings of *Mabinogion* myths – in which a narrative almost surfaces but remains submerged – poetically mirror generative tensions in the poems themselves between what is linguistically embodied and what evades articulation.

²⁴ Plath, Sylvia, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 74.

Forming Livestock: Hughes and Husbandry from Mexborough to Moortown

Jack Thacker

As Laura Webb has pointed out, 'Hughes is termed an "animal poet" more readily than almost anything else.'¹ But why look at animals in the poetry of Ted Hughes? In an essay entitled 'Why Look at Animals?' the writer and critic John Berger observes that in 'the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them.'² He goes on to say: 'The cultural marginalisation of animals is, of course, a more complex process than their physical marginalisation. The animals of the mind cannot be so easily dispersed. Sayings, dreams, games, stories, superstitions, the language itself, recall them.'³ Hughes's 'animals of the mind' testify to Berger's claim on the imagination. Readers of Hughes may according to Berger 'live without' animals, but through his 'sayings, dreams, games, stories, superstitions,' and most of all through his language, such creatures are brought back to mind. This essay seeks to observe the animals Hughes cultivated throughout his life, the creatures he formed in verse and those he farmed as livestock.

According to Berger, it is not merely animals that are disappearing. Those who have cared for and thought deeply about them are at risk too. He continues his essay by arguing that:

The marginalisation of animals is today being followed by the marginalisation and disposal of the only class who, throughout history, has remained familiar with animals and maintained the wisdom which accompanies that familiarity: the middle and small peasant. The basis of this wisdom is an acceptance of the dualism at the very origin of the relation between man and animal.⁴

It is the act of husbandry in which Berger locates the origins of cultural wisdom; caring for animals in order to harvest them really is a matter of life and death, and the hands-on involvement of labourers in this process demands a daily acceptance of the concept of mortality. As we shall see, Hughes's lifelong engagement with animals gives rise to poems which themselves seek to negotiate the dualism of life and death. They also document the decline of an agricultural way of life which is lived in close proximity to other creatures.

¹ Laura Webb, 'Mythology, Mortality and Memorialization: Animal and Human Endurance in Hughes' Poetry,' in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, eds. Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 33-47; p.34.

² John Berger, 'Why look at Animals?' *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.

It is in this regard, however, that Hughes's animal poems could be seen as contradictory. For the philosopher Mary Midgley, the difference between animal life and human life in fact becomes increasingly marked 'when people start keeping flocks and herds – still more so [...] with agriculture.'⁵ According to Midgley, agriculture 'seems to be the point where the clash of interests between humans and other creatures became too sharp to be smoothed over by mythical identification.'⁶ What Midgley defines as 'mythical identification' plays no small part in Hughes's feelings about and representations of animals. Yet in his poems about livestock in particular, this is often balanced against a sense – sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit – that the agricultural process undermines the creature's cultural value. This essay traces Hughes's efforts to reconcile his cultivation of animals on the page with his cultivation of animals on the farm. I am not proposing that Hughes's poetry resolves the contradiction raised by Berger's and Midgley's arguments, only that his agricultural verse contains all the conflicts and complexities which are at the heart of the subject and experience of farming more generally.

At the end of the agricultural process is the dead animal, the food product. In 'View of a Pig', from *Lupercal* (1960), Hughes's depiction of the creature's carcass inhibits empathy and identification. As 'the pig [lies] on the barrow dead,' all the speaker can manage is to comment upon is its mass:

Such weight and thick pink bulk
Set in death seemed not just dead.
It was less than lifeless, further off.
It was like a sack of wheat. (CP 75-6)

Spoken entirely in the past tense, every single one of the poem's nine four line stanzas ends with a full stop, emphasising the full stop on the animal's life. The pig is now merely identified by its consumable parts, as 'just so much / a poundage of lard and pork' (CP 76). Various different kinds of acoustic repetition create a sense of proportion, not just in terms of size but also in terms of just what the pig's existence has amounted to. The alliteration of 'thick pink bulk' bring the stresses down smack on these consonants, verbally enacting how its hide is 'thumped [...] without remorse' by the speaker. The echo of these notes in 'sack' package the sense that the pig has well and truly been harvested, compounded by the half-rhyme of 'weight' in 'wheat'. The pig is 'less than lifeless', merely an object or even an inconvenience – 'how could it be moved? / And the trouble of cutting it up'. Even in such close quarters, there is an irreconcilable and irrevocable distance between the onlooker and the pig; it is 'too dead' for empathy and therefore 'further off'.

Also from *Lupercal*, 'The Bull Moses' observes its subject across such an abyss of estrangement. This time the speaker stares into darkness of a shed:

Then, slowly, as onto the mind's eye –
The brow like masonry, the deep-keeled neck:

⁵ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 164.

⁶ Midgley, p. 165.

Something come up there onto the brink of the gulf,
Hadn't heard of the world, too deep in itself to be called to,
Stood in sleep. He would swing his muzzle at a fly
But the square of sky where I hung, shouting, waving,
Was nothing to him (CP 74)

Hughes frames the creature by enclosing it within a structure – even the anatomy of the beast is described in architectural terms: its 'brow [is] like masonry' and its neck 'deep-keeled'. The proportions of the shed also frame the world for the bull, with the speaker presented pictorially as a figure in a 'square of sky'. No matter how much the speaker tries to attract the beast's attention by 'shouting [and] waving', all attempts at a common language, however rudimentary, fall on deaf ears. To quote Berger, the bull's silence 'guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man.'⁷

Yet despite its otherness, 'The Bull Moses' does not merely represent the sum of its parts. It may be what Paul Bentley terms 'intractable' but it is also equally as mysterious.⁸ Presiding in the shadows, the half-formed bull becomes both individual (an animal with a name) and general – even platonic – as an embodiment of all *Bos taurus*. In a letter to his sister Olwyn in the fifties, Hughes explains how the creature in the poem 'is the bull on Oats' farm over old Denaby, but also of course a creature within the head,' claiming he got the idea from the 'Taurus' in astrology. (LTH 125) There is already the sense in 'The Bull Moses' that the symbolic and the autobiographical come together in the form of the poem, with Hughes readily incorporating the specificities of his childhood experience of farming in Mexborough into a mythological framework.

Elsewhere in his correspondence with Olwyn he remarks that 'The Bull Moses' is his 'favourite' poem in *Lupercal* (LTH 129). Bearing in mind Hughes's anthropological disposition to trace culture back to nature, it is easy to understand why this poem in particular had such a purchase on his imagination. The bull is after all an important figure in both Pagan and Christian iconography; hence the Biblical namesake of the animal in the poem. Citing 'the overwhelming presence of bovines in cave art,' Linda Kalof explains how certain species 'played a particularly important role in the human perception of creation, birth, life and death, and no species was so critical to human civilisation as cattle.'⁹ In antiquity, the cultural significance of an animal reflected its economic value; early civilisations were dependent upon bulls for their survival and success and therefore there was an increased level of identification with bovine species.

When Hughes acquired land in Devon with his wife Carol in the seventies he fulfilled a lifelong ambition to farm his own livestock. However, in a letter sent to his brother Gerald at the time he complains of the economic

⁷ Berger, p. 6.

⁸ Paul Bentley refers to the carcass in 'View of a Pig' as "'intractable" (it cannot be "moved" within or by language)' in *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond* (Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), p. 19.

⁹ Linda Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion, 2007), p. 11.

plight of small-scale farmers, expressing how it was a 'miracle' he had not already gone bankrupt. (*LTH* 358) In the same letter, Hughes mentions the 'purchase' of a 'phenomenal bull' named Sexton Hyades XXXIII, expressing how he has 'never enjoyed owning anything 1/10 as much [...] It isn't just his incredible size & beauty—he has a strange, sweet nature, in every respect like an unusual person.' This is a very different incarnation of Taurus to that of 'The Bull Moses'; Hughes's economic and aesthetic appreciations of Sexton's form encapsulate the contradictions which lie at the heart of agriculture. The bull is both his property and his familiar, a purchase with a personality.

If the bull has pride of place in Hughes's material possessions, he also grants it prominence among his literary assets. For Hughes this bull might well be the most literary bovine creature ever to grace the fields of Devon, or anywhere for that matter. Craig Raine tells the story of how Hughes would show off his prize bull to visiting poets and invite them to compose poems in its honour.¹⁰ Raine himself manages a stanza in a longer poem, entitled 'Rich'. He writes:

And this is her bull
Drooling over his dummy,
His angular buttocks
Crusted with cradle cap.¹¹

Hughes's response indicates just how particular he was about the literary life of his bull: 'Great,' he replies, 'but I hope that isn't our bull. His buttocks aren't angular at all.'¹² Hughes wrote his own poem about Sexton entitled 'Hoof Trimming' which until recently remained unpublished. The poem describes how the bull's hooves have grown out of shape and need to be treated. Hughes documents the process whereby the bull is herded into a cattle-crush (a caged instrument used for containing and demobilising cattle) and the hooves are trimmed back:

[...] The crooked slipper of hoof
Begins to shape up. But nestled in the core –
Something painful. The blade's found it. Sexton

Signals every touch. The knife sculpts.
Returns to the guilty quick. Sexton cries
No No in the language
We can ignore.¹³

¹⁰ Craig Raine, *Haydn and the Valve Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1990), p. 495.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 498. Sexton the bull also features in a poem by Leslie Norris and Charles E. Wadsworth, entitled 'The Beautiful Young Devon Shorthorn Bull, Sexton Hyades XXXIII,' Leslie Norris, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Meic Stephens (Bridgend: Seren, 2008), p. 218.

¹³ British Library ADD Ms. 88918/1/55. Ted Hughes, 'Hoof-trimming,' *The Spectator*, February 19, 2015, accessed July 18, 2016. <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/09/hoof-trimming/>.

As in 'The Bull Moses', it is language which separates the human from the animal and language which Hughes uses to form the creature on the page. Yet this is a more sympathetic handling of livestock to that of the earlier poem. Both the bull and the poet are sensitive to 'every touch' of the knife, which 'sculpts' rather than cuts. Nestled in the core of the poem is the guilt of the farmer but the action is carried out in the knowledge that the pain caused is a healing one and that the hand is anaesthetising as well as aestheticizing. The language of the bull may be ignored but in this case it is understood. Despite sculpting numerous drafts and typescripts of this poem, Hughes chose not to publish it in his lifetime – perhaps as a testament to his personal investment in the animal represented. The poem was published posthumously by the Ted Hughes Estate in 2015 in *The Spectator*, with a note explaining that it was originally written for the farming sequence, 'Moortown'.

Despite his absence in the 'Moortown' sequence, Sexton does appear on the half-title page of Hughes's 1979 volume *Moortown* in the form of an illustration by Hughes himself.¹⁴ What is remarkable is how much this drawing resembles a cave painting in its bold strokes and side-on profile. Marking the entrance to the collection, the drawing announces the unprecedented role animals are to play in its contents. *Moortown* is comprised of a number of sequential works that Hughes composed throughout the seventies in the wake of *Crow*, including 'Prometheus on his Crag', 'Earth Numb' and 'Adam and the Sacred Nine', all of which feature an array of animal spirit forms. The first section of the book, simply entitled 'Moortown', centres on Hughes's experiences farming livestock in Devon with his wife Carol and father-in-law, Jack Orchard, who died in 1976; the sequence is dedicated to his memory. The complex publication history of the 'Moortown' sequence is suggestive of the variety and flexibility of the animal and verse forms which populate it. In 1978, the sequence was published as a Rainbow Press special edition entitled *Moortown Elegies*. In 1979, the year of its publication in *Moortown*, a number of poems from the sequence were included in Michael Morpurgo's *All Around the Year*, alongside prose and notes by Morpurgo on agricultural matters such as the ailments of sheep and livestock market prices, as well as photographs by the Devonian rural documentary photographer James Ravilious. Most significantly, in 1989, the sequence was republished with an additional preface and agricultural notes, this time written by Hughes himself, under the title *Moortown Diary*. As Edward Hadley has noted, the change in titles are also 'indicators of tone', with the emphasis shifting increasingly from the elegiac to the diurnal and down-to-earth.¹⁵

In the 'Preface' to *Moortown Diary*, Hughes paints the Devonshire countryside as the vestiges of a primitive way of life, associating its inhabitants with the 'the Celtic tribe the Romans had known as the Dumnoni, "the people of the deep valleys".' (CP 1203) He also charts the decline of traditional farming practices in the wake of the 'technological revolutions and international market madness' that was part of the post-war 'seismic

¹⁴ Hughes illustration also featured as a gilt image on the front cover of the Rainbow Press special edition of *Moortown Elegies*.

