

# The Ted Hughes Society Journal



## Volume VI Issue 1



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**Cover image of Ted Hughes and Fred Rue Jacobs, 1994, by Mimi McKay.**

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## Editorial

The announcement of the death of Gerald Hughes in August 2016 came as the last issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal was in press. Preparing this new issue, and reflecting on the striking range of perspectives its contributors bring, from very differently inflected forms of knowledge of and approaches to Hughes and his work, I have been watching David Cohen's documentary *Ted Hughes: Dream Time*, released in 2015 but not reviewed here. The film is narrated by Juliet Stevenson, who read at the service of dedication of the plaque in Hughes's honour in Poets' Corner in December 2011. Amongst its incidental highlights is Seamus Heaney's reflection from outside the memorial service, also at Westminster Abbey, in 1999, of Hughes as the heir of Shakespeare, and the vivid and warm memories of Vicky Watling. Steve Ely provides a steady and wise critical overview of the poet's development from his Yorkshire childhood, emphasizing the crucial role his mother Edith played in stimulating her younger son's reading when his talent as a writer was first spotted. There are dignified and moving contributions, too, from Frieda and Carol Hughes. But it is Gerald's memories of his brother, first shared in his memoir *Ted and I*, that play a central part, in a film that represents a sober complement, and even a quiet corrective, to the BBC documentary *Stronger than Death*. DVDs of David Cohen's film are available from him at [dcpsychologynews@gmail.com](mailto:dcpsychologynews@gmail.com)

Personal memories of a poet, and a man, as powerful as Hughes will undoubtedly continue to find expression in the years to come, and not just from his family. I am delighted to be able to include in this issue an illuminating and provocative essay of recollection and anticipation by the late American collector and scholar Fred Rue Jacobs, and an introduction to that essay, and memories of her own, by Mimi McKay. Responses to Hughes's work and life continue to take many different forms. Hugh Dunkerley charts a judicious and discriminating course to a reading of Hughes's poetry, and of 'Gulkana' in particular, via a discussion of the complex history of the theory of the ecocritical sublime. Ann Skea's commanding overview of Hughes and the occult is the product both of many years of scholarly devotion and of recent study in Cambridge, and manages to make all manner of hermetic arcana clear: it will surely be an indispensable resource to future readers. Robert Jocelyn's scrupulous researches, in censuses and registers of births and deaths, into the Hughes family's Irish roots is not just fascinating in its own right: it reminds us both how much potentially revelatory material still awaits scholars in publicly available form, but also that sometimes such evidence may not match the myths and mysteries of family legend. Terry Gifford's short essay on corrections in the paperback edition of Jonathan Bate's recent biography is a model of scrupulous textual comparison; Lorraine Kerlake's reflections on the Spanish version of Koren and Negev's biography of Assia Wevill reveal some curious textual instabilities, or lack of focus, there too. My own essay reflects on the interplay of biographies, text and context in two apparently very different poems that seem to date from the same month. David Troupes reviews a bold new adaptation of *Gaudete* for the stage; Di Beddow reports from a packed evening at the London Review of Books bookshop in London, where Alice Oswald and Bernard Schwartz, director of the 92Y Poetry Center in New York, gave a first British airing of recordings

Hughes recorded in New York in 1971 and 1986. And the indefatigable Terry Gifford reviews a new book by Sam Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene*.

The next epoch in Hughes studies will be marked at the two-day conference being hosted by the University of Huddersfield on 15 and 16 June under the accommodating title of 'Ted Hughes and Place'. The programme boasts twenty-six speakers. I hope that in due course the journal may be able to give a home to at least some of those presentations, and, of course, to any other contributions submitted to me either via the Journal Editor's email or to [mrw1002@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mrw1002@cam.ac.uk).

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)

## Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition

Ann Skea

The use of poetry as a means of contacting and channelling hidden energies has a long history and in many cultures poets were, and sometimes still are, regarded as having special access to divine and magical energies.

When introducing some of his work in a recording made in 1979, Ted Hughes spoke of poetry as 'a way of making things happen the way you want them to happen.'<sup>1</sup> And he wrote in 'Strong Feelings' of the way in which poetry appears in anthropological literature as 'power-charms, tools and practical agents in the business of gaining desired ends' (*WP* 34).

In that same 1978 recording, he went on to describe his own experience of 'writing and rewriting' the poem 'Earth-Numb' (*CP* 541) 'over two or three years' until one day he seemed 'to have got it just right'. The next day he caught a large salmon, then two days later, another two, 'even larger'. It seemed to him, he said, that although he never thought of the poem as a 'hunting incantation', somehow 'everything had to happen as in the poem'.

Yet this sort of 'hunting magic' was not the only way in which old poetic traditions influenced Hughes's work. Long before he began his anthropological studies at Cambridge University, his interest in the work of W.B Yeats had introduced him to the magically inspired beliefs which Yeats expressed in works like *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, *The Vision* and 'The Symbolism of Poetry'. As Hughes told Ekbert Faas in 1970, 'Yeats spellbound me for about six years. I got to him not so much through his verse as through his other interests, folklore, and magic in particular.'<sup>2</sup> Especially in those years when he was working in Cambridge University Library after his graduation, Hughes read many of the older mystical and occult texts which Yeats himself had studied,<sup>3</sup> and books written by other members of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn of which Yeats was an initiated member.<sup>4</sup> These included books on Hermetic Christian cabbala, alchemy, astrology, divination, tarot and geomancy, as well as Rosicrucian and Theosophical writings. And records held by the library demonstrate his serious interest in historically important texts which deal with astronomy and astrology.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, *The Critical Forum Series* (Norwich Tapes Ltd: 1978). A transcript of this tape can be found at <http://ann.skea.com/CriticalForum.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p.202.

<sup>3</sup> Lucas Myers, *The Essential Self* (London: Richard Hollis, 2011), p.13.

<sup>4</sup> In 1885, at the age of twenty, Yeats became a founding member of the Dublin Hermetic Society, which adopted the principles of Madam Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. He later joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn where he rose to the rank of Imperator before breaking away to found Stella Matutina.

<sup>5</sup> ULIB 8/1/8: On 10 February 1954, Hughes consulted the influential *Ephemeris* by Andrea Argoli (1648) which also discusses the astronomical calculations and hypotheses of Tycho Brahe; on 16 February 1955, he consulted William Lilly's *Christian Astrology* (1647), a work based on the astronomical studies of Ptolemy, Dee, Fludd, Kepler and others.

The Cambridge University Library is almost certainly where Hughes read some of the earliest English occult treatises written as poems by alchemists such as George Ripley (1415-1490), Thomas Norton (c.1433-c.1513), and (in the seventeenth century) by Eugenius Philalethes (the name adopted by Thomas Vaughan (1621-66)) and his twin brother Henry.<sup>6</sup> Many anonymous alchemical works were also written as poems – a medium which perfectly suits the symbolic, metaphorical and imaginative language in which the spiritual and technical secrets of alchemy have been couched since its earliest appearance, reputedly in Ancient Egypt.<sup>7</sup>

These clearly influenced Hughes' own alchemical poem *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*, which has the same multi-layered character as these ancient alchemical poems. Beneath the surface story lies the drama of spiritual renewal; the structure of the sequence imitates the technical chemical process for making gold; and reflected in its metaphors and symbols is a description of the various stages of that purifying process.<sup>8</sup>

The fundamental principles of alchemy, however, are far broader and far older than this brief description suggests and they have been reflected in the work of poets since at least the time of Petrarch (1304-74), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400). All of whom, in turn, reflected the belief in the occult powers of poetry which was common to the ancient Greek, Egyptian and Arabs worlds.

Hughes knew Chaucer's work exceptionally well. Whilst at university, he wrote to his sister that he would get up at 6 a.m. to read a Shakespeare play and 'sometimes half-an-hour of Chaucer as well' (*LTH* 12); he numbered Chaucer amongst those poets he once regarded as his 'sacred canon';<sup>9</sup> and he twice claims Chaucer as 'Our Chaucer' in 'St Botolph's' (*CP* 1051-2), where he also refers to Dante. Both Chaucer and Dante were familiar with the work of Petrarch, whose work was widely known in Italy where Renaissance humanists were actively seeking out ancient knowledge.

Petrarch collected and translated Greek, Roman, Hebrew and Arabic classics, including the works by Livy, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid and Homer. Through his translations of Cicero, Petrarch came to know of the work of a Roman disciple of Epicurus, Titus Lucretius Carus (c.99-55 BCE), and Lucretius's philosophical poem *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things) was brought to Florence in 1471. There, together with other ancient texts translated at that

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<sup>6</sup> George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchemy* (1471); Thomas Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy* (1477); Thomas Vaughan, *Anthroposophia Theomagica* (1650); *Anima Magica Abscondita* (1650) and *Lumen de Lumin* (1651); Henry Vaughan, *The Chymist's Key* (1657).

<sup>7</sup> The alchemical process of progressively refining base matter until gold is produced is not only a chemical process but also a spiritual art aimed at progressively purifying the human soul until the gold of spiritual wholeness is achieved.

<sup>8</sup> All this is examined in detail in Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale, Australia: University of New England Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> 'At twenty-one, my sacred canon was fixed: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot'. Interview with Drue Heinz in *The Paris Review* 134 (Spring 1995), 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry No.71'.

time, it strongly influenced humanist thinking and, for centuries after, it was adopted, adapted and challenged by poets, philosophers and scientists, including, amongst poets, Ovid, Virgil, Sidney, Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, as well as such figures as Thomas More, Erasmus, Spinoza and John Dee; the Cambridge Platonists; and the founders and earliest members of The Royal Society.

In his poem, Lucretius described not only the void, the character, motion and combination of atoms, and the infinity of the universe, but also the nature and composition of the mind and the soul, the existence and character of images and mental pictures, and the passion of love. Poets, in particular, understood his method of 'sweetening our pauper speech' with song and expounding dry 'doctrine' in ways which 'touch it with sweet honey of the Muse.'<sup>10</sup>

He taught that all things are interwoven – that all parts influence one another; and that everything in this corporeal world decays and ends, becoming again primal germs from which, through Nature, all new things are formed. Especially, he claimed that 'Only Nature's aspect and her law' can teach us. Thus, we should look with wonder on Nature.

In his Proem to Book 1, Lucretius hymns the powers of the Goddess Venus, who as the goddess of Nature 'Guidest the Cosmos', and he calls on her to be 'co-partner' in this verse wherein he intends

...with steady mind to cast  
The purport of the skies – the Law behind  
The wandering courses of the sun and moon;  
To scan the powers that speed all life below;  
But most to see with reasonable eyes  
Of what the mind, of what the soul is made.

Above all, Lucretius taught that human beings embody the divine energies and that we, not God or the gods or any other external authority, are responsible for our own lives. 'The energy of the soul', he wrote, 'is sewn about / In all the body' and is the agent of the will: for 'the soul is conjoined with the mind', and 'no-one starts to do a thing, before / The intellect provisions what it wills'. We can, however, as Lucretius did, call on Venus's Power of Love to aid us in our lives.

Lucretius's reverence for Venus, Goddess of Love, and his insistence on the importance and the wonder of Nature strongly influenced Renaissance poetry and art.<sup>11</sup> And amongst the many later poets whose work was directly influenced by Lucretius's poem were Spenser, Milton, Dryden and Tennyson, all of whom Hughes had read closely. There are copies of the works of all these poets in Hughes's library and, in an interview with Drue Heinz in 1995, Hughes said of his early interest in poetry: 'I used to sit in the woods muttering

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<sup>10</sup> All quotations from the Lucretius' *De rerum natura* are from the Gutenberg Ebook, (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/785>).

<sup>11</sup> E.H. Gombrich discusses this influence in detail in *Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972) where he examines the art of Michelangelo (1475-1564), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and, in particular, Botticelli (1445-1510).

through my books. I read the whole of *The Faerie Queene* like that. All of Milton. Lots more. It became a sort of hobby-habit.<sup>12</sup>

Milton read moral philosophy whilst at Cambridge University and translated *De rerum natura*. He reflected some of its teachings about body and soul in *Paradise Lost*. Dryden translated parts of it. And Tennyson's poem 'Lucretius' satirises many of Lucretius's beliefs and wishes on him a wife named Lucilla who, 'when the morning flush / Of passion and the first embrace had died / Between them', grew tired of her husband neglecting her for his work, administered a charm which gave him dreams in which all his philosophical ideas were turned against him, and, thus, 'destroyed him'. Yeats had certainly read Dryden's translations, since he is recorded as saying that Lucretius wrote 'the finest description of sexual intercourse ever written.'<sup>13</sup>

Although Hughes may not have read the whole poem, he had read Dryden's translations.<sup>14</sup> His *Crow* poem, 'Lovesong', in which the lovers grip, press, bite, mutilate and devour each other until 'In the morning' they 'wore each other's face', (*CP* 256) reflects Lucretius's description in Book IV, 'The Passion of Love', of those 'sick-at-soul with love-pining' who 'cannot fix / On what to first enjoy with eyes and hands', but

squeeze so tight,  
And pain the creature's body, close their teeth  
Often against her lips, and smite with kiss  
Mouth into mouth,

then

greedily their frames they lock

powerless  
To rub off aught, or penetrate or pass  
With body entire into body – for oft  
They seem to struggle thus to do.

Hughes's own well-attested reverence for the Goddess clearly began early with his poem 'Song' (*CP* 24). And *Moortown, Under the North Star, River* and many individual poems reflect the wonders of Nature and demonstrate her powers over life, death and regeneration.

Perhaps it is significant, too, that the poem written by Lorenzo de' Medici (Lorenzo The Magnificent) (1449-1492) which Hughes chose to translate in 1992/3, is a sonnet which clearly states Lucretius's teachings about the impermanence of all life. It begins: 'How futile every hope is, that we have', 'We learn from our master – the Grave'. And it goes on to state that

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<sup>12</sup> Heinz interview with Hughes, *The Paris Review*, p.61.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve* (New York: Norton & Co, 2011), p.197.

<sup>14</sup> A copy of Florio's translation of *Michel de Montaigne's Essays* in which sixteen verses of Lucretius's poem are quoted is held in Hughes's library at Emory University, Atlanta, USA.

whatever sort of life we choose to lead: 'Nothing is still. And nothing lasts. Only death.'<sup>15</sup>

Lucretius's poem was just one of the influential texts which were collected, translated, circulated and discussed during the Italian Renaissance and which influenced all the magical and creative arts of that time, especially at the Florentine courts of Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) and his grandson, Lorenzo.<sup>16</sup> Hebraic, Spanish, Arabic and Egyptian works were also widely circulated; and one, in particular, through the writing of Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) and, later, his younger contemporary and protégé, Picco della Mirandola (1463-94) came to be of particular importance.

In 1463, Ficino, who was a priest, physician and scholar, was instructed by his patron, Cosimo de' Medici, to abandon his translation of Plato's works into Latin and begin work immediately on an almost complete Greek manuscript which containing a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Ficino called his translation the *Pymander*<sup>17</sup> and this book became fundamental to all later studies of Hermeticism, alchemy and magic.

Hermes, like Lucretius, taught that all things are interwoven. The first of twelve statements on the *Emerald Tablet* attributed to Hermes is

In truth, certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like  
that which is above. And whatever is above is like that which is  
below, to accomplish the miracles of the one thing.<sup>18</sup>

Hermeticists believe that this reciprocal dependence between the Macrocosm of the Universe and the Microcosm of our World allows divine powers to be transmitted to humans via the celestial bodies so that the Divine Spark within us may reunited us with the Creator. Astrology, talismans, magic and other sympathetic magic may be used to draw down these powers, but only a carefully prepared human body is able to receive them. As in Lucretius's teachings, the development of human imagination and willpower is of prime importance: and the *Corpus Hermeticum* teaches the way in which these may be developed. Like the agency of the Goddess Venus in *De rerum natura*, the greatest power of Hermeticism is Love – the essence which 'conquers

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Weissbort, *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> The number of ancient Greek philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers and geometers whose work was widely known is apparent in the so-called 'The School of Athens' fresco painted by Raphael for the Papal Palace of the Vatican between 1509-1511. These include Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Euclid, Plotinus, Heraclitus and Epicurus. Raphael's fresco has the accompanying inscription, 'Seek Knowledge of Causes' The suggested identification of the 19 figures in this fresco can be found at <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_School\\_of\\_Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_School_of_Athens)>.

<sup>17</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp.11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Titus Burkhardt, *Alchemy* (Dorset: Element Books, 1968), p. 196. The Arabic text attributed to Gerber was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages and, as the *Tabula Smaragdina*, was widely distributed amongst alchemists.

everything subtle and penetrates everything solid' and which is born of the sun and the moon, nursed by the earth, and moves between heaven and earth bringing 'glory to the world' and removing darkness from the human spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Most importantly, the transmission of divine powers is achieved through images created by the imagination from the memory of the Platonic Perfect Forms. The creative arts – poetry, music and art – are instrumental in this. And, although Lucretius wrote of the 'Supreme Gods' as careless of mankind, his description of the way in which we receive images was easily adapted by Renaissance Hermeticists to explain how such divine powers could be channelled to earth. Just as 'tenuous images from things are sent, / From off the utmost outside of things' and travel through the 'ether' to 'batter' our senses, so the images 'of heavenly bodies' are 'carried into the intellect of man / As the announcers of their divine form.'<sup>20</sup> Just so, for centuries, have the images of gods and religious icons, through our imagination and faith, connected us with the divine.

For Hermetic Neoplatonists, images became all important. For them, as Gombrich put it in his examination of Renaissance art, 'the numbers and proportions of a thing preserved in the image' impart to that image 'something of the spiritual essence which it embodies.'<sup>21</sup>

Blake, in a later century, wrote of 'Poetry, Painting & Music' as 'the three powers in Man of conversing with Paradise';<sup>22</sup> and he ascribed to the Lucretian/Hermetic teaching that 'All deities reside in the human breast' and that 'every thing that lives is Holy.' Hughes, too, has his God in *What is the Truth?* tell his son that 'the Truth is that' he is all the animals: 'I am each of these things...And each of these things is Me.'<sup>23</sup> And for both Blake and Hughes, Ficino's teachings about the essential power of the imagination and poetry to link us to the source of creative energies, and the Lucretian and Renaissance Humanist and Neoplatonic emphasis on our ability to control our own lives, remained of utmost importance.

Ficino sang Orphic hymns for their connection with Pythagorean Music of the Spheres and as ritual harmonies which, he believed, could draw down the powers of the gods through the *spiritus mundi*, 'which is infused throughout the universe' and is 'the vehicle of stellar influences.'<sup>24</sup> And W.B. Yeats's reference to the emergence of 'a vast image out of the Spiritus Mundi' in his poem 'The Second Coming' suggests his familiarity with Ficino's work.

When Hughes told Drue Heinz that poetry and music have medicinal' healing power<sup>25</sup>, he too was echoing Ficino, who wrote of Plato's claim that true music and poetry most effectively imitate celestial music; that 'poetry expresses with fire the most profound' and 'prophetic' meanings; that this fire

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<sup>19</sup> Burckhardt, pp. 196-7.

<sup>20</sup> Lucretius, Book IV. 'Existence and Character of Images'.

<sup>21</sup> Gombrich, pp. 89-90.

<sup>22</sup> William Blake, *Poems and Prophecies* (London: Dent, 1970), 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', pp. 47; 55.

<sup>23</sup> Ted Hughes, *What is the Truth? A Farmyard Fable for the Young* (London: Faber, 1984), p.121.

<sup>24</sup> Yates, pp.68-9; 77-8.

<sup>25</sup> Heinz interview with Hughes, *The Paris Review*, p.82.

– this ‘poetic frenzy’ - springs from a rapture inspired by the Muses; and that by the ‘burning desire’ for ‘divine beauty’ the human spirit ‘may be drawn to the heavens’. Ficino went on to define ‘four kinds of divine frenzy: love, poetry, the mysteries and prophecy.’ Love, inspired by the Goddess, was the most important.

Frances Yates (of whose books Hughes attempted to acquire ‘a definitive collection’)<sup>26</sup> examined closely the many ways in which Ficino interpreted the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the shaping influence of his writings on Renaissance Hermetic Neoplatonism. She also wrote in detail of the way Pico della Mirandola, who had studied Hebrew and Arabic at university in Padua and had read widely in Hebrew Cabbalistic manuscripts, saw the connection between Hermeticism and Cabbala. If Ficino’s work made Hermes Trismegistus ‘the most important figure in the Renaissance revival of magic’, as Yates claims,<sup>27</sup> it is said that Pico ‘was the first Christian to treat knowledge of Kabbalah as valuable.’<sup>28</sup> Both tried to present dangerously heretical teachings in ways which accorded with Christianity.

Hughes owned a copy of Ficino’s *Book of Life*, which deals, amongst many other things, with Nature as a ‘magician’; ‘the power of images and medicine’; ‘The figures of the heavens and the use of images’; the powers that draw ‘the favours of the heavenly bodies, that is the soul of the world, of the stars and of daemons’; and ‘the power of words and songs in obtaining heavenly gifts.’<sup>29</sup> Hughes’s interest in astrology, however, began long before he owned this particular book and he would have learned much about Ficino’s and Pico’s Hermeticism, Neoplatonism and Cabbala from the writings of W.B. Yeats; from Yeats’s fellow members of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn;<sup>30</sup> and from many other sources. He would certainly have read Yeats’s *Per Amicia Silentia Luna*, which describes the *Spiritus Mundi* and also seems to refer to Ficino’s teaching about divine *furor* when Yeats writes that ‘for the awakening, for vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word – ecstasy’.<sup>31</sup> In *The Symbolism of Poetry*, too, Yeats writes that ‘all sounds, all colours, all forms,... evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions’ which ‘call down among us certain disembodied powers’; and ‘a work of art, whether it be epic or song... the more powerful it is...the more powerful will be

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<sup>26</sup> In 1983, Roy Davids gave Hughes a copy of *Renaissance and Reform: the Italian contribution* by Frances Yates and inscribed it ‘Ted, towards your definitive collection of Frances Yates...’)

<sup>27</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p.18.

<sup>28</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<plato.stanford.edu>), ‘Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’.

<sup>29</sup> Ficino, M. *The Book of Life*, Boer, C (trans.), (Texas: Spring Publications, University of Dallas, 1980).

<sup>30</sup> In particular, A.E.Waite, MacGregor Mathers, Aleister Crowley and Helena Blavatsky, all of whom studied and wrote about Hermetic Neoplatonism, Cabbala and other early occult philosophical teachings, and also practiced magical techniques based on these studies.

<sup>31</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Per Amicia Silentia Lunas*, section V. p.30  
< <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/33338>>

the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us'.<sup>32</sup> In another link with Ficino's divine *furor*, he writes that: 'the soul moves among symbols and infolds in symbols when trance, or madness or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own'.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Hughes would also have known Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesie*, in which Sidney writes that poets may be inspired by the gods so that 'whatsoever they write proceeds of a divine fury' and that 'the sacred mysteries of poesie' contain occult secrets which are 'written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused'.<sup>34</sup>

When Hughes expressed his own belief in the summoning power of symbols in his 1970 interview with Faas, he spoke of them as 'invocations of elemental force, demonic force' with the power to 'destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one'.<sup>35</sup> It is interesting, too, that he then went on to refer to his use of the Red Cross Knight as a controlling image in his poem, 'Gog'. He also used this image in an unpublished fragment of his 'lost' play 'The Calm',<sup>36</sup> which suggests his understanding of the similar symbolic use of this figure in Spenser's allegorical poem *The Faerie Queene* where Spenser titles the 'Firste booke': 'The legend of the Knight of the Red Crosse, or of Holiness'.<sup>37</sup>

Spenser's poem is essentially a hymn to the Goddess, and his use of numbers to structure his poetry, as in works by Chaucer and Milton, was an expression of the influence of new European learning acquired from Ancient Greek texts, in this case, from the mathematical and occult theories about harmony and number derived from Pythagoras and Plato<sup>38</sup>. Hughes seems not to have used numerology in that way, telling Drew Heinz that it was not the inflexible ordering of metrics, stanzas and rhyme which interested him but 'a kind of deeper, hidden form' which although it 'doesn't show regular metrical patterning or end rhyme, can't in any way be called "free"' and has a sort 'musical inevitability'. His main argument for not often using regular metre, stanza and rhyme was that, although they could offer 'mathematical satisfaction' and the best examples had 'a kind of primal force', he wanted 'to gain access to the huge variety of musical patterns that they shut out'.<sup>39</sup> He

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<sup>32</sup> Yeats, *The Symbolism of Poetry*, II, p. 190. <

[http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/The\\_Collected\\_Works\\_of\\_W.B.Yeats](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/The_Collected_Works_of_W.B.Yeats), Vol 6.>

<sup>33</sup> Yeats, *The Symbolism of Poetry*, IV, p.197. <

[http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/The\\_Collected\\_Works\\_of\\_W.B.Yeats](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/The_Collected_Works_of_W.B.Yeats), Vol 6.>

<sup>34</sup> Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella and other writings* (London: Dent, 1977), p.113.

<sup>35</sup> Faas, p.199.

<sup>36</sup> In an unpublished mss. fragment held at Smith College, two characters are discovered in a bed with an image of the Red Cross Knight on the coverlet.