¹⁵ Edward Hadley, *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 71.

upheaval' (*CP* 1204) in agriculture. In this respect, the poems in *Moortown Diary* are written from a perspective that bears a resemblance to what Greg Garrard has referred to as the 'socialist georgic' outlook of Berger (*berger* meaning 'shepherd' in French).¹⁶ Berger's 'middle and small peasant' is incarnated in *Moortown* in the form of farmer Jack Orchard. Hughes's elegies to Orchard present him as a tribal 'Masai figure' (he also is keen to point out that the 'Hartland Orchards have a crest: a raven'), part of a 'tradition of farmers who seem equal to any job, any crisis, using the most primitive means,' a description which could equally characterise Hughes's linguistic handling of his own livestock in the volume (*CP* 536, 1210-11).

If the emphasis in Hughes's early animal poems is on death and detachment, the focus in *Moortown Diary*, as Hughes puts it, is on 'nursing [animals] against what often seem to be the odds.' (*CP* 1209) In a poem entitled 'Surprise', the speaker describes what appears to be a miraculous birth. Like most of the poems in the collection it begins almost out of the blue. Long gone are the oppressive formal dimensions of *Lupercal*; instead Hughes employs enjambment to create a sense of fluidity – only three of the poem's thirty-two lines are end-stopped. Here, the act of looking at cows is reciprocal, with the speaker 'sharing their trance'. (*CP* 515) Midway through the poem, the speaker notices a strange shape at the back of a cow:

[...] Crazy far thoughts
 Proposed themselves as natural, and I almost
 Looked away. Suddenly
 The apron slithered, and a whole calf's
 Buttocks and hind-legs – whose head and forefeet
 Had been hidden from me by another cow –
 Toppled out of its mother, and collapsed on the ground. (*CP*
 515)

In the optical illusion of the anthropoid image of the apron, Hughes witnesses his own reflection, as the barriers that separate the human and the animal 'collapse' in the wake of familiarity. The calf's delivery is both profound and bathetic, part of the everyday rhythm of the agricultural life-cycle. Throughout the course of the sequence the extraordinary is married to the habitual, as Hughes fashions an everyday language which neither venerates nor cripples its animals as subjects. Commenting on the form and style of the sequence in general, Hughes refers to the poems as 'casual journal notes,' hence the diary element of *Moortown Diary*. In 'Surprise', the slippage of Hughes's tenses enables him to keep the discourse casual, much as the 'mother' appears 'leisurely' in her labour (*CP* 515). There is a sense in many of the poems that the action is ongoing, that entries are beginning in *media res*, that is to say, in the middle of the process. In the 'Preface,' Hughes claims that the writing method he used 'excludes the poetic process', (*CP* 1205) cultivating the sense that the poems are unfinished. In this regard, the poetic process and the agricultural process are analogous. Hughes's interest in keeping his

¹⁶ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 118. I'm grateful to Hugh Haughton for this observation.

animal forms alive applies to his verses as much as it does to the flocks and herds in his care.

Things do not always go as smoothly as in 'Surprise', however. In 'February 17th', Hughes describes how on one occasion 'A lamb could not get born' (CP 518) and how, as a result, he had to intervene. The solution to this impasse is symbolic as well as situational. Hughes describes how he cut

the head off
To stare at its mother, its pipes sitting in the mud
With all earth for a body. (CP 519)

These lines are reminiscent of Hughes at his most abstract and mythological and yet the diurnal title of the poem, along with the localised title of the collection, grounds the language in a specific time and place. This interweaving of the practical and spiritual is typical of the combination of practical knowledge and familial wisdom at work in the volume. Take 'Orf' for instance, where accompanying notes explain the symptoms of the animal's affliction, while the poem describes, in compassionate terms, the departure of the soul from the dead lamb's body, as Hughes writes how the 'lamb life' stood up before him 'asking for permission to be extinct.' (CP 523)

Berger states that the vestiges of the dualism between the animal kingdom and humankind 'remain among those who live intimately with, and depend upon, animals. A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork.'¹⁷ What is significant for Berger is that the two apparently contradictory statements in that last sentence are 'connected by an and and not by a but.' Hughes does not concern himself with the slaughtering of animals in *Moortown Diary* – there are no views of lambs or cattle skinned and ready to be butchered, and only a passing mention of livestock markets (CP 534-5). Yet the agricultural process is what facilitates the intimacy of the encounters with animals in the collection. The lack of empathy on display in 'View of a Pig' gives way in Hughes's later work to an acceptance of the paradox which lies at the heart of caring for creatures in order to kill them. In this regard, the relationship between the farmer and the sheep and cattle in the poems is one which could be defined, like that of Berger's two statements, by parataxis. 'February 17th' closes with the line: 'And the body lay born, beside the hacked off head.'(CP 519) The use of the 'And' places the line on an equal footing with all that has come before it: the violence and the struggle of both man and animal. It also places death and life on an equal footing; the body is born despite the lamb being deceased, with the head and the body lying side by side representing both life and death. While Hughes's relationship with animals may be compromised by his agricultural experiences, in his poetry he is able to make peace with the price he pays for the connection.

¹⁷ Berger, p. 11.

Ted Hughes and Astrology

Ann Henning Jocelyn

In all that has been written and published on Ted Hughes, very little ink has been wasted on a major interest of his: that of astrology. Apart from the odd oblique reference to his “sometimes bonkers ideas”, critics and biographers have shied away from the subject, presumably out of fear of being seen as taking it seriously.¹ However, we know for a fact that Ted Hughes had a serious commitment to astrology. To ignore an element that formed an essential part of his self-image, his approach to life and his attitude to other people, leaves a gaping void in our insight into him and his work. Without acknowledgement of this aspect of his mindset, Ted Hughes’ inner self can never be fully understood.

Still, few things elicit such fierce hostile reactions as the mere mention of the word astrology. A few months ago, the *Irish Times* ran a feature categorically dismissing astrology as utter nonsense and deriding anyone taking an interest in it.² I couldn’t resist writing a letter to the Editor, pointing out that, by definition, the article defined people like Carl Jung, W.B. Yeats, Louis MacNeice and Ted Hughes as misguided fools. Needless to say, my letter wasn’t published.

The problem with astrology is that it takes thorough and profound study over many years to bring you to stage where you can have a view on the subject. Popular opinion is invariably based on uninformed prejudice, made worse over many centuries by innumerable charlatans making capital out of it. In ancient times, it was the reserve of a few selected wise men. If only this had remained the case, much misconception would have been avoided. Even five hundred years ago, Johannes Kepler complained about the misuse of astrology for fortune-telling, as opposed to character analysis, and a century later, mocked by the astronomer Edmond Halley for giving any credence to it, Sir Isac Newton famously replied: “Sir Halley, I have studied the subject. You have not.”³

So how do we know about Hughes’s involvement in astrology? Well, first of all, we know that he studied it to the point of proficiency, under the guidance of his sister. Among early letters to Olwyn, some contain direct and detailed references to planetary conditions. His interest is likely to have been further boosted by his reading of W.B. Yeats. Among Hughes’s papers in the British Library, is a notebook containing astrological charts drawn up by himself – a skill not easily acquired.⁴

¹ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: the Unauthorised Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 373.

² Donald Clarke, ‘MP says doctors should examine heavenly bodies’, *Irish Times* 28 February 2015.

³ J.A. West, *The Case for Astrology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991), 2nd ed., pp. 115-116.

⁴ British Library Add MS 88918/12/8.

Knowing how complex and demanding astrological studies are, I can testify that no one would undertake them without being seriously motivated. Conversely, I doubt that no one who has studied the subject in depth could have anything but respect for it, as such studies invariably bring up revelations and co-incidences that cannot be logically or statistically explained.

To begin with, Ted Hughes was cagey about his interest in astrology, aware no doubt that any such admission would damage his credibility. His review of Louis MacNeice's book *Astrology* in 1966 was entitled 'Superstitions', and takes great care not to reveal his own connection with the subject, only carefully admitting that "Some astrologers do make sense" (*WP* 51-2). Not until the publication of *Birthday Letters* in 1998, the year of his death – incidentally, on a date carefully planned by Hughes – did he, as it were, come out. The poems 'St. Botolph's', '18 Rugby Street' and 'Horoscope' make no secret of his astrological knowledge. Interestingly, no critic picked up on this. Even *Ariel's Gift*, the two-hundred page literary companion to the collection by *Times* critic Erica Wagner, studiously makes no mention of the fact.⁵

As it happens, I can add a personal testimony. In the mid-nineteen-seventies, as I was working on a five-year commission to write a book on modern astrology, intended to be a definitive treatise on the subject, I was approached by an acquaintance asking me to see a friend of hers who wanted to discuss an astrological matter.⁶ I made clear that I was not in the business of reading charts, but she insisted and turned up with a beautiful blond, buxom Australian woman, who told me that she was in a relationship with a married man who, though he spent the weeks with her in London, insisted on going back to his wife in the country at weekends. Now he had asked for the exact time and place of her birth, and since she knew that he avidly practised astrology, she realized he would be examining her chart. As she realized that his findings would have a bearing on their future life together, she wanted me to tell her what he might see in her chart. Out of sympathy I interpreted her chart and also that of her partner, comparing one against the other, looking out for conflict versus compatibility, which is what I presumed he would be doing. I remember the outlook was not very hopeful. As she left, she revealed the identity of the man: he was Ted Hughes. Her own name, familiar from Ted Hughes biographies, was Jill Barber.

The reason why astrology should appeal to poets is plain to see: it describes human life in terms of symbols – symbols so archetypal, they have remained largely the same for over seven thousand years. Overriding any faith, orientation or ideology, the astrological method of defining the human condition symbolically sums up all that we as human beings have in common – regardless of external conditioning. Used as such, as an aid to bring us closer to our own basic humanity, it has a deep affinity with poetry. Indeed, I find it surprising that more poets do not make use of these ancient images to help them delve deeply into the human psyche, challenge conscious thought,

⁵ Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the story of Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

⁶ Ann Henning, *Modern Astrology* (London: Hale, 1985).

nourish imagination and explore a moral, spiritual dimension to life. I would go as far as to say that there needn't be any substance to astrological claims – as a method astrology still has a lot to offer.

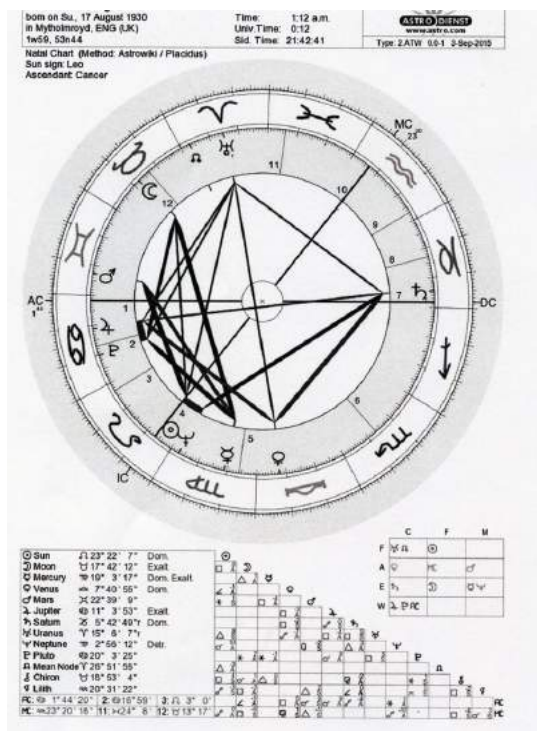
Because of its universality, astrology can easily be adapted to any period, location, culture or social environment. What is nowadays referred to as “modern astrology” – the version Ted Hughes is likely to have subscribed to – is in full agreement with prevailing western philosophy. Rejecting any suggestion of fate or inevitability, it maintains that we are all fully responsible for our actions: it is entirely up to our own free will how we choose to handle the equipment, with which we were born: equipment that shows the same traits, whether described by genes and DNA or by cosmic conditions prevalent at our birth. Hughes's Cambridge friends were aware of his expertise, and his path to it.