<sup>36</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Dedication and Title. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15272/15272-h/15272-h.htm#dedic>>

<sup>38</sup> See Alastair Fowler's detailed discussion of this in *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964); and *Time's Purple Masquers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). Also, together with Christopher Butler, in *Time Beguiling Sport: Number Symbolism in Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis'* in Bloom, E. (ed.), *Shakespeare 1564-1964* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1964), pp. 124-33.

<sup>39</sup> Drue Heinz, *The Paris Review*, pp.91-4.

did admit to Drew Heinz that the year after his first book was published he 'wrote verses with three magical assonances to the line with the intention of abolishing certain critics.'<sup>40</sup> And he did use numerology in numbering Rainbow Press and Gehenna Press limited editions, several of which were issued in runs limited to 101 books, a number which represents the completion of a cycle (100) and a new beginning (1) and which, by combining the digits, reduces to 11, a powerful Master number in magic and numerology. He used it, too, in the Cabbalistic numerology of 'Adam and the Sacred Nine', in *Capriccio, Howls & Whispers* and, especially, in *Birthday Letters*, where the 88 poems represent a complete journey around the 88 paths of the four overlapping Cabbalistic Trees of Life.<sup>41</sup>

Memory, Will, Imagination and Love are the basic principles of the occult tradition, and, together with the symbolism and precise natural rhythms associated with astrology, these skills are necessary in order to channel the divine energies into our world. Hughes trained himself rigorously in all these.

He had a remarkable memory but he also used traditional techniques to train and improve it. In a letter to Sylvia Plath on 3 October 1956 he wrote of his plan to 'get three hours of thinking in a day. Not thinking, perhaps, but remembering', and of trying to look at the actual thing in front of [him], because 'As soon as I begin imagining the thing happening in my world, everything becomes right' (*LTH* 51-2). He taught his children memory techniques and in a letter to Frieda and Nicholas in 1971 he instructed them to 'practise making memory lists', and promised them a shilling for each list they could recite 'both forward and backward without mistake' when he met them the following weekend (*LTH* 312-3). And Giordano Bruno's teachings on Cabbala and on his memory system, both extensively examined by Frances Yates, strongly influenced Hughes. Bruno's memory system was copied from an image system described by Cicero, Simonides and another, anonymous, Latin author, and it was taught in the early Italian universities as part of Rhetoric (one of the 7 liberal arts).<sup>42</sup> Hughes's 'Introduction' to *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember* describes essentially the same technique. In 1997, when he gave me a copy of that book he inscribed it 'the skeleton key to the Treasure Houses', and exhorted me to practise the memory techniques.

In his own work, Hughes experimented seriously with many occult arts and techniques of magic. The first work to be published after his alchemical *Cave Birds* was the Cabbalistic *Adam and the Sacred Nine*. In *Crow*, possibly influenced by Franz Bardon's book *Initiation into Hermetics*, which he read in the early 1960s and recommended and gave to friends,<sup>43</sup> he appears to have

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<sup>40</sup> Drew Heinz, *The Paris Review*. p.68.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Cabbalistic nature of these works see Ann Skea, *Adam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama* (<<http://ann.skea.com/AdamHome.html>>); and 'Poetry and Magic 1', 'Poetry and Magic 2' and 'Poetry and Magic 3' on the Ted Hughes pages at <<http://ann.skea.com/THHome.htm>>.

<sup>42</sup> Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1966). Chapter 1: The three Latin sources for the classical art of memory. pp.17- 41

<sup>43</sup> Franz Bardon, *Initiation into Hermetics* (Ruggeberg, 1962). Hughes recommended this book to Daniel Weissbort, as the latter told me in conversation, and in 1968 he sent a copy to Lucas Myers with the inscription

created an 'elementary' which expressed the Daemonic, shadow side of human nature. Bardon teaches that an elementary may be created mentally, astrally or physically but each method relies on the creation of an image which is then charged with spirit by 'the power of the imagination'. It should be given 'Will, Intelligence, Sentience and Consciousness'; life is then breathed into it and 'any further work then becomes a matter of the imagination.'<sup>44</sup> *Gaudete*, which was begun in 1964 but did not achieve its published form until 1977, is a shamanic, Bacchic, Dionysian creation which ends with hymns to the Goddess inspired by sacred Southern Indian hymns to Siva.<sup>45</sup>

In 1982, for the birth of HRH Prince William, Hughes wrote 'The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown', an astrological poem based on the Prince's birth chart, in which the chief planetary gods each pronounce their blessing.<sup>46</sup> And the cross-shaped poem he created for the letter S in *David Hockney's Alphabet* was almost certainly crafted for occult purposes.<sup>47</sup>

In all of these, and throughout his work, there is evidence of Hughes's acceptance of the traditional occult beliefs in the summoning power of images and imagination. A poem, as he told young poets in *Poetry in the Making*, is 'an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit' and he advised them to 'imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it.... Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic' (*PM* 18-19). His own early hunting experiences also gave him an empathy with animals and taught him how to immerse himself in their world: skills which allowed him to create the poetic magic which is readily apparent in poems like 'Hawk Roosting' (*THCP* 68), 'An Otter' (*CP* 79-80), 'Go Fishing' (*CP* 652) 'That Morning' (*CP* 663-4) and many others.

In Hughes's notebooks in the British Library, there are astrological charts; pages of magical sigils and images copied from old Grimoires; and detailed notes on the ten Sephiroth of the Cabbalistic Tree, listing the magical 'correspondences' of each (for instance, magical image, god name, angelic order, planet, qliphoth, spiritual experience). Hughes's extensive knowledge of the occult tradition was apparent in the 'Note' he wrote for his selection of

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'*To Lucas from the Crow*' (e-mail Myers to Skea 16 February 2001). He also bought Michael Baldwin a copy of *The Magician, his training and work*, Butler, W.E. (London: Aquarian Press, 1959), cf. Baldwin, *Hughes and Shamanism (A Memoir)*, <[ann.skea.com/MichaleBaldwinMemoir1.htm](http://ann.skea.com/MichaleBaldwinMemoir1.htm)>. And he had Butler's book, *Magic and the Qabala* (London: Aquarian Press, 1964), in his library.

<sup>44</sup> Bardon, pp. 196-206.

<sup>45</sup> This is discussed in detail in Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes' Vacanas', in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (eds), *Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to Collected*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp.81-95. Also available at <<http://ann.skea.com/THVacanas.html>>

<sup>46</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown: What the starry heavens sang for HRH Prince William on 21 July 1982' in Mackay Brown, G (ed.), *Four Poems for St; Magnus* (Orkney: Breckness Press, 1987). For a discussion of this poem, see Ann Skea, A. *Ted Hughes and The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown* <<http://ann.skea.com/Zodiacpoem.htm>>.

<sup>47</sup> See Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes and David Hockney's Alphabet', *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Vol.V No.1, 2016, pp.34-40.

Shakespeare's verse, and it is even clearer in the pages of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in which he discussed 'Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism' (later published separately in *Winter Pollen*).<sup>48</sup> There, he describes the salient features of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Cabbala and the influence of 'the great formative figures of Giordano Bruno and John Dee' on English poets such as Sir Philip Sidney and other members of the Areopagus;<sup>49</sup> on Henry Wriothesley and 'the group for which 'Love's Labours Lost' was written' (the so-called 'School of the Night');<sup>50</sup> and, through his close connection with these poets, on Shakespeare. That Shakespeare was familiar with at least some of the work of Pico is apparent in Hamlet's speech 'O what a piece of work is a man' (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 316), which almost paraphrases Pico's 'Oration on the Dignity of Man', which itself 'echoes throughout with the words of Magia and Cabala'.<sup>51</sup>

In *De imaginum compositae*, Bruno emphasises the primacy of the imagination in religion and magic; and he identifies the *furor* roused by true poetry, painting and music as the instrument for communicating with the divine and reaching the Truth.<sup>52</sup> In *De gli Eroici Furori* (which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney) he refers to the 'mystical and cabbalistic doctrines' found in the *Canticles* of Solomon as his model. And he suggests, too, the sort of spiritual summons Hughes discussed with Ekbert Faas, when he writes: 'the ultimate design in this work to which I have been called, was to signify divine contemplation and present the eye and ear with other frenzies, not those caused by vulgar love, but those caused by heroic love'.<sup>53</sup>

The 'operative Magi of the Renaissance', according to Frances Yates, used music, art and poetry to draw down divine energies into our world.<sup>54</sup> Everything Hughes had learned about magic, imagination, memory, images and Love from earlier philosophers and poets, and every skill he had learned with and alongside this knowledge, was essential to his creation of *Capriccio*, *Birthday Letters* and *Howls & Whispers*.<sup>55</sup> Unlike Bruno, he did choose a worldly woman to represent the Goddess. Just as Dante chose Beatrice, Sidney chose Stella, and Spenser chose Queen Elizabeth I in his *Faerie*

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<sup>48</sup> Ted Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (London: Faber, 1971), pp.167-170; *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber, 1992), pp.19-34; *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 293-309.

<sup>49</sup> Members of the so-called 'Areopagus' were poets who studied classical meter and number with the goal of reforming poetry. They included Philip Sidney, Gabriel Harvey, Edmund Spenser and Edward Dyer.

<sup>50</sup> This group included Sir Walter Raleigh, Christopher Marlowe, George Chapman and Thomas Harriot.

<sup>51</sup> Yates, pp. 102-3. This begins 'What a great miracle is Man, O Asclepius'.

<sup>52</sup> Yates, pp. 335-6.

<sup>53</sup> *De Gli Eroici Furori* contains love poems and dialogues which use Petrarchan conceits, accompanied by commentaries about their mystical meaning. An English translation by Paolo Eugene Memmo, Jnr. (1994) can be found at <[esoterisarchives.com](http://esoterisarchives.com)>. All quotations are from this translation.

<sup>54</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, pp. 104-5

<sup>55</sup> This is examined in detail in Ann Skea's, *Poetry and Magic 1,2 and 3*, <<http://ann.skea.com/BLCabala.htm>>; <<http://ann.skea.com/HWCabala.htm>>; and <<http://ann.skea.com/CapriccioHome.htm>>

*Queene*, Hughes chose Sylvia Plath for whom to write his 'Canticle'. For all of these poets it was the music, the rhythms, the rituals, the acts of imagining and remembering, and the sheer magic of poetry which recaptured the ecstasy, the *furor*, of love and drew divine healing energy into our world. So *Birthday Letters* became one more hymn to the Goddess of Love in a long and largely occult (or hidden) poetic tradition.

# Ted Hughes and the Ecological Sublime

Hugh Dunkerley

The purpose of this essay is to look at the sublime through the lens of ecocriticism and to see if this can tell us anything new about Ted Hughes as a poet of nature. The sublime is important because it has been the West's main way of exploring the otherness of nature for the past two hundred and fifty years. The sublime is, of course, central to much Romantic writing. Originally a Greek term, the sublime was theorised first by Edmund Burke and then by Kant and Schopenhauer. Although there are important differences between their accounts of the sublime, what they do have in common is an emphasis on the awe-inspiring nature of the sublime, of the experience as being one which, temporarily at least, threatens to overwhelm the perceiver. Discussions of Ted Hughes's work and the sublime have been generally limited to an analysis of the sublime in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as in Christian La Cassagnère's essay 'Ted Hughes's Crying Horizons: 'Wind' and the Poetics of Sublimity'.<sup>1</sup> While such an approach provides a new and stimulating way of rehabilitating the sublime, I am concerned here with the opportunities and possible pitfalls of reading the sublime from an ecocritical viewpoint. In order to do this I will examine a number of Hughes's poems through the lens of what Christopher Hitt terms 'the ecological sublime'.

In his essay entitled 'Toward an Ecological Sublime', Hitt traces the idea of nature's otherness in recent debates, particularly with regard to the sublime. As Hitt explains, the concept has come under sustained attack.

Indeed, it has been the overwhelming tendency of literary criticism over the past few decades to evaluate the aesthetic of the sublime primarily as an expression of asymmetrical power relationships; between human and nature, self and other, reader and text, male and female, conqueror and oppressed.<sup>2</sup>

Such critiques of course have a point. It is important to bear in mind the ways in which the idea of sublime wilderness, in particular, does reinscribe the separation of human and non-human realms. For ecocritics, the problem with the sublime, certainly as theorised by Kant, is that after the threat of being overwhelmed, the perceiving mind's equilibrium is restored, demonstrating our 'pre-eminence over nature'.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, as William Cronon points out in his seminal essay, 'The Problem with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', what we think of as wilderness is rarely untouched by

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<sup>1</sup> Christian La Cassagnère, 'Ted Hughes's Crying Horizons: 'Wind' and the Poetics of Sublimity', in *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons* edited by Joanny Moulin, (Taylor and Francis, 2005), pp. 34-39.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hitt, 'Toward an Ecological Sublime', in *New Literary History* (Volume 3, Number 3, Summer, 1999) p. 603.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, quoted in Hitt, p. 608.

humans.<sup>4</sup> We have been modifying the world since the Pleistocene. As Cronon suggests, by separating off certain parts of nature as sublime, we neglect the rest of the world with its messy accommodations of the natural and the cultural.

However, Hitt sees ‘a scholarly neglect on the part of ecocriticism to interrogate the discourse of the sublime’<sup>5</sup> in any more subtle a manner. For him the concept as we use it today is double-edged. The idea of wild nature as ‘out there’ underwrites our separateness from, and ultimate superiority over, the natural world. But a loss of any sense of otherness is potentially catastrophic. Here Hitt quotes Cronon:

I also think that it is no less crucial for us to recognise and honour non-human nature as a world we did not create, a world with its own independent, non-human reasons for being as it is. The autonomy of non-human nature seems to me an indispensable corrective to human arrogance.<sup>6</sup>

What are we to make, then, of a concept such as the sublime which seems to be both deeply troubling and in some way essential? The answer, Hitt suggests, lies in the very nature of the sublime itself. ‘Crudely put,’ he states, ‘the contradiction of the sublime is that it has tended to include *both* humbling fear *and* ennobling validation of the perceiving subject’.<sup>7</sup> He quotes Kant from *The Critique of Judgement*, suggesting that in experiencing the sublime ‘the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature’.<sup>8</sup> This humbling effect, Hitt suggests, gives us a starting point for ‘a new reconfigured version of the sublime, an ecological sublime’.<sup>9</sup>

But what of the more negative aspects of the sublime? Here Hitt turns to Thomas Weiskel’s *The Romantic Sublime*.<sup>10</sup> Weiskel ‘elaborates on the “structure of Romantic transcendence”<sup>11</sup> by dividing Kant’s sublime into three “phases or economic states”.<sup>12</sup> The first phase is the ‘pre-sublime’ where “the mind is in a determinate relation to the object.”<sup>13</sup> Then there is ‘a rupture in which a disequilibrium between the mind and the object is introduced’.<sup>14</sup> This is followed by a final, “reactive phase” in which equilibrium is restored’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William Cronon, ‘The Problem with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, in Cronon, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. (W.W.Norton & Co., 1995) pp. 69-70.

<sup>5</sup> Hitt, p. 605

<sup>6</sup> Hitt, p. 606.

<sup>7</sup> Hitt, p. 606.

<sup>8</sup> Kant in Hitt, p. 606.

<sup>9</sup> Hitt, p. 607.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>12</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>13</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>14</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>15</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

For Hitt, this analysis allows us to salvage some of Kant's analysis, to 'avoid throwing out the Kantian baby with the bathwater.' 'According to the *Critique*,' he suggests, 'the sublime experience begins with the apprehension of a natural object which the imagination is unable to grasp. The result is a kind of cognitive dissonance, a rift between perception and cognition. This rift is then overcome by the triumphant emergence of reason, revealing to us, finally, our "pre-eminence over nature"'.<sup>16</sup>

At first it might seem enough merely to eliminate the final stage of the Kantian sublime. After all, it is this mental domination of nature that is so problematic for the ecocritic, echoing as it does the whole instrumental attitude of our culture towards nature. However, Hitt sees the sublime drained of any revelatory experience as a diminution:

it seems to me that to deprive the sublime of *some* kind of revelatory experience would be to water it down, to dim its lustre. I am not even sure we would be justified in continuing to use the word "sublime" in such a case. Ideally, then, an ecological sublime would offer a new kind of transcendence which would resist the traditional reinscription of humankind's supremacy over nature.<sup>17</sup>

So how might this ecological sublime actually look? Hitt draws on the work of environmental philosopher Neil Evernden. In his book *The Social Creation of Nature*, Evernden rejects the two traditional Western views of nature, 'nature-as-object' and 'nature-as-self'.<sup>18</sup> Both, Evernden says, rely on a dualism in which 'the centrality of the perceiving human subject is apparent.'<sup>19</sup> Evernden suggests a third way, an approach which Hitt suggests would 'decentre the subject and "liberate" nature, leaving it outside the domain of the mind – neither as object, nor as "wider self."<sup>20</sup> This move,' states Hitt, 'would involve seeing nature as independent of any conceptual categories, to take seriously Merleau-Ponty's adage: "To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge"'.<sup>21</sup> For Hitt, the experience of nature '*in its full individuality*' is a 'unique and astonishing event' and is 'perhaps fundamentally religious in a nonecclesiastical sense.'<sup>22</sup> This, suggests Hitt, is transcendence of a different order, not of mind over nature, but of speaker over logos.<sup>23</sup>

What happens to language in such an experience of nature? How can an experience that seems to exceed our conceptual capacities be expressed in words, which themselves are, of course, intimately bound up with our conception of the world? In answer to this I am going to look at a number of

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<sup>16</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>17</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>18</sup> Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Hitt, p. 613.

<sup>20</sup> Hitt, p.613.

<sup>21</sup> Hitt, p. 613.

<sup>22</sup> Hitt, p. 613.

<sup>23</sup> Hitt, p. 616.

Hughes's poems which, I believe, can tell us something interesting about the ecological sublime.

Hughes's most obvious early engagement with the sublime comes in 'The Horses' from *The Hawk in The Rain*. In many ways this poem follows the familiar track of the Romantic sublime: a lone wanderer on the hills encounters an awe-inspiring vision of nature, then returns, changed somehow, to the world of humans.

At first reading the poem might seem to fulfil the three stages of the Kantian sublime. The poet climbs into the hills 'in the hour-before-dawn dark' (CP 22). Soon there is a 'rupture in which a disequilibrium between mind and object is introduced.'<sup>24</sup> The poet 'turned // Stumbling in the fever of a dream...' (CP 22). The final two couplets then seem to echo Wordsworth's consolatory lines from 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' ('But oft in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities...').<sup>25</sup>

In the din of the crowded streets, going among the years, the  
faces,  
May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place

Between the streams and the red clouds, hearing the curlews,  
Hearing the horizons endure. (CP 23)

We might see these couplets as an example of the 'final, "reactive phase" in which equilibrium is restored.'<sup>26</sup> However, the ending of the poem seems underpowered, and more so because of its obvious echo of Wordsworth. Rather than a memory to be called up for comfort of some sort, this reader is left with a sense of the uncanny, of the vast inhuman forces that are at work in the 'Megalith-still' horses and the sun 'splitting to its core' (CP 22). The language of the final two couplets fails in the face of the enormity of the experience. The Romantic convention can't do what Hughes needs it to do.

Hughes's work has, on the whole, been read by critics in the past for its referential content. Critics such as Gifford, Roberts, Faas and Scigaj have written on Hughes's use of myth, his attitude to violence and the religious elements in his work. Less attention has been paid to his treatment of language, unless it has been from a psychoanalytical perspective.<sup>27</sup> Yet the question of the relationship of language to nature does in fact occur again and again in his work. In *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes makes explicit the relationship between words and experience for the writer.

There are no words to capture the infinite depth of  
crowiness in the crow's flight. All we can do is use a word

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<sup>24</sup> Hitt, p.608.

<sup>25</sup> William, Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1798' in *The Penguin Book of Romantic Verse*, ed. David Wright (Penguin, 1968) p.110.

<sup>26</sup> Hitt p.608.

<sup>27</sup> See Paul Bentley, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond* (Longman, 1998) and Daniel O'Connor, *Ted Hughes and Trauma: Burning the Foxes* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

as an indicator, or a whole bunch of words as a general directive. But the ominous thing in the crow's flight, the bare-faced, bandit thing, the tattered beggarly gypsy thing, the caressing and shaping yet slightly clumsy gesture of the downstroke, as if the wings were both too heavy and too powerful, and the headlong sort of merriment, the macabre pantomime ghoulishness and the undertaker sleekness – you could go on for a very long time with phrases of this sort and still have completely missed your instant, glimpse knowledge of the world of the crow's wingbeat. And a bookload of such descriptions is immediately rubbish when you look up and see the crow flying. (*PM* 119)

The difficulty of negotiating experience through words is obvious in a number of poems in *Wodwo*. In 'A Wind Flashes the Grass' Hughes describes 'listening for below words / Meanings that will not part from the rock' (*CP* 153). Later, the stirring of the twigs of the trees is described as 'the oracle of the earth'. Hughes seems to be suggesting that there is another language out there, something we, as humans, can sense but only gesture towards. In 'Pibroch' the anthropomorphic imagery is taken further, the sea being described as crying 'with its meaningless voice' and later as being '[w]ithout purpose, without self-deception' (*CP* 179). Similarly, a pebble, the wind, a tree are also given a sense of existential horror, aware of their own pointless existences. What is happening here? On one level Hughes is employing a degree of hyperbole and anthropomorphism, but his aim is actually, I would suggest, to set up a dissonance in the reader's experience. Paul Bentley, in his fascinating book, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond*, makes the following point:

Hughes' use of anthropomorphic imagery...accentuates this gap between word and thing. It draws attention to the second-hand, displaced, improvisatory quality of the object – the signifier – with which we think, with which we negotiate our frontiers.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of the sublime, these poems have moved on from 'The Horses' in their power to question the very concepts underlying our understanding of the phenomenal world. But the poet seems caught in the second phase of the sublime, what Hitt describes as 'a kind of cognitive dissonance, a rift between perception and conception.'<sup>29</sup>

A similar moment occurs in the poem 'Tree' from *Remains of Elmet*. Here I am going to refer to the version originally published in *Remains of Elmet* rather than the revised text in *Collected Poems*, which combines two

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Bentley, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond* (Longman, 1998) p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

poems from the original collection. The tree is initially characterised as a kind of mad Calvinist ('Smote the horizons / With the jawbone of emptiness' (RE 47)). Here 'the mind is in a determinate relation to the object.'<sup>30</sup> But a violent rupture occurs as 'words left him. / Mind left him. God left him' (RE 47). The tree is described as 'The Lightning conductor / of a maiming glimpse' (RE 47). There is the 'cognitive dissonance' of the second stage of the sublime here, as the tree glimpses something which language and conceptual thought cannot grasp. But the poem doesn't leave us simply with this stage. There is something more going on. The tree is '[t]ransfigured' and is then described as 'the new prophet' (RE 47). Unlike the trees at the end of 'A Wind Flashes the Grass, which are 'too afraid they too are momentary' (CP 153), this tree gasps a cry which has a religious quality to it, suggesting a new vision, even if that vision is agonising. The vision is, to return to Hitt, one of nature '*in its full individuality*' and is a 'unique and astonishing event', 'perhaps fundamentally religious in a nonecclesiastical sense.'<sup>31</sup>

I am now going to turn to 'Gulkana', a poem from *River*. 'Gulkana' is an account of a fishing trip Hughes made in Alaska with his son Nicholas. It was an important poem for Hughes. There are a number of published versions. The first, which I refer to here, is from *River* (1983). The poem was then revised for the U.S. edition of *River* (1984). Another version, entitled 'The Gulkana' appeared first in *Three Books* (1993) then in *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* (1995). This third version is also the version in the *Collected Poems*. As Hughes told Nicholas Gammage, there are one hundred and fifty manuscript pages of the poem in the Ted Hughes archive (LTH 734). It is my view that the revisions to the *River* version weaken the poem. In the version included in *Three Books* onwards, what Bentley describes as the 'second-hand, displaced, improvisatory quality of the object – the signifier –' is downplayed. 'Gulkana' is written in an open form, lines of irregular length organised in stanzas or verse paragraphs of varying lengths. One effect of this is to offer the reader a greater sense of an enacted experience, of language and thought straining at the limits of comprehension.

Unlike some of the other poems in *River*, which have an uplifting sense, even a religious joy about them, 'Gulkana' is, on one level, a poem of profound alienation. Early in the poem there is already a questioning of language, of the human conceptualisation of the land and the river. The poet attempts to divine something about the river from its name, but the word is strange, almost otherworldly, and he can make nothing of it. 'Strange word, "Gulkana". What did it mean?' (R 78) Even the map seems senseless in the face of the reality of the river, the river 'A pale, blue line, scrawled with a childish hand' (R 78). But more than this, the water and the rocks somehow seem to exceed the names they are given, 'More than water...more than rocks' (R 78).

Soon we are told 'The whole land was in perpetual seismic tremor' (R 78), a physical shaking which echoes the shaking of categories that the river with its 'deranging cry' (R 78) provokes in the poet. He describes his eyes as 'blind somehow to what I stared at / As if it stared at me' (R 80).

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<sup>30</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>31</sup> Hitt, p. 613.

What Hughes is describing is the rupture of categories that Weiskel refers to as the second phase of the sublime. There is a severe disequilibrium between the mind and the object. The rupture is so severe in fact that the poet's sense of self is threatened. Instead of the reassuring sense of knowing subject and known object, Hughes describes a situation in which the river seems to be staring at him. Hughes attempts to rationalise this sense of a threatening presence as a 'doppelganger other, unliving, / Everliving, a larva from prehistory' (*R* 80). It is as if nature is now inside him, looking out, 'Recognizing his home' (*R* 80).