According to Lucas Myers, it was Olwyn who had first aroused Ted's interest in astrology, but by the time Myers knew Hughes, he was an expert in his own right: 'He responded to requests of friends to cast their nativities or those of their girlfriends, and he was marvellously entertaining in explaining their significance.' Nevertheless, Hughes did not see astrology as a science, more 'as an instrument for a vivid expression of intuitive insights'.⁷

So what does Ted Hughes's horoscope tell us – or, more pertinently, what did it tell him? How did it help form his own idea of himself and people close to him, and how did it affect his responses to major events in his life?

⁷ Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of A Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001), p.47. She is quoting Lucas Myers's memoir *Crow Steered, Bergs Appeared* (Proctor Press, Tennessee, 2001), pp. 9,8.

Chart for a man born at 1.12 a.m on August 17th, 1930 in Mytholmroyd, UK



This is a graphic depiction of the sky at the moment of Hughes's birth. An important part of interpreting a chart is to measure the angles formed between the various planets, using the Earth as the point of intersection. If an angle amounts to certain fixed degrees, this is called an aspect, each of which has its own significance. Here, the first thing an astrologer would notice is this: in technical terms, four planets lined up at right angles or 180 degrees to each other. You can imagine the statistical likelihood of this occurring. Called a Grand Cross, it is the rarest of all planetary configurations. In forty years of studying many hundred charts, I have only come across it once or twice. Perhaps it was the uniqueness of this horoscope that first fired both Olwyn's and Ted's interest in astrology.

A Grand Cross is not something you wish to see in a horoscope. It has been described as a heavy cross to bear, a pervasive inner darkness. Appearing in so called Cardinal signs, as here, it can also be destructive. So how did Hughes feel about that? It has been found that, whatever it throws up, most people have a peculiar fondness for their own chart, rather as you have for your own hand-writing. According to astrological theory, all human traits have both positive and negative poles, and it's up to ourselves to control them. Since a Grand Cross is a real powerhouse, the dynamic energy it generates can be used constructively, and then often with great success.

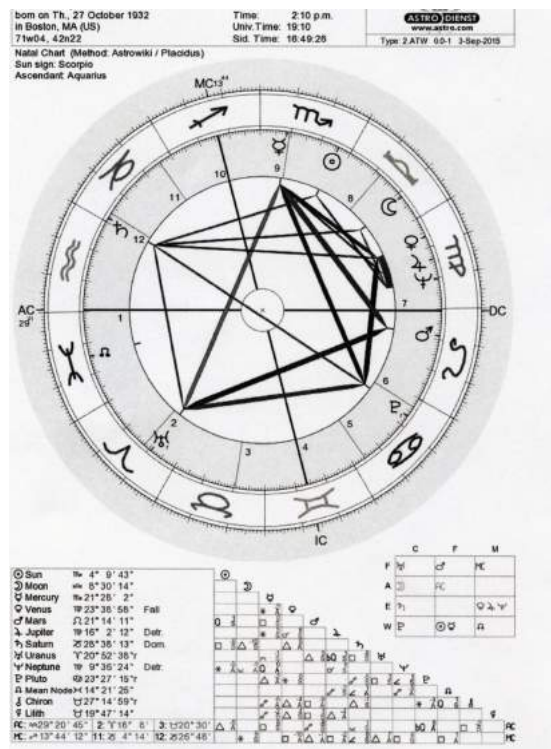
To mitigate challenging aspects, one should also look for more favourable points of balance. The Sun, Moon and Pluto are all well placed, signifying a happy early childhood and a talent for self-expression likely to impact on others. Jupiter and Pluto together close to the horizon at the moment of his birth suggest a literary outlet. It all ties in with Hughes's own words: "Every work of art stems from a wound in the artist's soul... Art gives

expression to the healing process.”⁸ And in ‘Myth and Education’ he reflects: “The inner world... is a place of demons... The faculty that makes a human being... is called divine... it is imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit.” (WP 151)

Ted Hughes may have used his chart as an excuse for his dealings with women. His Venus, representing emotions, is badly afflicted, part of the Grand Cross, and as for sex, a totally unsuspected Mars in fickle Gemini marks him down as unfit for sustained relationships.

Which brings us to the chart of Sylvia Plath.

Chart for a woman born at 2.10 p.m. on October 27th, 1932 in Boston, USA



And what is the first thing we see here? The second most ominous sign after a Grand Cross: the T-Square, which has three planets lined up at right angles to each other. And in cardinal signs, just as in Hughes’s chart, replicating the same signs!

We know that Ted was familiar with Sylvia’s chart (Birthday Letters, St. Botolph’s, p.14 and Horoscope, p.64) and, in view of his keen interest in the subject at this time, he is likely to have examined it at an early stage. He would have been struck by the amazing similarities between their two charts. Perhaps that’s what attracted him. The charts suggest two individuals haunted by inner demons, and both seeking a release through creativity. Though the

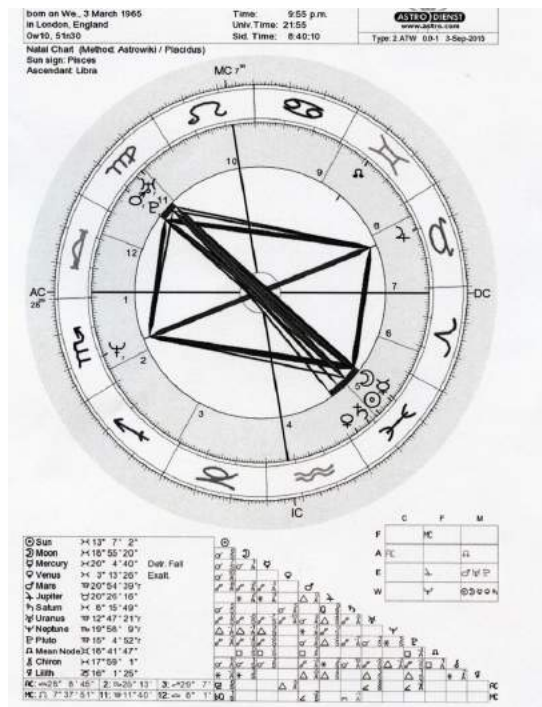
⁸ Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill* (London: Robson, 2006), p.166.

combination could be said to compound the conflicts of each chart, it could also be seen as a help for them to understand each other.

Sylvia’s release, symbolized by the shape of an arrow close to the western horizon, suggests a dependence on other people’s approbation; by contrast, Ted’s equivalent on the eastern horizon signifies assertiveness.

Assia Wevill’s chart cannot be as specifically drawn, since her time of birth is not known. However, astrological tables still tell us a great deal. For example, Hughes would have recognized signs of great charisma in Assia’s chart, combined with strong passion – and also an obvious lack of reason, substance and stability, which may all have appealed to him. Her Venus, ruling emotions, is afflicted in Gemini, indicating multiple partners, and Ted can’t have failed to observe that her Venus is in exactly the same sign and degree – one chance in 360 – as his own fickle Mars. He may have hoped that the violent attraction produced by this bond would be enough to overcome the volatility of them both.

Chart for a girl born at 9.55p.m. on March 3rd, 1965 in London, UK



Shura’s chart is the most unusual chart of all – something I myself have never seen the like of. Nothing but straight lines and diagonals. Ted had her chart drawn up by a professional astrologer shortly after her birth. Did he not trust himself to be objective, or was he worried enough by what he saw to seek a second opinion? He kept the astrologer’s report, which quotes: “a lot of fantasy, pretence, deception... A hell of a chart... not very promising. Severe loss within the family through death or accidents.”⁹

One of the most inexplicable things about horoscopes is that astrological traits are often inherited. For example, Nicholas Hughes’s chart shows remarkable parallels to those of both his parents. (Frieda’s chart I

⁹ Ibid., p.148.

have, out of courtesy, not examined.) In Shura's chart, though there are obvious links to Assia, there is hardly anything reflecting Hughes's planetary positions. We can only speculate as to his reading of this horoscope.

In conclusion, I have no doubt that these observations played a major role in Ted Hughes's consciousness. How much of it has any real application I leave to you to decide.

Drawings As Deep As England: Illustrating Ted Hughes

Mick Gowar

In histories of fine art, illustration has too often been defined using terms like 'decorative' and 'commercial'. For example, 'An illustration is a [drawing](#), painting or printed work of art which explains, clarifies, illuminates, visually represents, or merely decorates a written text, which may be of a literary or commercial nature.'¹

Even if the writer goes on to praise the technical skill and draughtsmanship required of an illustrator, the impression has once again been given that this is an intellectually inferior form. Not only practising illustrators find this portrayal of their art form galling. The design critic Stephen Bayley had this to say:

I was always dismayed when I heard people say of a picture 'that's not art, it's illustration'. As if art had no duty to elucidate its subject. In this interpretation, art must be incomprehensible. If it could be read and enjoyed, it was evidently lacking seriousness, so it was illustration: facile, inferior, junior, middlebrow. No matter the technical achievement, no matter how validated by popularity, illustration was held in lofty disdain by a fatigued elite who mistook being baffling for being profound. Strange to have art defined by what it is not: it must not delight, not represent, not communicate.'²

Maurice Sendak, who was, as *The New York Times* acknowledged when he died, "widely considered the most important children's book artist of the 20th century,"³ argued passionately for the vital rather than decorative or expository function of illustration, and the subtle, sensitive and creative reading skills an illustrator needs. In an article for *The Sunday Herald Tribune*, first published in 1964 the year he was awarded the Carnegie Medal for *Where The Wild Things Are*, he stated:

Quicken I think best suggests the genuine spirit of animation, the breathing of life, the swing into action, that I consider an essential quality.... To quicken means, for the illustrator, the task first of comprehending the nature of his text, and then of giving life to that comprehension in his own medium....The word quicken has other, more subjective associations for me. It suggests something musical, something rhythmical and

¹ <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/illustration.htm> accessed July 17, 2016

² Stephen Bayley Foreword to Martin Dawber, *Modern Vintage Illustration* (London: Batsford, 2012).

³ Margalit Fox, 'Maurice Sendak, Author of Splendid Nightmares', *The New York Times*, May 8, 2012.

impulsive. It suggests a beat - a heart-beat, a musical beat, the beginning of a dance.⁴

And I'm certain that Ted Hughes would have agreed. Hughes was an inveterate collaborator with visual artists, starting with Jim Downer in the mid-1950s, and then George Adamson, Leonard Baskin, Andrew Davidson, R J Lloyd, Chris Riddell, Fay Godwin, Peter Kean, Felicity Roma Bowers, posthumously with Flora McDonnell and Raymond Briggs, and most poignantly his daughter, Frieda, who provided the jacket painting for *Birthday Letters*.

Some (Baskin and Lloyd) formed successful and mutually enriching creative partnerships; others (Kean, McDonnell and Briggs) did not. But Sendak's sound metaphor perhaps indicates the special qualities required of a successful collaborator. He or she must in some significant way resonate with the text: picking up not simply the principal rhythms created by the words and punctuation of the text, but to detect perhaps the rhythm of what set in motion the composition of a poem; or perhaps to sense a fundamental rhythm that moves throughout a whole body of work and represent that within a single illustration for a single poem. Or as Hughes himself proposed in a letter to arguably his finest illustrator, Leonard Baskin, in 1959, early on in their partnership: to 'illumine the undermeaning.'*LTH* 137) These rhythmical undermeanings became in the work of Hughes's most sensitive collaborators – Baskin, Lloyd and Bowers; the photographer Fay Godwin; Peter Brook, the theatre director; and of course Sylvia Plath – the essential pulse which quickened their own work as well as his. As Baskin observed, in a conversation with Ted Hughes which was recorded by the photographer Noel Chanan and released under the title *The Artist and The Poet*:

I try not to try for a visual equivalent of the text, it seems to me that's the worst sort of reductive illustration that's possible. That at its best an illustration should extend the text; should be concomitant to the text; should be an equivalent to the text – extending the intention, the meaning; giving further insights, subtleties, hints, awareness of the same theme and subject. That's what great illustration is: it expands and extends one's understanding, rather than provide a visual nomenclature (so to say) of what's happening in the words.⁵

What follows is a picture gallery which was presented, in digital form, to *Dreams As Deep As England*, the international Ted Hughes Conference hosted by the University of Sheffield in September 2015. In addition to some of the artists' own comments, I'll be adding my own views on the ways in which I believe the young illustrators whose work is represented here have extended or expanded upon Hughes's texts, through the process of close,

⁴ Maurice Sendak, 'The Shape of Music' from Maurice Sendak (New York: Noonday, 1990) p 3.

⁵ Leonard Baskin, from Noel Chanan, *The Artist and The Poet: Leonard Baskin and Ted Hughes in Conversation, 1983* (2009) Hereafter *Artist and Poet*.

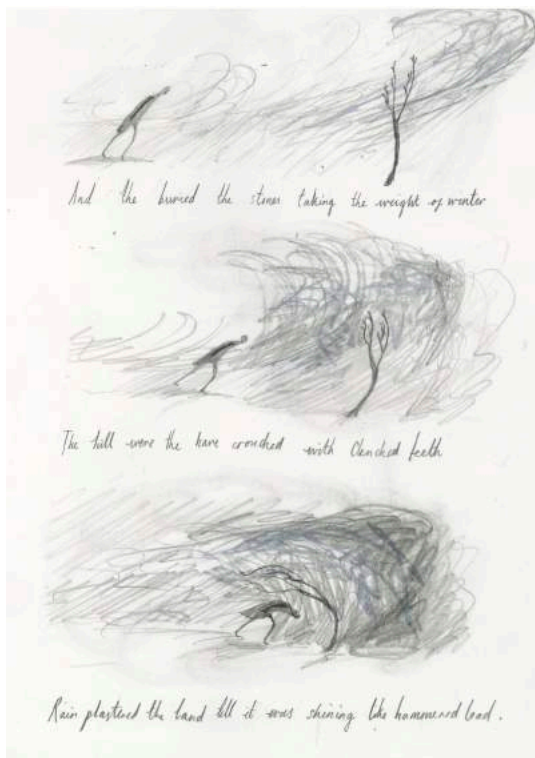
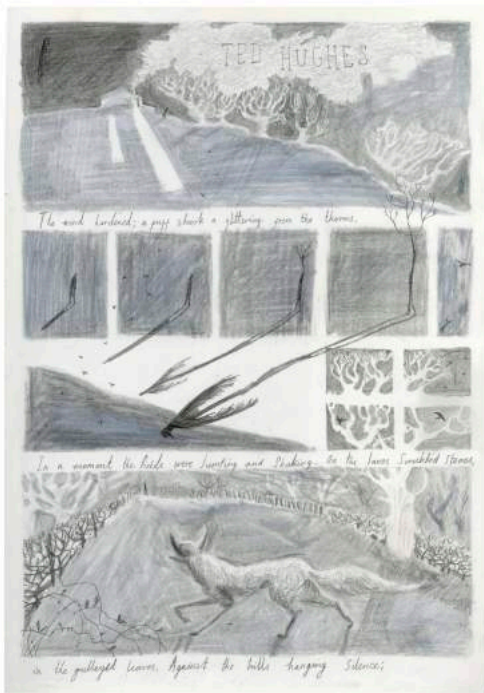
sensitive and creative reading which is (as Sendak and Baskin have both attested) the key skill for every good illustrator. I'll be exploring how they have consciously, or more interestingly perhaps unconsciously, made new connections and brought a new sentience to the rich narrative environments which surround and continue to 'quicken' Hughes's finest poems. Like fish in a river which when caught, weighed and returned only grow larger, healthier and more gorgeously iridescent.

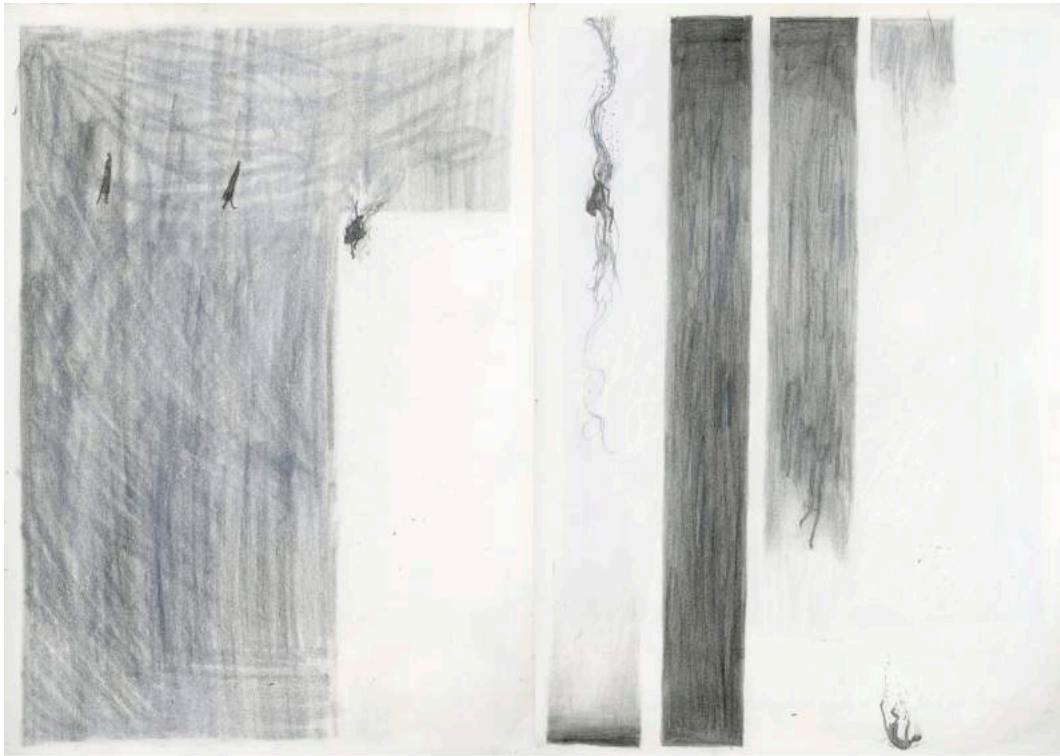
Josephine Birch's comic book-styled chapbook based on 'November' from *Lupercal* [figs. 1-3] was the first starting point for this project. At the time when the call for papers for the Dreams as Deep as England conference was first published, Josephine was both a student at The Royal Drawing School and a Studio Supervisor at Anglia Ruskin, and had just proposed to her tutors at the Drawing School that she create a graphic novel/comic-book treatment of a Hughes poem as one of her major projects. I suggested to her that, if her tutors at the Royal School had no objection, we could propose to the Ted Hughes Society an exhibition of specially commissioned illustrations of Hughes's poetry by Anglia Ruskin University students.

The second starting point was the enthusiasm with which almost every student I've taught at Anglia Ruskin has responded to Hughes's work. Hughes's autobiographical teachers' guide and anthology, *Poetry In The Making*, has been the key text for an art school creative writing module 'Writing for Images' which I've led for many years, and one of the high points of a second year illustration contextual studies module entitled 'Debates and Practices' is the screening of Noel Chanan's film *The Artist and The Poet*. (Illustration students are, not surprisingly, fascinated by the insights it gives into a uniquely intimate and mutually inspiring partnership between an artist and a writer.) I placed a call on the illustration students' Facebook group page and within a day a group of eleven illustration students had made a firm commitment to join Josephine, of which only one dropped out due to other time pressures.

The original notion had been to follow Josephine's example and apply the visual techniques of the comic book/graphic novel to illustrating Hughes's poetry, in a form of modernised chapbook. However, a number of the students felt, quite rightly, this would impose too many restrictions on their choice of poems, as well as inhibiting their visual responses. Consequently, the final selection of pieces includes one short comic book/graphic novel, four chapbooks, a painting in acrylics, a pencil drawing, a print, a GIF (a short animation, often of a single image), a short film and a collection of ceramic plates.

Figs 1-3 Josephine Birch, 'November'





Unlike any of the other students, Josephine literally deconstructed her chosen poem and created from a selection of fragments a substantially new text. She took stanza 7 in its entirety and, with four other complete lines and two half lines from elsewhere in the poem, created her own poem which removes the central human character of the tramp and instead focuses on the uncontrollable force and terror of a storm. The new construction of word and image Josephine created makes strong connections with a distinct group of poems from Hughes's two earliest collections – the title poem 'The Hawk In The Rain', 'Wind', 'Crow Hill' and 'November' itself – which address the terrifying power of a storm, and the helplessness of any frail human forced to confront it. The power and helplessness are graphically expressed in Josephine's exceptionally skillful and compelling pencil-drawn panels, which conclude with the tiny figure, who has until then apparently survived the storm, clutching at some flimsy fabric which then frays plunging them into a terrible void.

In her radical editing of Hughes's poem – the musical equivalent would be 'sampling' – and in using a visual format so closely associated with popular culture, Josephine's 'zine'-like reconstruction might be considered essentially post-modern. If so it shows that post-modern visual art is not necessarily either flippant in spirit, or concerned with perversely elevating the most kitsch images from popular culture into high art, or vice versa.

Four illustrators – Toby Rampton, Charlotta Rasmussen, Elina Kadakowska and Aleesha Nandhra – decided to use the project to converse in different ways with the chapbook format and tradition.

Although most often associated with the rapid growth of radical and popular publishing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the earliest forms of chapbook appeared in French towards the end of the fifteenth century and were sold by colporteurs, or wandering booksellers. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries wandering English chapmen were

selling cheaply produced books and broadsheets retelling the kinds of sensational tales, farces and ballads that Autolycus peddles to the gullible swains, shepherds and shepherdesses in *The Winter's Tale* concerning such bizarre events as, "how a usurer's wife was brought to bed of twenty money-bags at a burden and how she longed to eat adders' heads and toads carbonadoed."⁶ Or how:

a fish, that appeared upon the coast on Wednesday the four-score of April, forty thousand fathom above water, and sung this ballad against the hard hearts of maids: it was thought she was a woman and was turned into a cold fish for she would not exchange flesh with one that loved her.⁷

These are Wonder tales confectioned from an ounce of Ovid scrambled with a spoon or two of Aesop in the salacious imagination of an infinitely resourceful ne'er-do-well.

Toby Rampton's strikingly bold chapbook illustrations for 'Amulet' from *Crow*, however, have much more in common with the sub-genre to which Pepys, an enthusiastic collector of chapbooks and ballads, gave the classification of 'Penny Godlinesses' – works of devotion appropriate for personal meditation. Toby writes about the initial attractions of the poem: 'The rhythm and repetition of Amulet stood out immediately for me. I wanted to illustrate the poem using a circular narrative to emphasise the structure and suggest darker urges of a wolf like nature.'

⁶ William Shakespeare, 'The Winter's Tale' from *Complete Works* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), p. 743, ll. 267-268

⁷ 'The Winter's Tale', p. 744, ll. 279-282.

Figs 4 & 5 Toby Rampton, 'Amulet'



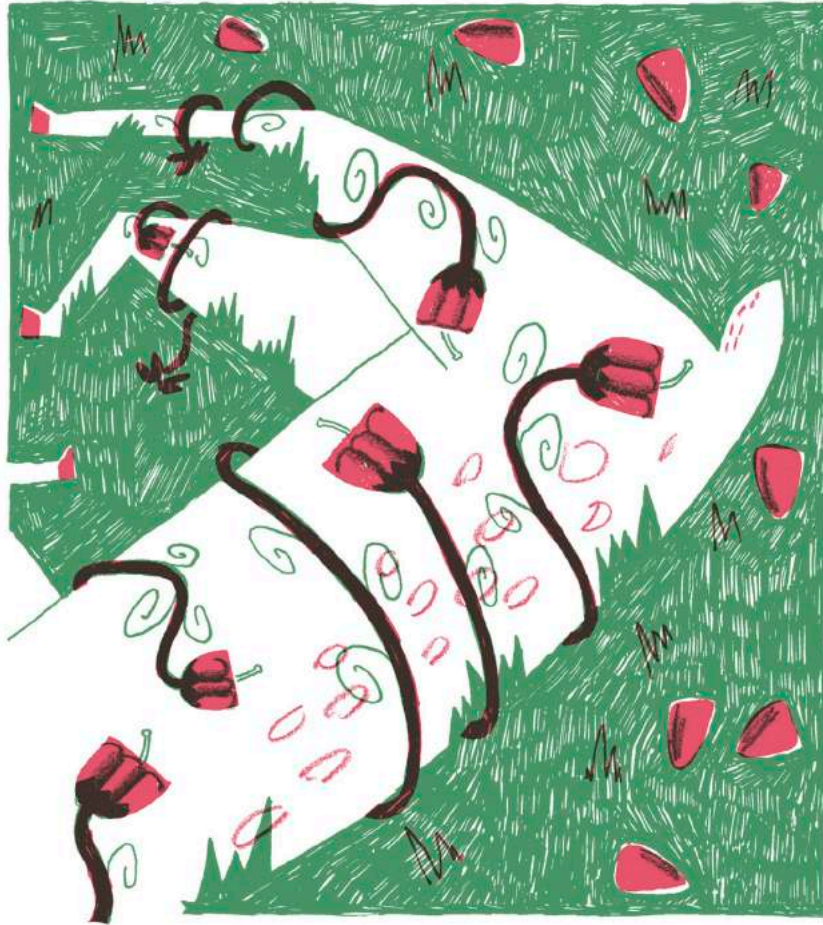
Inside the wolf's fang, the mountain of heather.