When, finally, they do land a fish, it is too big to eat.

But there was the eye!

I peered into that lens

Seeking what I had come for. (What had I come for?

The camera flash? The burned-out, staring bulb?) (*R* 82)

What Hughes is expecting, but failing to experience, is the third, transcendent stage in Weiskel's account of the sublime. He is seeking what he had 'come for', but instead can only tentatively suggest possible answers. The camera-flash represents the moment of illumination, the record of something significant. But instead of a photo, there is the suggestion of '[t]he burned-out, staring bulb', as if that is all that is left of the observer. Looking into the eye of the fish he can only make comparisons to a 'sunken sun', 'refrigerating pressures' (*R* 82). The promise of transcendence cannot be fulfilled. There is no 'ennobling validation of the perceiving subject'.<sup>32</sup> The experience itself is beyond categorisation, can only be gestured at.

For the fish, relaunched into the river, only death is certain, albeit a death with religious overtones, a 'sacrament – a consummation' (*R* 84). Hughes, on the other hand, comes back to himself in an aircraft sometime later, the whole incident recalled, we now realise, as he leaves Alaska.

A spectre

Peered from the window, under the cobalt blaze,

Down onto Greenland's unremoving corpse

Tight-sheeted with snow-glare. (*R* 84)

The sense of self is still disrupted, '[a] spectre of fragments.' (*R* 84) The human world of the aircraft seems unreal and flimsy, like a child's toy. It is the experience of the river, in all its otherness, that is still more real, its 'burden' 'beyond waking' (*R* 84). Hughes states that all he could do was to record 'The King Salmon's eye', the blood-mote mosquito', 'the stilt-legged, one rose rose' (*R* 84). Recording is of course a passive activity. It is as if Hughes has given up the fight to rationally comprehend what has happened to him.

On one level 'Gulkana' can be seen, as I suggested earlier, as a poem of profound alienation. In Lacanian terms, one might see Hughes as struggling with the lack revealed by the breakdown in the symbolic order as

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<sup>32</sup> Hitt, p. 604.

experienced through an irruption of the Real. In this sense it seems Hughes can't get beyond the second phase of the sublime experience. There is certainly no 'triumphant emergence of reason revealing to us, finally, our "pre-eminence over nature"'.<sup>33</sup> And yet there is a sense that Hughes is changed, even transformed by the experience. Although the only certain thing for the fish is death, it is death as part of the natural cycle. Hughes's use of religious imagery isn't hinting at a spiritual survival of some kind so much as an absolute being in the moment, whether it is in life or death.

Devoured by revelation,  
Every molecule seized, and tasted, and drained  
Into the amethyst of emptiness – (R 84)

Returning to Hitt's essay, we can see parallels with Evernden's 'third way' of seeing nature in this poem. Evernden draws on the work of Rudolf Otto in his argument.

It might be fair to say that the experience of radical otherness is at the base of all astonishment or awe, all "numinous" experience. It is that shock of recognition that generates the acknowledgment of mystery that we can characterize as religious. Otto suggests that "in the last resort it relies on something quite different from anything that can be exhaustively rendered in rational concepts, namely, on the sheer absolute wondrousness that transcends thought, on the *mysterium*, presented in its pure, non-rational form."<sup>34</sup>

Through a reading of a number of Hughes's poems it has been possible to trace the development of the sublime as an important feature of his engagement with 'the more-than-human world'<sup>35</sup>. From an ecocritical viewpoint, a rehabilitation of the sublime in terms of our understanding of the relationship between the human and the wider world is important: it allows us to see literature as a vital way to break out of the symbolic order of our contemporary world-view. As Hitt states towards the end of his essay:

[t]he symbolic order, after all, is a limited human construction that never fully accounted for the wholeness of "reality" in the first place. The sublime would seem to adumbrate the ontological autonomy of the nonhuman by forcing us to recognize this limitation.<sup>36</sup>

Hughes's engagement with the sublime can usefully be viewed as a constant attempt to negotiate those borders between the human and the 'more-than-

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<sup>33</sup> Hitt, p. 608.

<sup>34</sup> Evernden, quoted in Hitt, p. 614.

<sup>35</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of The Sensuous* (Vintage, 1997) p. 183.

<sup>36</sup> Hitt, p. 615.

human', to more clearly understand our place in the larger ecology of the world.

## Tracing Ted Hughes's Irish Roots

Robert Jocelyn

'Crag Jack was my grandfather – Dad's father, Irish' (*LTH* 724). So wrote Ted Hughes to Keith Sagar in July 1998. Hughes was aware of the family's Irish roots on his paternal side and, at some point, as this same letter reveals, a genealogist, also named Hughes but no relation, tried unsuccessfully to trace these roots back to before his grandfather.

It has now become a little easier to research family history through available birth and marriage records, baptisms, censuses, rent rolls, valuations, church records, petitions and so forth - even prison records, as we shall see. Nevertheless, there are times when one has to accept the balance of probabilities in this area of research, especially the further back one goes. Working through these records and with the help of highly professional researchers in Yorkshire, Salford and Belfast, to whom I owe a considerable debt of gratitude, I have been able to establish with a high degree of certainty that Ted Hughes's ancestor came from Armagh, Northern Ireland, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

Ted's grandfather, John Hughes (Crag Jack), died on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 1903 in the family home at 4 King Street, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire. His death certificate gives his age as forty-eight and shows that he was, "Formerly a dyer's labourer (Fustian)". The cause of death is given as "Phlusion (sic) Pulmonalis 3 years". Phthisis Pulmonalis, or pulmonary tuberculosis, was in those days a common disease amongst textile workers, akin to miner's lung. Fustian was a coarse cloth made from cotton and flax that was then brushed to raise the pile. It was the forerunner of today's corduroy. In the confined spaces of the mills the extreme dust was conducive to serious lung disease in an atmosphere made that much worse by the high temperatures and humidity that were necessary to prevent the yarn from snapping. In such conditions a textile worker's life was often a short one, a notable exception being Crag Jack's wife, Mary Alice, who lived to be ninety and to whom I will return.

In a letter to Ann Skea, Olwyn Hughes wrote that, 'All we know of him (Crag Jack) is that he was a merry soul, a great drinker and singer [...] When on his deathbed the local Church of England minister came by and spoke of religion, and the Catholic priest made a visit and left a bottle of whiskey that Jack drank and died'.<sup>2</sup> Ted Hughes wrote that:

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the following who have assisted in this research: Ian F. Marson, Genealogist and Record Agent, Maltby, South Yorkshire; Dr William Roulston, Research Director; and Gillian Hunt at the Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast.

<sup>2</sup> Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2000. I am grateful to Ann Skea for details of this letter, and for all her work on the Hughes family.

Family legend makes him a local sage – solved people's problems, wrote their letters, closest friends the local Catholic and Wesleyan Ministers, though he spent a lot of time in pubs. Said to be a great singer [...] Mystery man. (LTH 724)

Crag Jack got his name from Crag Vale, 'leads up through the deep gorge opening South from Mytholmroyd'. (LTH 724) In Keith Sagar's opinion Crag Jack was one of Hughes's alter egos,<sup>3</sup> and his grandfather became the subject of two of his poems, 'Crag Jack's Apostasy' and 'Familiar'.

Crag Jack was born on February 15<sup>th</sup> 1853 at 10 Upper Canal Street in Salford, Lancashire, the son of Henry and Mary Hughes. He had an elder brother, Thomas, and two elder sisters. Three years later another sister, Jane, was born, followed by the youngest child Henry.

There were numerous Canal Streets in Salford, as the town was intersected by canals bringing coal to the mills. Later, the canal system provided a cheaper method of shipping out the finished goods directly to the ships. Upper Canal Street was in the Crescent Ward of Salford, close to where the university is today, in a quite remarkably regenerated city. Nearby stood the Hopetown Cotton Mill, long since demolished, where the Hughes families would have probably found work. Nearly all Ted's paternal ancestors were connected in one way or another with the weaving and spinning industries.

In 1853, there were 108 mills in the area, exporting textile products to every corner of the globe. The skyline was black with smoke, while inside the mills there was a constant, thunderous noise from the looms – and dust. Disease was rampant and serious flooding occurred from time to time, rising on one occasion to eight feet above street level. During his research in Manchester, Friedrich Engels described Salford as 'an old and therefore very unwholesome, dirty, and ruined locality'.<sup>4</sup> But the booming industry still sucked in labour from all quarters of the country – and Ireland. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Irish men and women lost their jobs, especially in the North of Ireland, where linen weaving was superseded by power-loomed calico. Furthermore, the country was only slowly recovering from the Great Famine, which had devastated the country. Even before the Famine one observer recorded that, 'Accustomed to a wretched mode of living in their own country, (the Irish) are contented with wages which would starve an English labourer.'<sup>5</sup> The number of men and women seeking work suited the mill owners, who were able to keep wages low, but so too were the cost of housing, such as it was, and food.

These were the prevailing conditions when John (Crag Jack) and Mary Alice Hughes took lodgings at 1 Upper Canal Street in Salford. They are

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<sup>3</sup> Keith Sagar, ed., *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1983), p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (English translation by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky (New York, 1887; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1892), p.84. First published as *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (Leipzig, 1845).

<sup>5</sup> Edwards Baines, *The History of Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain*, (London: Fisher, Fisher and Jackson, 1835), p.496.

recorded as living there in the 1881 census.<sup>6</sup> Their ages are given as twenty-six and twenty-two, and they declare themselves to be a married couple. His occupation is listed as a “Washer dyehouse” and hers as a “Jack tenter Cotton Mill”. A jack tenter was someone who watched over the cotton bobbins as they were being wound.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Manchester and Salford lost their worldwide domination of the textile trade to overseas competition. This created a massive surplus of labour and more over-crowding in an area already suffering chronic social deprivation. These conditions were the likely reason Crag Jack moved his young family over to Hebden Bridge in search of work some time between 1881, and 1887, the year of their daughter Emma’s birth in Hebden Bridge, and in so doing established the family’s association with Yorkshire.

It is recorded that Crag Jack and Mary Alice Hughes were formally married on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1894 at the parish church in Hebden Bridge one month after the birth of their fourth and last child, William Henry Hughes, Ted’s father. The certificate shows Crag Jack being then aged thirty-eight and Mary Alice Major thirty-four. The bride’s father is given as George Major and his occupation a glass maker. Both bride and groom signed their names with an ‘X’. This does not necessarily mean one or both of them couldn’t write, but it is interesting that they didn’t sign in full. The groom’s father is shown as Henry Hughes (deceased). There is also a record of Mary Alice’s baptism on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1859, where her father’s occupation is again given as a glass blower. Neither document mentions the figure whom Ted Hughes identifies as a fixture in family tradition, a ‘Major Major of the Rock’(LTH 724).<sup>7</sup>

The parish church of St. James the Great in Hebden Bridge is part of the Church of England parish of Leeds and the marriage took place by banns, not by licence, which would have been the case had they been Roman Catholic. Crag Jack, or his father before him, had at some point switched denominations. Certainly Crag Jack and Mary Alice paid scant regard to the customs of either church by getting married after the birth of their last child.

Of all the Hughes family members, Henry Hughes, Ted Hughes’s great-grandfather, proved the most difficult to trace. Initially, the first record I obtained for Henry Hughes was in the 1851 census, which showed him living at 3 Upper Canal Street, Salford. There were then five in the family, namely: Henry aged thirty-seven, his wife Mary aged twenty-nine, a son Thomas aged ten, Mary five and Elizabeth nine months. Henry’s occupation is shown as an ‘Assistant carder’, and both he and his wife are listed as having been born in Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

By 1861 they had moved to 10 Upper Canal Street and the family now included the addition of John Hughes (Crag Jack), and the two youngest children, but there is no mention of Thomas Hughes, who may have left

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<sup>6</sup> National Archives Ref RG11 Piece 3966 Folio 70, p.9.

<sup>7</sup> According to Hughes in this same letter, family tradition portrayed Mary’s father as an army major stationed in Gibraltar who married a dark-skinned Spanish woman bringing exotic blood into the family. A search of the National Archives uncovered no “Major Major” in the Army Lists.

<sup>8</sup> National Archives Ref: HO107 Piece 2925 Folio 12 p.18.

home, being then in his twenties. The father's place of birth is now shown as Salford, while Mary retains her place of birth as Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

The 1871 census shows the family still residing at 10 Upper Canal Street, but both Henry and his wife Mary give their place of birth as Salford.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that after twenty or more years in Salford they had begun to drop their Irish affiliations. He is still shown as being a carder in a cotton mill.