Inside the mountain of heather, the wolf's fur.



Inside the wolf's fur, the ragged forest.

Inside the ragged forest, the wolf's foot.



Inside the frozen swamp, the wolf's blood.

Inside the wolf's blood, the snow wind.

However, as the sequence of images developed, Toby strove to represent both the rhythm and circularity of the chant in a stylised, medieval manner; and the creature which he chose to be the main motif in his sequence of images was not the wolf, but the doe mentioned in lines 7 and 8. Toby chose white as the colour of the doe in his pictures, and crafted his images in a style intended to recall 'the bestiaries we looked at it in class... I drew on the language of those illustrations.' As Toby knew from our conversations on medieval iconography, the white hart as well as being a symbol of the mythical Herne the Hunter was also the badge of Richard II.

Fig 6: Grieving white hart on a bed of rosemary from the Wilton Diptych.



And the white deer in Toby's chapbook also makes a further fortuitous connection with Hughes, who selected a particularly moving passage from *Richard II* for his Faber anthology *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*.

The king is alone and imprisoned, close to despair and engaged (as is his way) in mournful meditation – feelings with which Hughes may have particularly empathised in the Spring of 1969 when he was compiling the book.⁸ But the king rallies himself, albeit temporarily, and is determined that:

My brain I'll prove the female to my soul;
My soul the father: and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts
And these same thoughts people this little world.⁹

These lines propose an attempted reconciliation of the male and female principles which Hughes strove to achieve in his own work, and to encourage in the work of others.

⁸ See *LTH* 292; Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), pp. 458-459.

⁹ William Shakespeare, 'The Life and Death of King Richard The Second', *Complete Works* p. 886, ll. pp. 6-9.

Figs 7 & 8 Charlotta Rasmussen 'The Thought-Fox'



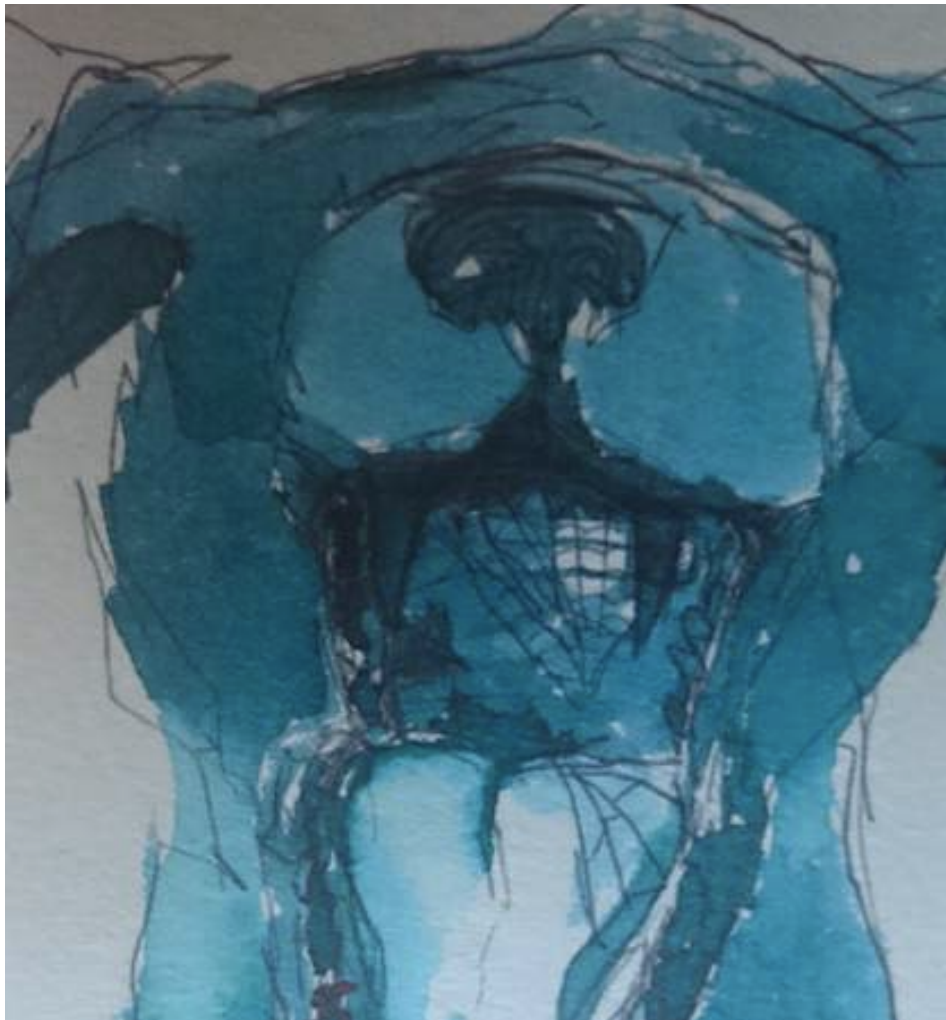
Charlotta Rasmussen, from the Faroe Islands, was the only student in the group who hadn't read any of Hughes's poetry or prose before coming to university. Nevertheless she became a great admirer of Hughes work, particularly *Crow*, which she read in both English and in a translation into Icelandic.¹⁰ In this piece, Charlotte explores the possibility of 'The Thought-Fox' as the basis of a chapbook for children – not altogether inappropriate, remembering that Hughes himself once described *Crow* as an 'expanded story for children'.¹¹ Her vigorous interpretation of 'The Thought-Fox', especially the playfully dapper tea-drinking fox the cover (Fig 7), might strike an English Hughesian as rather too light-hearted – unable as so many of us are to read the poem without hearing Hughes's familiarly sonorous and gravely inflected recital. However, that cover image is actually a reference to the tale of the Scorched or Burnt Fox which Hughes would sometimes tell as a prelude to reading 'The Thought-Fox'. A version was published in *Winter Pollen*, in which Hughes, frustrated at the pressures of his university English course and his consequent inability to write poetry, dreams a fox walking

¹⁰ *Kraka Af nevi songuvum Krakunnar* We gave a short reading of three poems from *Crow* in both English and Icelandic at the University of Cambridge Festival of Ideas in October 2015.

¹¹ Cambridge Poetry Festival, 1975.

upright like a man – but scarred, scorched and bleeding, as if burned in a furnace – visits him and warns him: ‘Stop this – you are destroying us.’ (WP 8-9) It leaves behind a bloodstained paw print on the page. However, that version in *Winter Pollen* is not necessarily the whole story. In a longer version, which Hughes occasionally told, after he changed from studying English to Archaeology and Anthropology, and began writing poems again, he had a second dream of the man-fox. In that second dream the fox appeared looking healed, sleek and healthy, and instead of the bloody paw print of the first dream, he simply gave Hughes a cheery thumbs up and left the bedroom.¹² It’s the healed and ebullient fox that Charlotta imagines, toasting the reader in tea – although he does still have a wisp of smoke and a spark or two, rising from his head, as a reminder of his ordeal.

Figs 9 & 10 Elina Kadakowska ‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’



¹² Private conversation with the author and Jan Mark, June 1996.



The broad strokes of Elina Kadakowska's mark-making in her watercolour illustrations for 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' characterize her chapbook, suggesting the boldness of a children's book. The chapbook form – the medium for re-telling wonder tales, and the forerunner of the children's picture book – seems particularly appropriate for recounting a highly significant moment of family magic. When Frieda spoke her first coherent word it was doubly magical by being 'Moon!' A child's first word is magical to any parent, but the moon is the symbol of a triple goddess Selene/Artemis/Hecate, and Hughes had a life-long fascination with the cult and worship of the Mother/Moon/Earth Goddess, and in his opinion its catastrophic suppression by various cults of male gods. This fascination began at the end of his school days, when his English teacher John Fisher gave Hughes a copy of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, which many years later Hughes confided to Graves was to him 'the chief holy book of my poetic conscience.' (LTH 273)

Elina's decision to restrict her palette to various shades of blue, emphasises not simply the evening twilight, but also the specialness and magic of the occasion – the action happens under a 'blue moon' when not only does the child Frieda utter her first 'spell' but the moon herself responds. Notice also how the dog, to whose bark the evening is initially 'shrunk to' – perhaps engaged in herding the cows along the lane, or a guard dog – is shown from a child's point of view, with enormous Cerberan jaws above the viewer and large enough to block out the sky and the moon. And Elina's watercolour of land and sky meeting, skillfully evokes a mysterious place of magical encounters, a liminal space where the barriers between elements and worlds become blurred and porous.

Figs 11 & 12 Aleesha Nandhra 'Hawk Roosting'

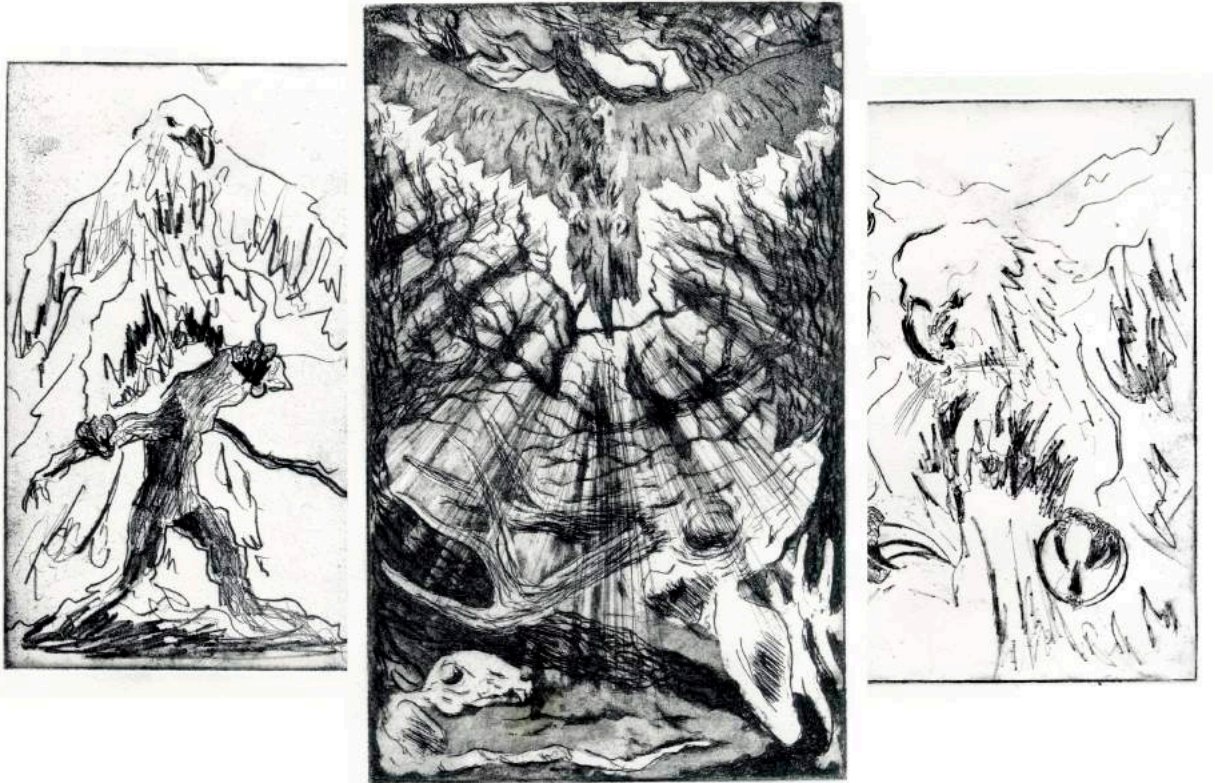


Aleesha Nandhra's partly hand-drawn, partly digitally-created chapbook, for 'Hawk Roosting' also uses a deliberately restricted palette. Aleesha introduces her work:

I read the piece as a Hawk's arrogant point of view, 'talking itself up' as a 'perfectly designed' (by God or some sort of deity of creation) hunting machine. It was a very strong representation of a Hawk doing what it does best: hunting to survive. I knew that I wanted to be quite literal with the the images and depict a hawk hunting and making a kill. I then researched what hawks were native to the U.K. and settled on the sparrowhawk, as males have a fantastic blue/grey and orange plumage – which is what informed the colour palette of my illustrations. The final artwork was made by working in black and white colour separations, scanning these, and then adding the colour and overlaying the images digitally.