The next stage of the research was to try and find a birth certificate for one or more of Henry and Mary's children that would show Mary's maiden name. This would open up the chances of finding their marriage registration and the name of Henry's father. Following my enquiries four birth certificates emerged: one for Elizabeth Hughes born in 3 Upper Canal Street, followed by one for John Hughes (Crag Jack), another for Jane Hughes and the fourth for Henry Hughes, the last three born at 10 Upper Canal Street. Henry Hughes is shown as their father with an occupation as a cotton carder. On Elizabeth's and John's certificate their mother's name is recorded as "Mary Reading", while in Jane's case it is "Mary Redding".

Now the search began for Henry Hughes's and Mary Reading's wedding registration. Nothing appeared for a Henry Hughes and Mary Reading, or any close variation of Reading such as Reddy or Reddon. I then switched my research to Ireland on the assumption that they had been married there, having stated in the 1851 census that that was where they had both been born.

One of the great losses for researchers and a lasting legacy of the Irish Civil War was the burning of the Dublin Four Courts in 1922, which housed Ireland's records. Bales of documents and ledgers were even used as barricades before being set on fire. Just a few records survived and researchers have had to fall back on parish and local records, which get sparser the further back in history one goes. Fortunately, more of these remaining records are now being brought together and made available.

There are plenty of Hughes names recorded. In fact there are 630 of them in County Armagh alone, with more in Antrim and Belfast. While it is predominantly a Northern Irish name, with strong links to the weaving and spinning industry, the Hughes name can be found all over Ireland. But nowhere could I find any record of a marriage between a Henry Hughes and a Mary Reading, or any similar rendering of her name. I also had to consider that official registration of marriage did not begin until 1864 and some marriage registers did not survive at all.

Unable to find any record of Henry Hughes's marriage anywhere in Ireland, I started again in Salford, where there was a marriage registered for a Henry Hughes and a Mary Redman. The marriage took place on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1843 in the parish of Prestwich-cum-Oldham. Their residence is shown as just 'Oldham' without a specific address. Henry Hughes is shown as a widower and his father as Peter Hughes, who was a weaver. Mary Redman's father, John Redman, is shown as a soldier.

The marriage was solemnised in the Church of England by banns, not by licence as, it has already been noted, would be required for a Catholic wedding. There were no Catholic churches in Salford prior to 1844 so it was

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<sup>9</sup> National Archives Ref: RG9 Piece 2925 Folio 12 p.18.

<sup>10</sup> National Archives Ref: RG10 Piece 4023 Folio 36 p.26.

not unusual for Catholic marriages to take place in a Church of England. But if this couple were indeed the parents of Crag Jack Hughes, and there is no other record in England or Ireland approaching the Prestwich entry, a number of questions arise.

Many Catholic marriages were carried out in Manchester Cathedral, and if the couple were residing in Salford, why were they not married there? Was it because they did not stipulate that they were Catholics? Was it a mixed marriage? Mary Redman's address is given as Butler Street which was on the Oldham side of the town, so she could just have decided to be married in Oldham. There were ten other marriages that day in the Prestwich church, which was far more than usual, and this could have led to mistakes being made in the register. Another possible explanation is that it was Henry rather than Crag Jack who converted to the Church of England beforehand. As we have seen, Crag Jack was certainly married in the Church of England.

The fact that Henry Hughes was shown a widower necessitated a search for his first marriage. This uncovered a marriage on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1833, again by banns not licence, between a Henry Hughes and a Jane O'Neal. Burial records show that a Jane Hughes, wife of Henry Hughes, was buried in Salford on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 1836, aged twenty-two.

Returning to the marriage entry of Henry Hughes and Mary Redman, Henry's father is shown as Peter Hughes. If Henry Hughes was born in Ireland, as he declared on the 1851 census, it was just possible that a parish register would show the marriage of Peter Hughes, or a baptism record of Henry. After a lengthy search through existing Irish records nothing emerged that linked Peter and Henry Hughes so it was back again to Salford for another trawl through the census records.

There to my surprise in the 1841 census, was a Peter Hughes aged fifty-six, his wife Bridget also aged fifty-six, a son John aged twenty and Henry Hughes aged twenty-five. Both parents are shown as having been born in Ireland, and their address in Salford listed as 'Back Oak Street'.<sup>11</sup> Oak Street, I discovered, used to be close to Upper Canal Street, and it seems that Peter had been living nearby all along. The 1851 census shows Peter had moved to 4 Upper Canal Street next door to Henry and Mary Hughes in No. 3. The two generations were, indeed, neighbours. The 1861 census shows Peter, now aged seventy-six, and his wife Bridget in 1 Canal Bank, all in the Crescent Ward of Salford. Canal Bank appears to be one of several small lots adjacent to Upper Canal Street running between the street and the canal itself. The same census shows Henry's family in 10 Upper Canal Street, as mentioned earlier.

A search through the marriage registers for the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century uncovered the marriage of Peter Hughes, a cotton weaver, and Bridget Carle on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1812 in Manchester Cathedral. Seven months later, on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1813, there is a baptism entry for Henry Hughes. His age in the later censuses corresponds with the date of his baptism. In 1821 there is another baptism record for a John Hughes with the parents given as Peter Hughes and Bridget Carroll.

The 1841 census for Salford (15) shows Mary's father, John Redman aged forty-eight, living in Butler Street. His occupation is shown as a

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<sup>11</sup> National Archives Ref: HO107 Piece 577 Folio 36 p. 45.

'Relieving Officer', a person who distributed poor relief.<sup>12</sup> This does not tally with the occupation given two years later on his daughter's marriage certificate where he stated he was a soldier, but he could have had a previous career in the army. The age of his daughter, Mary, is shown as eighteen, which correlates with the 1851 census, where her age was given as twenty-nine. Her occupation was a weaver.

While there remain some outstanding questions that may never be fully resolved over the marriage of Henry Hughes to "Mary Redman", all of us involved in the research agree that the balance of probabilities comes down in favour of Henry and Mary Hughes being the parents of Crag Jack Hughes.

Attention could now be focused on Peter Hughes and the fact that he stated his place of birth was Ireland. But where in Ireland? His age is given as seventy-six in the 1861 census and this would place his date of birth around 1785, and also make him twenty-seven when he was married in Salford in 1812. Peter Hughes's early years coincided with one of the most tumultuous periods of Irish history. Inspired by the French Revolution, the Society of United Irishmen was formed by Presbyterians in Belfast. This movement coalesced into the 1798 Uprising, but when the French invasion fleet sent to support the Uprising was scattered in a storm off Bantry Bay in Cork, the Uprising failed. In following years the English authorities tracked down and uncovered numerous secret societies in Ireland and England. One was the English Society in Manchester where a James Hughes, a weaver from Armagh was arrested and imprisoned. It is possible he was a relative of Peter Hughes, also a weaver from Armagh, but nothing has yet to emerge to connect the two. During the turmoil of those last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland, people scattered, emigrated, fled or were hunted out, so at this juncture it is largely conjecture what brought Peter Hughes to Salford, apart from the necessity to find work. Peter would have been too young to have taken part in the 1798 Uprising, but would have been one of many young men taking the boat to England afterwards.

To show how scanty the existing material for that time is and the general paucity of records, there are no Catholic baptism records for County Armagh earlier than 1796. An Irish census was undertaken in 1770, but only for the larger towns. A John Hughes is shown in Armagh with a wife and son, but there are no further details. The next census in 1821, which was the first true census for Ireland, shows two Hughes families, where at least three of the children's Christian names correspond with those used by later generations. One family is in Kilmore six miles north-east of Armagh City and the other in Liskeborough nearby. There is a list of flax growers from 1796, which includes fifty individuals named Hughes in County Armagh alone, who would have been in possession of some land.<sup>13</sup> If Peter Hughes named his eldest son Henry, then that might have been because his own father was called Henry following the convention of naming the eldest son after the paternal grandfather. There are flax growers named Henry Hughes in several parishes in County Armagh, namely in Creggan, Tynan, Derrynoose and Keady. There are also two Church Baptism records from Derrynoose in 1815

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<sup>12</sup> National Archives Ref: HO107 Piece 577 Folio 14 p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Flax Growers List of 1796 – a database created by the Ulster Historical Foundation, The Corn Exchange, Belfast and accessible on application.

and 1817 showing a Peter Hughes, in each case as the father, but the children's names do not correspond. These parishes are to the south-west of Armagh near the present-day border with the Republic of Ireland. In none of the cases mentioned is it yet possible to substantiate that these families have any connection with the Peter Hughes who had moved to Salford.

But Peter Hughes in Salford did leave us one last tantalising clue late in his life. On the 29<sup>th</sup> September 1860, he was arrested for being drunk and incarcerated in gaol for three days. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were no front and side mug shots so the duty officer entered a detailed description in neat copper-plate handwriting in the prison record. Part of Peter's entry reads as follows:

**Entry no** - 191. Peter Hughes. **Offence** - Drunk at Salford. **Height** - 5ft 2 inches. **Aged** – About 76. **Address** - Canal Street, Salford. **Religion** - RC. **Description** - Hair and eyes sallow, grey, blue. Glides (lazy) left eye. Pockpitted. **Status** - Married with two children living. **Country** – Irish. **Occupation** – Weaver. **Sentence** – 3 Days or pay 5/- plus 5/6 costs. **Where born** – Armagh.<sup>14</sup>

We may never know exactly where in Armagh Peter Hughes lived before leaving for England, but more information does emerge from time to time which can often be a great bonus to those researching ancestral lines, and the search for the Hughes family's exact Irish roots will continue. Interestingly, Armagh is little more than forty miles from Bellaghy and Seamus Heaney country.

Ted Hughes mentioned that his grandmother, Mary Alice Hughes, lived to be "92 or so". If this was the case it would place her death around 1950. She could have shed more light on the mysterious Major Major of Gibraltar and how she herself came to lodge with her "husband" in a none too salubrious quarter of Salford. Did the Major fall on hard times or was he cashiered? Or was the "legend" of Major Major of the Rock just that, a legend to add a little flourish to the un-remitting toil in the Victorian cotton mills? Either way, she would have had a rich cache of stories concerning the Hughes's family in the latter part of the nineteenth century. And, yes, she may even have learnt from Crag Jack's grandfather, who lived next to them in Salford, just where the Hughes's original Irish family home was in "Armagh".

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<sup>14</sup> Manchester Prison Registers 1847-1881. Film M600-2-1. Register 9268, p.99.

## Ted Hughes and Fred Rue Jacobs

Mimi McKay

The day after Fred Rue Jacobs received his limited edition copy of *Birthday Letters*, we were driving on yet another visit to Larry McMurtry's homage to Hay on Wye – Archer City, Texas. It seemed the perfect opportunity to read this new bombshell of a parcel aloud. By the third poem Fred was holding his head begging me not to go on. I, of course, pressed on through the entire volume, interspersing thoughtful comments along the way such as: "Remember this is your idol."

Needless to say this is not how Fred, the largest U.S. collector of Ted Hughes's oeuvre, felt about most of Ted's works. *Birthday Letters* was the exception. Why? Fred had no patience for anything akin to confessional biography. And while it could be argued that *Birthday Letters* was also much more than this, it was certainly the published Hughes work that came the closest. Much more importantly from Fred's perspective, and based on conversations with Ted over the years prior to publication, it was – at least to an extent – published under duress.

On at least half of the dozen times I was with Fred and Ted, we were with Ted alone. Those were terrific meetings, a few of which Fred described in the essay that follows, with Ted telling his magical stories and me mainly providing what dialogue there was. Fred, in the company of Ted, and very uncharacteristically, mainly listened. I was always amazed that Ted recalled and asked me about the things I had told him when we'd last met – and in detail that I had forgotten myself. I was also surprised about the amount of time Ted spent talking, and the details he shared, about his relationships – to everyone from Carol to Olwyn to Sylvia, and of course to his children. Ted clearly trusted Fred and, by extension it would seem, me. Fred's very close friendship with Olwyn dating back to the early 1970s was likely one important basis for this trust. But Fred developed a close and enduring friendship with Ted, and with many of Ted's friends and collaborators, certainly well beyond that of a passionate collector and even beyond what was enjoyed by many others in these circles.

My first meeting with Ted is captured in the essay below written by Fred in 1998, but Fred seems to have remembered that day very differently than I do, other than the places we ate, of course. We had spent the day prior to this meeting with Olwyn, and she had read my tea leaves. She insisted that they determined I would become a great mystery novelist, despite my protestations that I not only had never thought of writing one but didn't even like reading them. When I told Ted this, he said Olwyn was right, as she was always right, and drove us to several places of significance in great mystery novels. I remember him saying that Carol wasn't able to join us due to needing to stay with a sick cat. And at Gidleigh Park him demonstrating for me the correct way to put cream and jam on a scone. (He did many times at our teas together. I never learned to do it properly.) He also kissed me. That I remember very well.