Aleisha's ingeniously limited palette, restricted as it is to the colours of the hawk, literally reflects back the world to the hawk as an extension of itself; even its prey takes on the same colours as the hawk. The range of colours through which the hawk views its world – the oranges, ochres, browns greys and blues – also disputes the canard that animals experience only a monochrome world.

Fig 13 Gary Dougherty, Triptych: 'Hawk Roosting'



Gary writes:

In the first soft ground etching I made, the wood appears to be shaped as a hunched person with the hawk's talons gripping in the bark – this is to symbolise the hawk's position as above all of creation, and with nature in its hands, something normally associated with being in control by humans. In the second etching the hawk has the moon and sun in its talons, indicating control of the day and night. He also has a mouse's ripped head in his mouth, further symbolising control of nature and its brutality. The final aquatint plate has a purposeful religious look to symbolise the hawk seeing himself as a deity and in control of life. The two skeletons of deer and fox indicate that he is more a deity of death rather than life, an antithesis to the religious icon of the dove of peace.

Gary's formidable evocation of pagan worship also refers, very aptly, to the work of William Blake. Blake was, of course, one of the small circle of Hughes 'sacred' writers. As Hughes told Nick Gammage in February 1998, 'I bought my complete Blake in 1948...and from that day I read it constantly.' (LTH 679) A striking aspect of Gary's triptych is how closely the

shape of the central panel resembles that of Blake's illustration for the line 'And my servant shall pray for you' from The Book of Job.



The visual quotation from Blake also connects it more obliquely with the work of Leonard Baskin. In his introduction to *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin*, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly', Hughes notes how, like himself, Baskin draws inspiration and sustenance from Blake: 'Throughout Baskin's artistic life, he has drawn strength from the kinship he feels with William Blake' and later in the same introduction 'Baskin's art... finds its fullest, most poignant verbal expression in the Book of Job.... And the Book of Job is like the hidden masterplan behind everything he produces.' (WP 96, 101)

The gripping of both sun and moon in the hawk's talons in the right hand panel also connects Gary's image with the Egyptian god Horus, who was god of the sun and the moon because one eye was the sun and one the moon - until the 'moon eye' was torn out by Seth, a loss which is re-enacted in the waxing and waning of the moon as the god's eye is first removed and then slowly restored. This is a further connection to Baskin, and in particular to *Cave Birds*, which as Hughes was at pains to explain in Noel Chanan's documentary *The Painter and the Poet*, was profoundly influenced by Egyptian mythology.

Fig 15, Alex Hahn 'A Childish Prank'



Alex Hahn's forceful lino-cut print for 'A Childish Prank', Hughes's creation midrash from *Crow*, portrays in stark black and white the stark panic of two creatures suddenly awakened into consciousness by a force they do not comprehend and into an experience they neither welcome nor enjoy. After the Fall, God punishes woman with the agony of childbirth: "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."¹³ But in Hughes's poem the source of agony is the desire for union, not its eventual outcome:

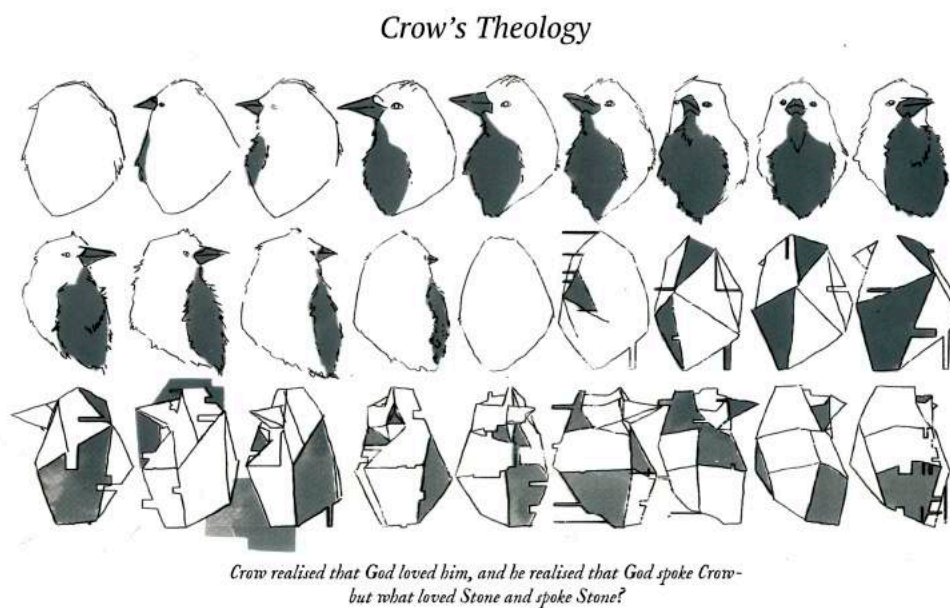
Calling its tail half to join up quickly, quickly
Because O it was painful (*CP* 216)

Typically Hughes uses an archaic 'O' — which puts the image of an open mouthed cry of pain and horror into the poem and in Alex's image, and not the

¹³ Genesis 3:16

more modern exclamatory ‘Oh.’ Alex’s image, however, depicts the moment after coitus; the shame, shown by the woman covering her breasts and genitals, and the man’s despair at having been perpetually burdened with an uncontrollable serpent for a sexual organ over which he apparently has no control. Hughes may have had a worm in the Anglo-Saxon sense in mind, but Alex’s airborne worm (‘that flies in the night/In the howling storm’?) is an earthworm which, unlike a serpent, is hermaphrodite - having both male and female sexual organs.

Fig 16: Brian Tyrrell, ‘Crow’s Theology’



Brian Tyrrell chose the GiF – a ‘free-standing’ short digital animation — to create a visual meditation on the lines:

God spoke Crow –
Just his existing was His revelation.

But what
Loved the stones and spoke stone? (CP 227)

Brian’s skillful and ingenious visual answer to the riddle posed by Crow is to create a rotating image of Crow emerging from stone and returning to stone – which also echoes Genesis 3:19: ‘For you were made of dust, and to dust you will return.’ But the GiF format means that Crow is created and recreated over and over and over in moto perpetuo reflecting Crow’s many apparent

resurrections, if one reads the poems in the order in which they are printed in *Crow* and the *Collected Poems*.

Fig 17 Patrick Robinson, 'Crow's Theology'



When compared with Brian's GIF, Patrick Robinson's picture is at first sight a more conventional approach to illustrating 'Crow's Theology'. Patrick is drawing on a rich tradition of fantasy illustrative/narrative art – presently exemplified by Alan Lee and John Howe; but he is also connecting with the work of pre-modernist illustrator/artists like Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac and N.C.Wyeth, and with the symbolist paintings of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Victor Vasnetsov.

In Patrick's highly accomplished acrylic painting, Crow is shown in a barren landscape, in the company of three angelic creatures whose kneeling postures suggest that they venerate Crow as if his revelation – 'God spoke Crow' – makes him an object of worship. The group within which Crow is centrally placed form a sinister Trinity, two of whom are winged and one whose partly exposed skeleton suggests a deity not unlike the Norse goddess Hel. Patrick's note on his painting mentions one of the Norse gods, the trickster Loki, one of many sources Hughes may have drawn on in creating the character and escapades of his trickster Crow, but Patrick's interpretation of the God 'much bigger than the other' situates the poem resolutely within the period in which it was written: the height of the Cold War:

The god of weapons in the sky I wanted to depict like a nuclear mushroom cloud, something far more powerful than the seemingly mortal crow gods. The pattern is more than a little inspired by several medieval carvings of Loki, bound and waiting for the day when he can loose his bonds and destroy the gods and the world. The poem reminded me of the Cathar heresy. The idea that an evil god exists, as powerful or more powerful than a benevolent one is perhaps the most terrifying idea imaginable.

Fig 18 Heather Colbert 'Emily Bronte'

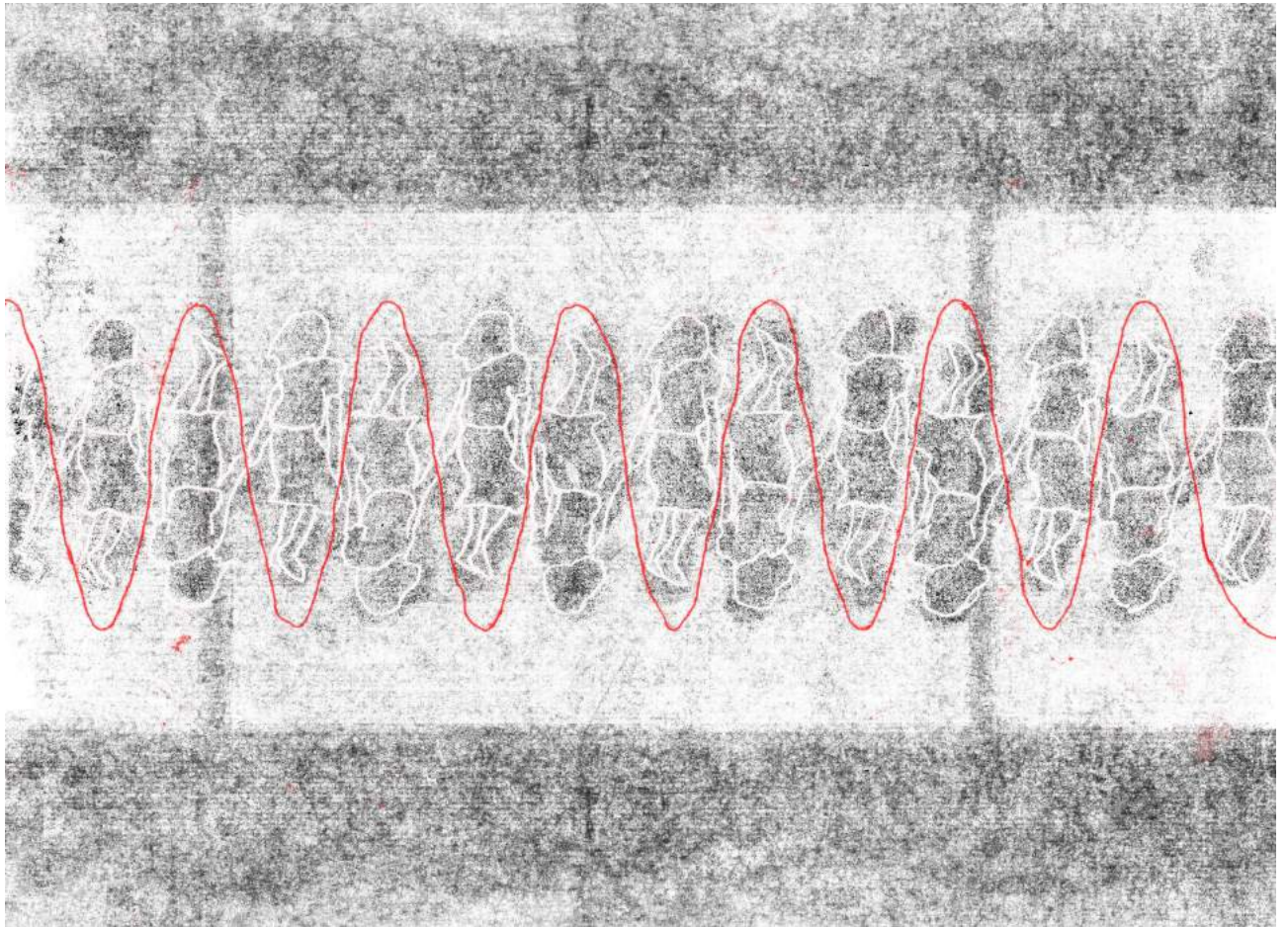


Heather Colbert has written an excellently concise summary of her thoughts and intentions in illustrating, in an exquisitely detailed pencil and pen and ink drawing, 'Emily Bronte' from *Remains of Elmet* and *Elmet*:

To me the poem has a seductive quality, the unnamed female character is ensnared by 'the moor' and will follow the 'shaggy sodden king' until death. I wanted the relationship between them to be ambiguous – as it is in Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*. On the surface, their desire is visible but there is an underlying tone of malicious intent, on the part of the personification of the moor. I have also attempted to use Klimt's way of describing the body underneath clothing, by painting the three-dimensional limbs emerging from flat pattern, to show how connected these figures are to their landscape. They are literally made of their surroundings.