My point? Beyond the obvious one that on the details of our meetings with Ted our remembrances diverge, is that Fred mythologized Ted, and that

it was in so many ways the perfect relationship for them both. It was in keeping with Fred's continuing quest for, in the Arendtian term, self hood. And Ted was a warm and true friend to us both, making time to see us whenever we were in England or he in the US, calling Fred often, and sending us delightful treats (food of course!) from Harrods.

What would Fred have thought of Jonathan Bate's biography? I can't be sure. But I am certain that he would have hated Bate's hysterics over Ted's relationships, and hated the surmises about Ted's conjectured angst in relation to them even more. As a good friend of Ted's, Fred knew much more about Ted's relationships than Bate would ever learn. And like all his true friends, would never write a biography.

## “Who will write the biography?”

Fred Rue Jacobs

It was a question heard over and over at conferences, especially the two big Ted Hughes seminars held at Manchester in 1980 and 1990. Would it be Ekbert Faas from Germany or Terry Gifford from England or Joanny Moulin from France or Ann Skea from Australia or Len Scigaj from America – they have all written a book or two on his work – or would it be one of the newer critics: Sahar El Mougy from Egypt or Sachidanda Mohanty from India, or, from Brazil, Izabel de Fatima de Oliveiro Brandao? Who? People shifted uncomfortably. Torn. The conversation shifted. Nobody seemed to want to write that biography. Though they may have wanted to, they forswore – perhaps from a grudging respect for his desire, almost demand, for personal privacy. A palpable feeling in almost all he did and said – whatever it was that filled Janet Malcolm with the “shame at [her] complicity in the chase that had made his life such a torment.”

He was a public man in the best Roman sense – after all, he was Poet Laureate in ordinary to her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II – but he was seen as a man who eschewed “the literary life,” the intrigues of the London poetry “establishment,” really a yeoman farmer aloof on his Devon fields, out of the limelight, remote, fishing and writing. A biographer would have felt like an intruder, some kind of agent.

But I can only imagine Hughes slogging around a damp Devon farm in Wellingtons or working at his desk every day at 10 a.m. or casting again and again in some stream or pond for the fish he loved; for I knew Hughes in his public mode: a bon vivant and raconteur, more like a boulevardier than that solitary recluse he seemed to want to appear. Just a damn good man in the pub.

You cannot know a person, as Johnson said about Boswell, until you “have eaten and drunk with him.” And my remembrances of Hughes are from meals, for dining fixes the memory, our own personal one and the one we keep for ideas. Hazlitt claimed he only remembered Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* because he read it while eating cold chicken and drinking particularly good coffee from a silver pot. What I remember about Hughes is associated with taste and sound, conversations over meals and, of course, his voice.

For me that voice still resonates. I can’t read his work without hearing the deep, rich powerful sound of it. There are records and CD’s, the sound is available, and I feel you can’t really know the work without hearing it: some poets are like that, Dylan Thomas and Czeslaw Milosz come to mind. It is a pity we can’t hear some of the T’ang poets like Li Bai.

I first met Ted Hughes during the Jubilee for Queen Elizabeth II. I’d come to London to have dinner with his sister, Olwyn, at the Trattoria de Pescattori. I rushed up from Barcelona and, since it was the Silver Jubilee, hadn’t bothered to look for a place to stay. Just checked my bags and grabbed a cab. No sooner had I sat down than we were joined by Hughes himself. He didn’t glance at the menu, just asked the waiter if the chef could prepare a particular dish. It turned out that the chef felt flattered at the confidence a patron had in his skills. I ordered the same. It was superb. But I

was too embarrassed to ask what it was and still don't know. The Queen was the main topic of conversation. Hughes had just recently gotten his Order of the British Empire (OBE) and so had recently seen her. She has "the ability to make you feel intimate," he said, and went on to describe how small she was, but how "brilliant"; she knew his poems very well, knew specifics, not just as if she'd been briefed. We talked late into the night – not a good idea in those days when London closed down at 11 p.m., you couldn't even get a cab after that. When it was time to leave, he offered to drop me at my hotel. I had none, so he had the waiter bring a phone and call a friend, at midnight, and arranged for me to stay there for a week and drove me over.

His friend, Liliana Giardini, had dinner parties. Everyone would bring something. I didn't know what to bring; Hughes suggested a fine smoked eel that you could only get at Harrods. I got a whole one. He brought champagne – Perrier Jouet or Clicquot – and we just feasted on that. There were a couple of Italian girls who were in London learning English, Sara and Patrizia, some staff from a literary magazine. We took a couple of pictures – one of the rare times he did that. Hughes talked about *Vasco*, an opera he'd written with the composer Gordon Crosse. It was all changed. Hughes had written it as a light, comic piece, then he didn't hear for years from Crosse – whose marriage had broken down -- now it was produced as "three and a half hours of sombre tragedy." The girls wanted to know what to see in London. Hughes passed on whatever delighted him. He told them to see the Inns of Court, but from "the executive dining room at W.H. Smith Department Store, just ring up Pam Leggett and tell her I sent you."

We had breakfasts at Liliana's as well. At one, Hughes talked about the eel we'd had at a dinner. He talked about fishing, especially in Devon. He even wanted to start an eel fishing business down there and claimed that there had not been much done in so long that now there were more than ever. He went on to intricately describe the eel traps. Then on to eels themselves, fascinating talk about their life in the ocean and on land, specific details about how they are so sensitive they can "detect a single molecule."

Once we spent a whole afternoon at Spenger's in Berkeley eating raw oysters as we put off our dinner of crab legs sautéed in butter and wine. He talked oyster lore – how to bite them just right to release the juices from their livers to enhance the flavor of the whole. I told oyster jokes – "you can't believe everything you hear about oysters and sexual prowess, why last night I ate a dozen and only nine of them worked." Then we drove across the bridge to San Francisco and got the pecan pie he loved on Union Street. He told about the project that had been going on for over twenty years, he'd tried to write the Tibetan Book of the Dead as a libretto for an opera or, maybe, an oratorio with the composer Chou Wan-chung. They had worked on and off on it since 1957, now Chou had "just disappeared."

Hughes first met my darling girl, Mimi, at the White Hart in Exeter. We ate steak and oyster pie as he described Hawkins and Raleigh and Drake meeting at the same spot and planning their defense against the Spanish Armada. He knew Elizabethan history. Then we drove out to Dartmoor for tea at Gidleigh Park, a posh hotel, where he'd written an introduction for the cookbook the chef there had published. He told us about his children, his son trying to bring fish to people in Africa whose diets were poor, his daughter painting in Australia. He was sorry he'd talked his son into renouncing his U.S.

citizenship – during the Vietnam War, so he wouldn't be drafted and need to fight there – but was proud that his daughter carried three passports: UK, USA, and Australia.

On my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday Hughes came to visit me in the Bristol Cancer Clinic where I was having treatments and Mimi was my patient advocate. We'd been on a strict diet of seeds and leaves and tofu and, once in a while, berries. Ted's arrival meant I would get out and have a good meal. I wanted a steak but he warned me – before it became known – about Mad Cow Disease. The three of us ended up having a fine salmon at a place near the iron bridge. Hughes had just gotten back from Iceland – one of our favorite places – and had great stories of dreams. He was fascinated by dreams. He told a couple:

A man dreams of going to the country with a colleague's wife. He dreams they have an affair. He dreams that she falls in love. Meanwhile, the colleague's wife – who he doesn't really know – had the same dream. Then the man has a dream about being unfaithful to her. The wife – in real life – has a nervous breakdown. 'TRUE!' say the people who tell this one.

Another of the dreams he heard was:

A girl dreams of being asked by a professor to go to a conference on vulcanology in Paris to deliver a paper. She dreams that she masters the topic and learns French and goes to Paris. She dreams she gives the paper and then is recognized as preeminent in the field, especially by the professor who is sitting in the front row. When she awakens in the morning, she goes out walking and sees the professor she dreamed about. He crosses the street and comes over to tell her "Great lecture!" TRUE!

He went on to tell how the title for *Winter Pollen* – his latest book – had come from his wife's dream. Mimi told him that I never dream. He said, "Baskin never dreams." It was fascinating to hear that Baskin's stark vision was unmediated by dreams and to feel some kinship with Hughes's greatest artist collaborator. We took a couple of pictures that day as well. Now I'm sorry there are so few, that we didn't bother.

There are dozens and dozens of other meals, other conversations. But then the voice ran out. Hughes complained that he had a "cough." He'd try to do a reading or a talk but he'd get a cough. He stopped making public appearances.

In my observation of England over the last half century – going from an empire upon which the sun never set to the pathetic turnover of Hong Kong in that downpour – it has been like watching the Romans become Italians. Philip Larkin was the true personifier of emerging England, Ted Hughes was not. Hughes maintained the stern public Roman virtue of stoicism, the stiff upper lip. He was the last of that breed. Now the clamor is for a "fresh" Poet Laureate: one of the Beatles or a Rastafarian or an Irishman. "Tell it not in the Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon."

In the last terrible days in the cancer ward, Hughes would doze then wake and tell what he dreamed. Then the cough would come, he couldn't continue. He'd fall asleep again, then wake to tell his dream. And again he'd cough and doze and wake and tell a dream. Then he didn't wake.

I wish he would wake one more time and tell that one great dream. Perhaps, there is someone who comprehends that dream, is attuned to it. That is the person who should "write the biography." It won't be me. I never dream.

## Textual Changes in the Paperback Edition of Jonathan Bate's *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*

Terry Gifford

Ted Hughes was a reviser of his works, even after they were in print, or in performance. There is a story in Jonathan Bate's *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* of Hughes giving Richard Murphy a copy of his translation of Racine's *Phèdre* to take to a performance of the play that night which Hughes had been busy revising whilst waiting for his meeting with Murphy in the Connaught Hotel. Of course, scholars and editors of books about Hughes's works will be familiar with the different paginations of the hardback and paperback editions of *Winter Pollen* and *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, as well as in the American editions, which makes referencing a nightmare to check. If I reference the story of the revision of Racine translation it would be page 536, but on that page three lines have been added for the paperback edition, so the pagination differs between the two editions from that point onwards.

The paperback is prefaced by a note from the author indicating that 'a number of errors, ambiguities and contested memories' have been pointed out by 'Anne Donovan, Peter Fydler, Brenda Hedden, Carol Hughes and Rowland Wymer' and that these 'have been addressed in this edition'. It might be helpful to future scholars if some of those differences were documented, without comment, to prevent anyone else from having to undertake a parallel reading of the two texts, although there remains the possibility that this list is incomplete.

First, there are some minor revisions. On page 53 there are two changes in the second paragraph with the addition of 'next' teacher and later the addition of 'this' second teacher. On page 400 Ann Duncan is corrected to Ann Donovan and changed in the Index. On page 572, note 5 has been changed.

Importantly, on pages 539 and 540, the details of the account of Hughes's last days and hours have been changed from the hardback. The opening of Bate's epilogue titled 'The Legacy' has been changed and on page 542 there now appears the correction: 'Court Green was reopened later for close friends and family'. On page 553 a large section of the second paragraph has been cut and on page 557 the top paragraph has been cut. At the foot of page 559 there are two cuts and the important change that Hughes took his children home from school for a week (rather than a weekend) to tell them the truth about their mother's death. On the second paragraph of page 560 there are two small cuts and on page 562 there is an addition that makes it clear that in the sentence before the break Bate is reporting Olwyn's belief.

## Stealing Trout and Pike: 1962 to 1957

Mark Wormald

So much for the horror  
It has changed places. (CP 140)

There is a way of reading these dramatic and disturbing lines from 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning', Ted Hughes's great poem about fishing the river Taw at first light, that attends only, and properly, to their immediate literary situation, as any reader could have learned of it from the poem itself.

That sounds simple. Yet there is more than enough to learn, and as Christopher Reid's recent discussion of the poem reveals,<sup>1</sup> you don't have to be a fisherman to appreciate its vividness. But 'the horror' in question, a word with a long literary and cultural history, needs to be fully reckoned before it can be dismissed or, as here, relocated. The story already told by the time the poet-fisherman makes contact with his prize, the trout, or in Reid's view the poem itself, has had several phases: apprehensive arrival, two fields away from the river, full of the fear of discovery of his trespass on land and his intended poaching, aware that the car he sits in is 'the reeking instrument' of 'An atrocity of the lace of first light' (CP 138); then infectious delight, on descending into the river's deep channel, as the river, 'amazed with itself' (CP 139), inspires both its fish and the fisherman's mind to rise and sink; the realization of the shocking savage power of the body of water as he starts wading in it; the conquest of that power by bold and deft wading, and casting, upstream, 'Flashing my blue minnow / Up the open throats of water' (CP 139); and then, as 'I deepen', (CP 139) a different kind of immersion, an extraordinarily sensitive conjuring of what else the river holds or brings down, overnight, off the moors in its turbulence, all of which the wading fisherman has to confront. Those depths are no longer just the river's. As its wreckage from 'some overnight disaster' (CP 139), some battlefield from which it is in flight, comes

Trailing past me with all its frights, its eyes  
With what they have seen and still see,  
They drag the flag off my head, a dark insistence  
Tearing the spirits from my mind's edge and from under...  
(CP 140)

That ellipsis evokes what it can't express: the compounded violence done to, as well as in, his unconscious. Whatever 'its eyes' are, whatever 'they have seen and still see' of this river's night terrors, they are dark and insistent enough. And Hughes needs rescuing from them, as surely as Hardy's darkling thrush had rescued him sixty-one years and four and a half months earlier on the last afternoon of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Reid, 'Ted Hughes as Teacher', *Ted Hughes Society Journal* IV.1 (2014), pp.23-32; see especially pp.29-32.