I would also suggest that the cloak of soil, rock and plant, as well as clearly referring in its shape and size to the gilded robe of the man in Klimt's *The Kiss*, is also reminiscent of a shaman's cloak – a very apt allusion, as the face of the Heathcliffian man/moor so closely resembles Hughes. Heather's male and female figures are reversed when compared to Klimt's: the woman is on the left, the man/moor on the right. One result of this reversal is that, perhaps coincidentally, the man/moor's head is bent at the same angle as the cranium-shaped ball of ice hanging above the swollen river in Fay Godwin's photograph which accompanies the poem in *Remains of Elmet* (RoE 97) and *Elmet* (E 95).

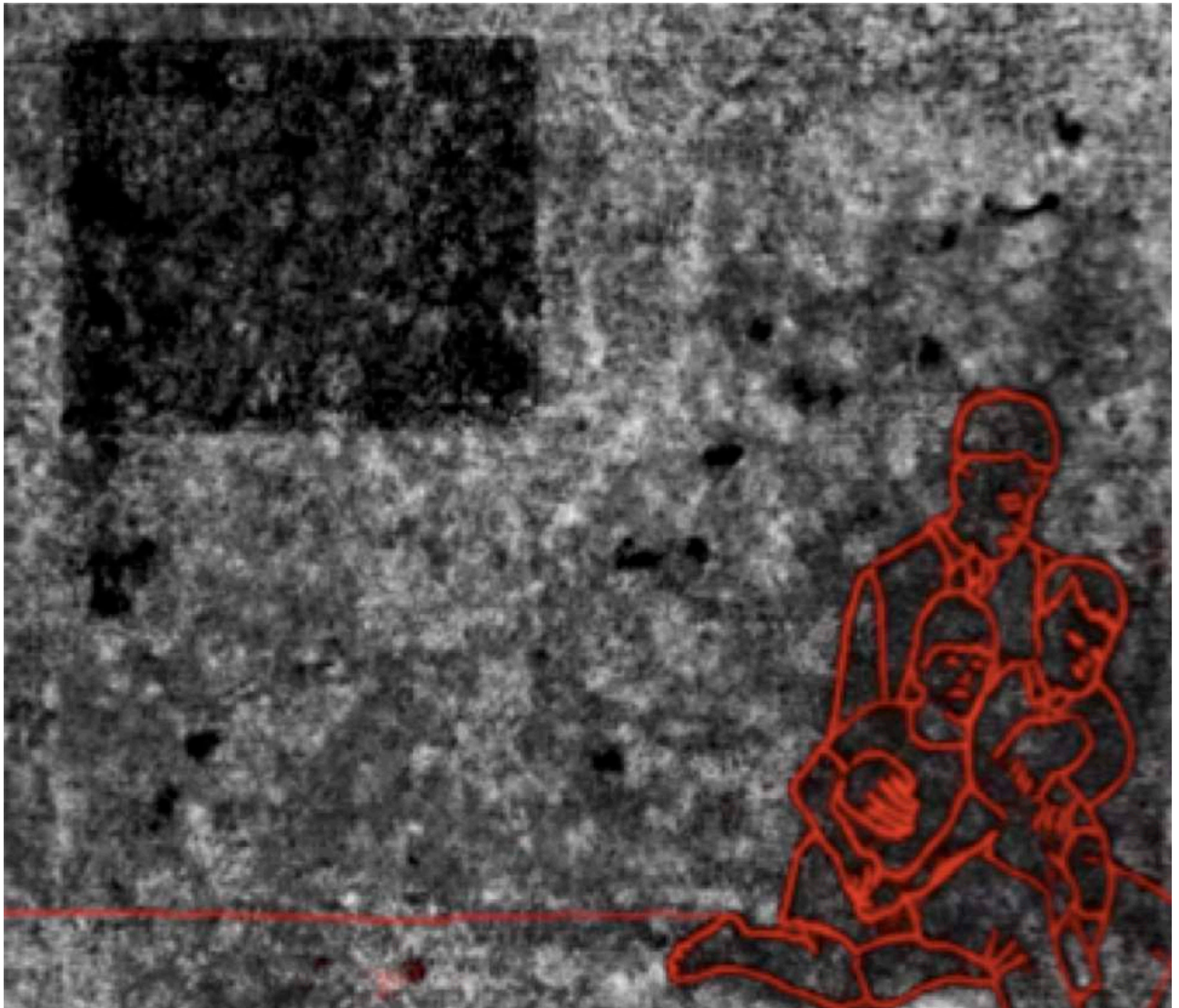
Fig 19 Jackie Duckworth, 'A Short Film'



Jackie Duckworth has created a profoundly moving but unsentimental video piece, which combines still images and a spoken text, like Noel Chanan,; and what could be a more fitting way to illustrate the poem 'A Short Film'? Jackie writes:

The red skipping rope is intended to represent brain waves, and electrical impulses (cf ECT), as well as a fuse. Although I believe that Hughes actions definitely made things worse, the fact was that Plath had been seriously unwell before she had ever met him. If he had been the nicest man in the world, she might still have spiralled into suicide.

Fig 20 Jackie Duckworth 'A Short Film'



Finally, and most shockingly, the red line becomes both an asystole – the flatline which indicates no cardiac activity – and also forms the freshly burnt outline of the motherless/wifeless family group. The outline of these crouching figures also recalls the shadow figures of the dead which were burnt into the walls of some buildings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki following the dropping of the atomic bombs – an event which had particular and personal resonance for Plath. As she told Peter Orr in her well-known interview for *The Poet Speaks*, she strongly believed that her poetry had to be relevant to what she acknowledged were ‘the bigger things, such as Hiroshima.’¹⁴

The red line also represents a colour which Plath repeatedly used in her later poems. ‘Red’ is the last poem in *Birthday Letters*, in which Hughes meditates, as Plath so often did in her poetry, on her personal association of colours, and

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2IMsVpRh5c> - accessed 17.7.2016

particularly red, a colour she especially loved – as Erica Wagner reminds us in *Ariel's Gift* her commentary on *Birthday Letters*.¹⁵

Fig 21 Amanda Banham, 'Red'



And so, appropriately, Amanda Banham's ceramic illustrations for *Red*, the final poem in *Birthday Letters*, were the last works to be shown at the Sheffield conference, and also the last works to be considered in this commentary. It's a work of outstanding originality; a collection of plates - actual ceramic plates and not the term commonly used to describe full-page, colour illustrations. Amanda explains her creative decisions in the following note:

The poems in *Birthday Letters* have a domestic quality to them as one might expect from a husband to a wife. I chose 'Red' as it is a very visual poem and I wanted to have some clear graphic guide lines such as the roses, poppies and lipstick from which to draw. I also thrive best when working in colour and the very obvious colour palette of red, white and blue of this poem was very enticing.

Ceramics are my chosen medium for much of my work and in the initial planning stages I imagined making a vase with the red roses, poppies and lips splashed all over it.

Figure 23 Amanda Banham, *Red*

¹⁵ Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. 193-194.



However I soon realised that a vase would be too ornate and grand for this couple and this poem. I needed to create something 'everyday' and domestic but with the 'splashes' and 'drips' of red that Ted Hughes talks of Sylvia Plath adding to every surface in their lives. So I chose plates, they are mundane and ordinary, everyday objects that are used in domestic settings the world over. It was important to me to use something from the kitchen as this was the place where Sylvia Plath met her death. Such a banal, everyday place for such a final, desperate act to occur.

Voice prints: images of Ted Hughes by Tony Othen

Mark Wormald

On 7 December 1982, Ted Hughes and his poetry editor at Faber & Faber Craig Raine recorded a selection of his poems for an audio cassette of his and Paul Muldoon's poetry for Faber & Faber. The project followed the appearance earlier that year of Hughes' *Selected Poems*. The venue for the recording was the London home of the social action photographer Tony Othen, a family friend of Raine's. Othen had constructed a sound recording studio within his photographic studio, and the dimensions of that space – eight feet by ten – contributed to the uniquely intimate character of the recording made that afternoon. So did Raine's guiding and reassuring presence. Letters at Emory suggest that, earlier that autumn, he had had to overcome considerable reluctance on the poet's part to commit to the project, but the success of his editor's efforts is palpable in the end result, in which Hughes seems at times to be talking to himself, or to only one listener.

The recording of eleven poems includes pieces from *Season Songs*, *Cave Birds and Remains of Elmet*, and – the only poem Hughes does not preface with words of explanation – 'Do Not Pick Up the Telephone'. But it opens, reaches its mid point and concludes with three of his most powerful poems from *River*, the imminent publication of which Craig Raine's own introduction anticipates. In these recordings you hear the voice finding its way on its journey into and back from what 'Go Fishing' calls 'underbeing'; in his reading of 'October Salmon' you hear the most vivid demonstration I know of what Hughes meant when he wrote, in a piece in the British Library Carrie Smith has brought to our attention, of the ideal reader of poetry: 'he can be more effective, often, by being extremely quiet, the wholeness of physical engagement has to be there, he has to embody somehow a state of crisis [...] in [...] the inner intensity of his voice.'¹

That afternoon also bore a very different kind of fruit, in its way just as significant. Between takes, and as the poet surfaced from this intensity – for cups of tea, jokes, light relief – Hughes and Raine provided the opportunity for Tony Othen to take dozens of photographs of the pair in conversation. Hughes was usually a wary subject of photography. But it is a tribute to both photographer and editor, and perhaps a measure of his own sense of the success of the recording, that here he relaxed, revealing a real warmth.

Until 2015, thirty-four years after these photographs were taken, only one of these pictures of Raine and Hughes had been published: it appears in Christopher Reid's edition of the *Letters* (LTH 488, photograph 14c), and accompanied a recent adaptation of 'Crow' for the stage. Now Tony Othen has reframed and cropped ten of these images, printing them for the first time

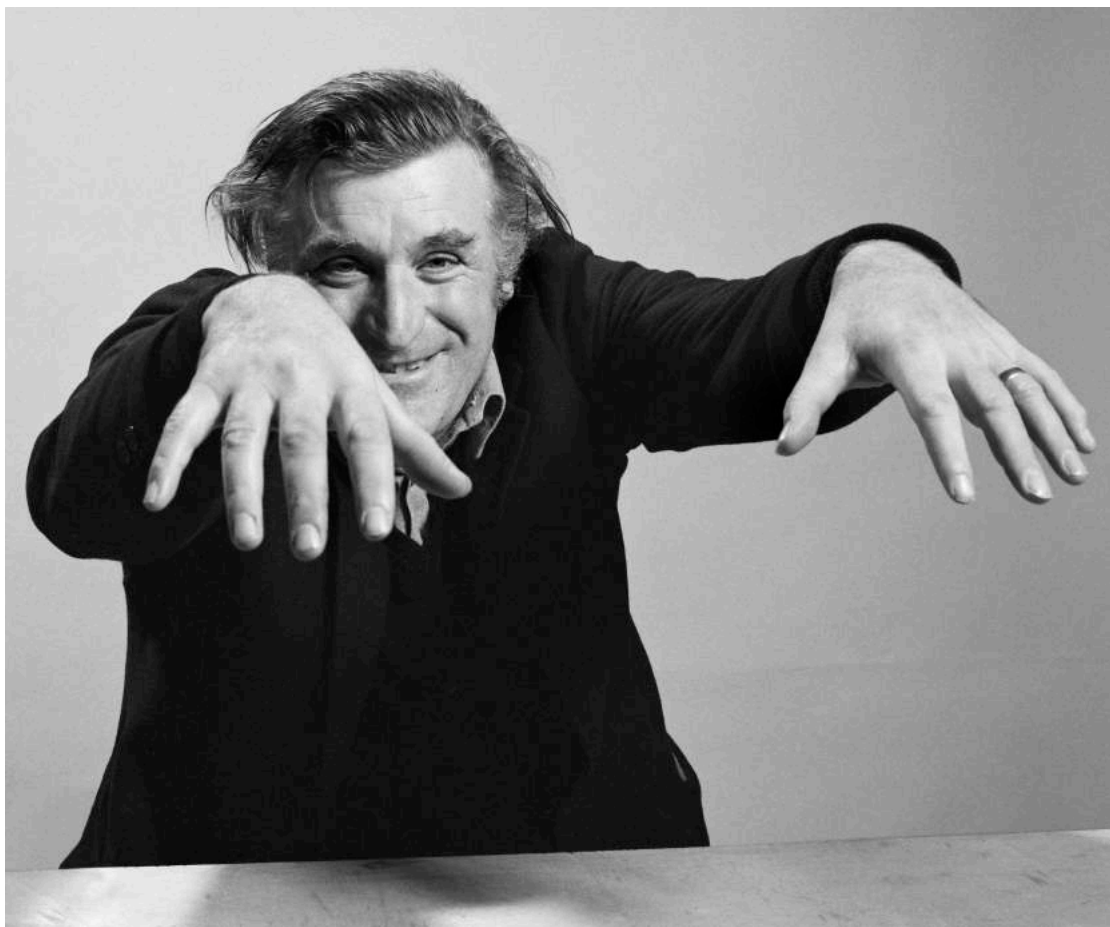
¹ British Library Add MS 88918/7/1, quoted in Carrie Smith, "The Ted Hughesness of Ted Hughes": The Construction of a 'Voice' in Hughes' Poetry Readings and Recordings', in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford, eds., *Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to Collected* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp.205-220; p.208.

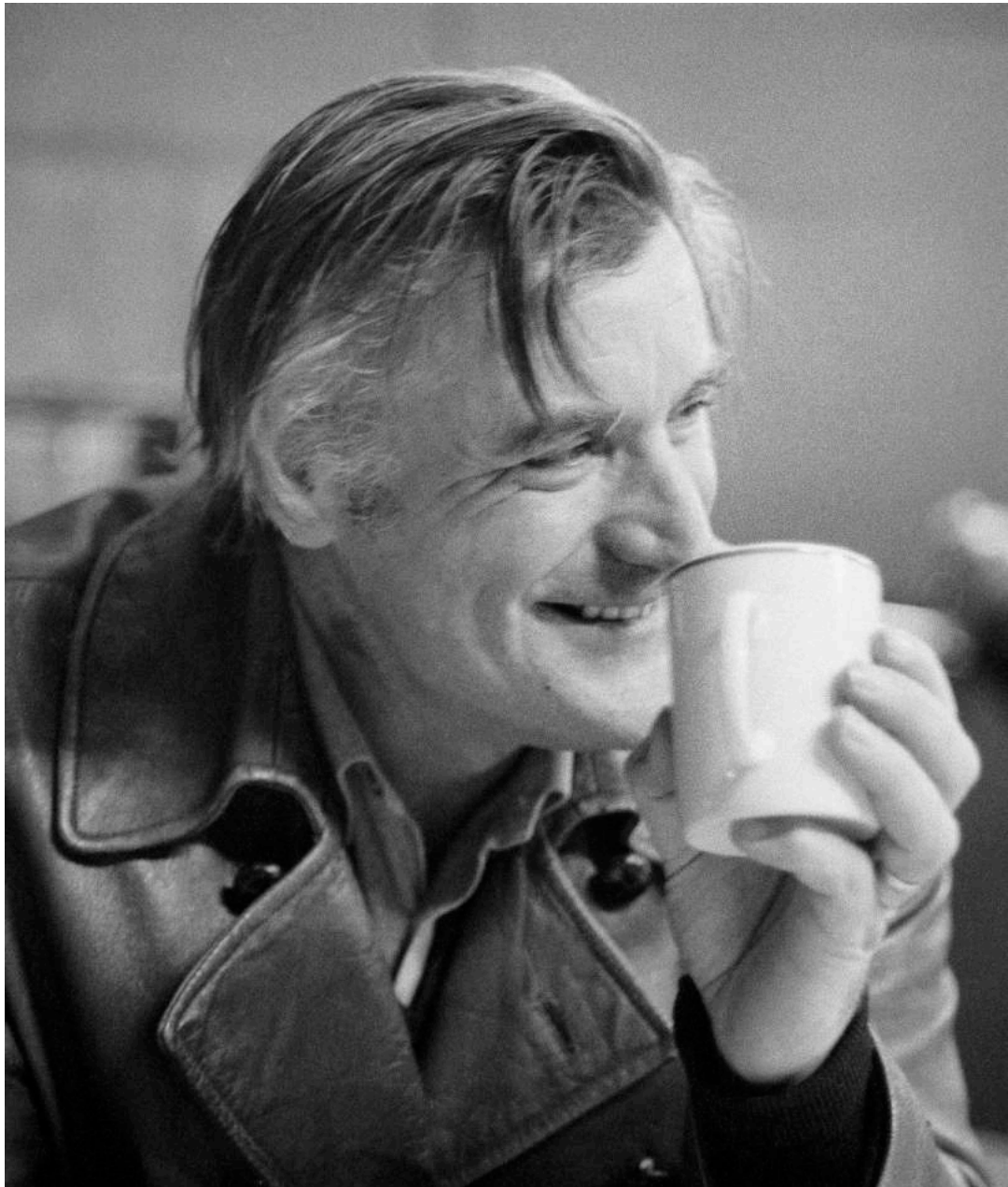
as portraits of the poet. These prints remain the copyright of Tony Othen, with whose permission they appear on the cover of this issue and on the following pages.

Terry Gifford has commented:

The range of photographs from this shoot is unique. There are the standard bardic heavily serious shots, but never before has Hughes been photographed in grotesquely comic mode, nor in quite this manner of engagement with the photographer in a variety of utterly relaxed moods. The intimacy with the photographer has produced a series of remarkable photographs which should be seen as a whole in an unusually confiding 'spot of time' in the special Wordsworthian sense. There is simply nothing like this series that has yet come to light.

Readers interested in viewing the series for themselves, acquiring their own A3 prints of these or other images – a contact sheet of the several dozen images, mostly in black and white, some in colour, taken by Tony Othen that afternoon, is available for inspection at Pembroke College – or seeking permission to use one or more of these images in any publication should contact Mark Wormald at mrw1002@cam.ac.uk.





Images of Ted Hughes 7 December 1982 Copyright Tony Othen

Reviews

Gamefisher 2016: The Yearbook of Salmon and Trout Conservation UK

I bought this yearbook in order to read articles on Hughes as fisherman/poet by Mark Wormald and David Profumo, but then was absorbed by every other article until I'd read it from cover to cover, concluding that the conservation research presented here ought to be supported by all readers of Hughes since it represents the current state of his own concerns.

Novelist and one-time poetry reviewer for the *Sunday Times*, David Profumo fished with Hughes over nearly ten years and describes him as 'a gifted story-teller' who 'perhaps had no such thing as small talk. But he was also a good listener, never arrogant, and consistently generous of spirit' (49). For readers of this journal much is probably added to this character assessment by the fact that, on a day on North Harris when 'the salmon were proving recalcitrant; Ted gingered up a few by using a large black tarpon streamer on his dropper' (50). As I write, everyone seems to be quoting 'Swifts' for an image that the globe is still working, but sitting in a hide on the Levels I've been watching woodpeckers, tits and reed buntings take the emerging mayfly from the reeds they're crawling up. The water just seems to be bubbling with the mayfly hatch which, Profumo reminds his readers, was a symbol of resurrection for Hughes, who wrote, 'Space cannot hold them [...] they hurl themselves into God'.

Mark Wormald's article here serves as a tantalising introduction to his forthcoming book, *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes*, which is to be published next year. Through conversations with Hughes's fishing companions, a close reading of the fishing diaries in the British Library, following their leads to fish himself in Hughes's footsteps in riverbeds and lakes, and with thus informed new readings the fishing poems, Wormald's warm and reflective writing offers startling fresh insights into not just the poems, but the significance of a fisherman's imagery elsewhere in Hughes's writing. Ecocritics call this 'narrative scholarship' and Wormald calls it 'a form of genuinely practical criticism' (47). We may be in for some surprises and some corrections of our misinformed taken-for-granted readings.

But the real importance of this journal for those sharing Hughes's concerns for water quality and fish conservation lies in the evidence of articles about salmon farming, a crash in insect life in Britain's rivers and the 'citizen science' of local groups monitoring invertebrates throughout the country. As in Hughes's day, farming practices continue to pollute rivers with slurry, silage and stock infringements. On the fisheries' side, catch-and-release policies are reported upon and results monitored. Hughes would have been amazed at the number of fish passes now installed for salmon on the river Don in Yorkshire from Doncaster to Rotherham and right through the centre of Sheffield out to Beeley Woods under a programme of the Don Catchment Rivers Trust. Regional reports, laced with fascinating historical knowledge, reveal continuing problems with estuarine net fishing, fungal disease, sea lice, forestry and now predatory goosanders. Hughes would be heartened by the news that the Westcountry Rivers Trust, which he helped to found 'remains the first and largest of the Rivers Trusts in the UK' which last year celebrated its twentieth anniversary, and now offers 'a reservoir of scientific knowledge'

and 'very practical advice and guidance to farmers and others without being also an arm of government' (38). For only 'a contribution' (I paid £10) this publication will be sent to you if you request one by emailing Debbie Creasy at debbie@salmon-trout.org. It is clear that you will be supporting much more than the piscatorial art by informing yourself about nationally important and locally active water conservation from which we all benefit.

Terry Gifford

Terry Gifford
Bath Spa University
University of Alicante
t.gifford@bathspa.ac.uk
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Contributors

Terry Gifford is Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Writing and Environment, Bath Spa University and Profesor Honorifico at the University of Alicante. He is the author of seven collections of poetry, most recently, with Christopher North, *Al Otro Lado del Aguilar* (2011), in English and Spanish, and *Ted Hughes* (2009), *Reconnecting With John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice* (2006), *Pastoral* (1999), *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (2011 [1995]), editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (2011) and *New Casebooks: Ted Hughes* (2015), and is a contributor to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment* (2014). He is President of the Ted Hughes Society.

Mick Gowar is Senior Lecturer in Contextual Studies at the Cambridge School of Art, Anglia Ruskin University, where he has taught part-time since 1983. Mick is also widely known as an author of children's books and a performer and workshop leader in schools. Since 1980 he has written or edited over 100 books for children and young people, including five books of poetry, novels, short stories, and non-fiction books for major educational series such as OUP's 'Treetops' and 'Project X' reading schemes. He has visited schools, libraries, colleges and festivals throughout the UK and abroad to give readings and performances, and he has undertaken educational projects for, among others, the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Britten Sinfonia, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Sinfonia 21, and the Fitzwilliam Museum and Kettles Yard Gallery in Cambridge. He has tutored on courses for the Arvon Foundation and the Taliesin Trust. Since September 2015 Mick has been co-director, with Jeannette Baxter, of *New Routes Old Roots*, a research network based at Anglia Ruskin University which aims to actively encourage scholarly examination of, and public engagement with, the literature of exile and migration.

Ann Henning Jocelyn is the author of seven stage plays, including *Doonreagan*, a play about Hughes and Wevill, recently performed in London and Cambridge. Her published work to date has appeared world-wide in over forty editions. She writes and presents programmes for radio and has lectured at Gothenburg University and many other venues. She has also been co-hosting the Ted Hughes Weekend conference at Doonreagan for two years.

Gregory Leadbetter is Reader in Literature and Creative Writing at Birmingham City University. His book *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) won the University English (formerly CCUE) Book Prize 2012. His debut full-length poetry collection, *The Fetch*, will be published by Nine Arches Press in October 2016. He is Poet in

Residence at Anne Hathaway's Cottage as part of Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival 2016.

Ed Reiss has written a book of poems, 'Your sort', published by Smith/Doorstop, Sheffield, in 2011.

Katherine Robinson's essays, poetry and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Hudson Review*, *Poetry Ireland* and elsewhere. She holds an M.F.A. from The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, and she lives and teaches in Baltimore.

Jack Thacker is a PhD student at the Universities of Bristol and Exeter, researching contemporary British and Irish poetry and agriculture. He has published on Alice Oswald in *The Cambridge Quarterly* and his poems have appeared in *PN Review* and *The Clearing*.

Mark Wormald is Fellow and Director of Studies in English at Pembroke College, Cambridge. He has written widely on nineteenth and twentieth century poetry and fiction, and is a past winner of the Newdigate Prize and a E.C. Gregory Award for poetry. With Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, he co-edited *Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to Collected* (2013). Since then essays on Hughes have appeared in the journals *Book 2.0* and *Anglistik*, as well as in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*. *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* will be published by Little Toller Books in 2017.