That is what the climax of Hughes's poem does when its next movement serves 'To yank me clear' (CP 140). And recognizing that element of relief which 'one of the river's real members' (CP 140) brings him as it emerges from the element in which it had lurked in the chaos of its tumbling syllables, – from the 'headlong river's rout' (CP 139) now comes 'a trout, a foot long' (CP 140) ~ may just help explain if not excuse that note of curious apparent insouciance in the lines with which I began. It's not insouciance, or not just the predator's brutalized recognition of what he has inflicted on his prey. It's also the recognition which that moment of encounter forces on him, once he has been forced to see himself caught in the act as well as catching the fish; only when, that is, 'Lifting its head in a shawl of water' (as though the fish was doing so voluntarily – the angler's line between them is as invisible as it is taut), and straining every fin and muscle to get free, 'it forces the final curve wide, getting / A long look at me' (CP 140).

Only then does Hughes weigh the reality of horror, see that it has changed places, and accept that, in killing this fish, catching the poem, he was closer, in this north Devon terrain to Conrad's Marlow, even to Conrad's Kurtz, than to Hardy (whose aged thrush lived to sing another century). Like the Thames, the Taw also has been one of the dark places of the earth, and is every night; but the place to celebrate that membership of an uneasy tradition is not by a river but in the home of such traditions, complicities, trophies, brutalities: the local pub.

Now I am a man in a painting  
(Under the mangy, stuffed head of a fox)  
Painted about 1905

So much for the first way of reading.

\*

But what happens when you bring to these lines, and this situation, this story, this conjunction, as Hughes wrote when introducing a reading of this poem in June 1965, of 'moments that go deep' and 'immediate poetic experience',<sup>2</sup> a knowledge you have reason to believe that not everyone can share, or once had access to? I want to give two instances. Both are examples of heightened or specialized insight, what fishermen call local knowledge, that is, information about particular waters or locations or techniques that improve their chances of success; both can at times feel almost illicit, or at least not strictly literary. But only the first of them is the kind of knowledge that fishermen might be motivated to acquire. The other is open to any student reading Hughes today, though it was certainly not available to the first readers of the poem, either in *The New Yorker* (21 March 1964) or in *Recklings* (1966), and I've already exploited it in two details of my discussion so far.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Poems by Living Poets', broadcast 16 June 1965; on Ted Hughes, *The Poet Speaks: Poetry in the Making*, (London: British Library, 2008), Disc Two track 26, '[Introduction]'.

I've suggested that there is a contrast between the imagined river and the real; between the river as perceived, experienced, felt by the poet – first watching it, then wading in its waters, shallow at first then deeper, its fish, its weeds, its detritus brought down overnight from its moorland source – and 'the sudden, strong spine / Of one of its real members – /Thoroughly made of dew, lightning and granite' (CP 140).

But hasn't that contrast been undermined by an earlier detail I quoted, about 'Flashing my blue minnow / Up the open throats of water/ And across through the side of the rush'? Is that not another fish, another real member? Well, no. And we should be grateful for that, in weighing the 'horror' of this story. The clue is in the 'blue', that added colour. Hughes knew all too well, as a sea-fisherman, and as a pike fisherman, about live bait – his poem 'The Live-Bait' (1983) imagines in horrifying detail the terror of a small living bait fish, first netted or hooked in its own right, then kept in water before it could be impaled through its navel on a fisherman's wire trace, then swallowed by a conger eel, then unhooked, still just alive, by the fisherman, whose belated gratitude at this life spared does not let himself off the hook of his own moniker in the poem, 'The Mighty Intelligence' (CP 686). But this flashing blue minnow is not what it seemed. It is, that is, not real but a man-made imitation, though itself perfectly in place. Hughes was using it in the county where, well over a century earlier, Mr Angel of Totnes invented the Devon minnow, either carved in wood or moulded in tin or lead, with exaggerated pectoral fins set at angles on a hollow fuselage so that, when threaded on a wire that ended with treble hooks at its tail or set, those fins acted as propellers and sent the body spinning around and around, suggesting the allure of fishy distress. It was designed to provoke aggression from larger predatory fish; in this case, the foot long trout. That, at least, was the only fish to suffer for this poem. But it does mean that we need to add another contrast to our understanding of the elements in play in the encounter: to recognize the tension not just between the real and the imagined, or the physical and the metaphysical, but also between the real and the artificial. The artificial catches the real.

More than this: Hughes was almost certainly right at the start of his experiences using his Devon minnow. We can infer this from the other form of local, if still notably partial knowledge, which all readers of Hughes now can deploy if they choose, to supplement or complicate their own response to the text of the poetry. In 2004, in *Her Husband*, Diane Middlebrook referred to this letter, now amongst Plath's papers in the Lilly Library at Indiana, to confirm that at a time when money was tight for their young family Hughes was fishing, twice a week, for the table, as well as to seek space for himself from the pressures of married life.<sup>3</sup> In 2006, Koren and Negev's biography of Assia Wevill, who with her husband the poet David Wevill visited Court Green on the weekend of Friday 18<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May in what the biographers call 'A Fateful Meeting', rely on a letter to Gerald and Joan 'about a fishing trip', dated 19<sup>th</sup> Saturday morning, to support their view that for at least some of that visit things 'passed smoothly enough'.<sup>4</sup> Was this the same fishing trip to

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<sup>3</sup> Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath: A Marriage* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), p.162.

<sup>4</sup> Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: the Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill* (London: Robson Books, 2006), p.89.

which a letter subsequently extracted in Reid's edition of the Letters refers? Presumably not: Reid needs to ascribe to this letter a date 'early May 1962', citing a reference Plath provides, in a letter she enclosed with Hughes's, to the cherry blossom. And in it, Hughes refers to going twice a week to the Taw just below North Tawton; he gets up at 5, he reports, is 'at the river in ten minutes', but, crucially, has not yet put the Devon minnow to use (*LTH* 196). Instead, 'I fish with a worm, wading slowly up the river & casting upstream into the likely runs. This morning I got four fish'. Significantly, none of the four was a specimen like the one recorded in 'Stealing Trout'. The best of them weighed half a pound; one 'had been mauled at some time by an otter or a big cannibal trout'; and though he conceded that bigger trout did lurk in 'the quiet pools & deep places', 'I haven't yet connected with any or devised tactics to. It's a very swift river, so spinning is a bit of a problem though I suppose it would be possible.' For the moment, he had to content himself with the birds and flowers these 'wonderful mornings' afforded him: 'the banks full of primrose clumps & daffodils & aconites.' (*LTH* 198)

That letter, full of some success and ambitions for enhanced tactics, is one reason for my suggestion that 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning' was written about sixty-one years and four and a half months after 'The Darkling Thrush'. It seems so perfectly to set the poem's scene. Why couldn't 'Stealing Trout' have been written the following May, or even the next? Its publication history would permit that. Not just because of the consonance of the mood and detail between letter and poem, but also for a simpler, bleaker, reason. A year later Sylvia Plath had died. However truthful, determinedly honest a poet could be in pursuit of an image, it is difficult to imagine that, in his account of wading upstream to cast his blue minnow, Hughes could have written then of wading as he cast his minnow through shallow water which 'Ropes my ankles, lobbing fake boomerangs, / A drowned woman loving each ankle' (*CP* 139). Sometime in mid or late May 1962, perhaps just after that weekend visit, that 'Fateful Meeting', but before he renewed contact with Assia Wevill the following month during one of his day trips to London, seems altogether likelier. He was living with, striding ahead despite, both possibilities.

But in thinking of what the publication of *Birthday Letters* in 1998, and its own prompt, in Hughes's poem 'Dreamers', to blame 'the Fate she carried' and 'the Fable she carried', has led the biographers of Wevill to agree with those of Hughes in identifying as the larger significance of that weekend, likelihood has long had to contend with a more powerful force: what Erica Wagner described as the irresistibility of myth.<sup>5</sup> 'Dreamers' itself seems confident, even unquestioning, about the way that 'Fable' 'Requisitioned you and me and her, / Puppets for its performance'. Sylvia succumbed, the poem suggests, to the way Assia's account of evoked horrors to which her own family's German history made her particularly susceptible: it was 'As if your dream of your dream-self stood there'. (*CP* 1145)

Hughes places the same trust in the dream Assia claimed to have had 'After a single night under our roof' (*CP* 1146), and in their reactions to it. He records Sylvia's first, in such a way as to suggest that she was present either when or shortly after Assia 'told her dream'.

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<sup>5</sup> Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the Story of Birthday Letters* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p.162.

A giant fish, a pike  
Had a globed, golden eye, and in that eye  
A throbbing human foetus –  
You were astonished, maybe envious. (CP 1146)

For his own part, he claims, from a distance that Elaine Feinstein associates with the calm, if not tranquility, of recollection, the simplicity of recognition of something 'fated',<sup>6</sup> 'I refused to interpret.' (CP 1146) Instead, he prefers to confine himself to what 'I saw' of Assia's reaction, itself a sign of a self within the self, beyond her control or knowledge:

The dreamer in her  
Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it. (CP 1146)

Knowledge he reserves for the dreamer in himself, who 'Fell in love with her, and I knew it.' (CP 1146)

Critics and biographers have had their reasons to disagree, at least with Hughes's view of Assia's involuntary response to an astonishing dream. Feinstein's interviews with Assia's friend Suzette Macedo and Al Alvarez led her to conclude that Wevill, whom Alvarez described as 'predatory', had set out from London that weekend with the intention of seducing Hughes.<sup>7</sup> Middlebrook regards the telling of the dream as 'a calculated act of seduction on Assia's part'; the dream is itself a text 'that refers to "Pike", a poem that was frequently mentioned in reviews of Hughes's work as an example of his originality. Assia enough involved in the London poetry scene to have known this.'<sup>8</sup> More recently, Jonathan Bate and Steve Ely have both been more reticent and more pointed. Ely refers to Assia's '(alleged) dream', in discussing the role it played 'in catalyzing the infatuation that was to lead to their affair', 'so important was the pike to his inner life'.<sup>9</sup> Bate credits Assia with much more local knowledge; she would have noticed the Gehenna Press broadside of Hughes's 'Pike', with an illustration by Robert Bermelin, on the wall at Chalcot Square, but then Bate mixes caution with a bit of clumsy fishing of his own: 'to suggest that she was putting out a line in order to catch a bigger poetic fish than her husband is to buy into the image of her as a ruthless seductress.'<sup>10</sup>

As Assia Wevill's biographers, Koren and Negev have their own reasons to avoid that image too, and marshal different evidence in seeking to avoid the 'sensational'.<sup>11</sup> David Wevill was a Cambridge poet, who remembers seeing, but never meeting, Sylvia Plath, striking in her spring

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (London: Phoenix, 2002), p.140.

<sup>7</sup> Feinstein, p.139.

<sup>8</sup> Middlebrook, p.166.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Ely, *Ted Hughes's South Yorkshire: Made in Mexborough* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), p.89.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), pp.186-7.

<sup>11</sup> Koren and Negev, p.87.

dress amongst rumpled students on Trinity Lane while both were students. He was also part of Eric Hobsbawm's London-based Group to which Hughes sent some of his poems from America. Poems by Wevill, Hughes and Plath had appeared in Christopher Levenson's anthology of *Poetry from Cambridge* published in 1958, and the Wevills would have read *Lupercal*. Koren and Negev also mention the effect that proximity to the Group, being 'an ardent reader' and sharing her life with a poet had on Assia's own creativity; without analyzing them, they quote from her two extant poems, both from the early months of her relationship with David, in 1956-7, when she was still Assia Lipsey, and both of which refer to eyes. 'Magnificat' expresses her gratitude for 'the eye /That finds me welcome' after hours spent beside a river's searching force. 'Winter End, Hertfordshire' responds to the memory of seeing a tombstone of a pauper, one Thomas Head, his wife and child by determining to 'look through all the windows / Of this time's passing', and ends by resolving to

see again the black northern pond,  
Its eye burning with crippled cedar wings  
And four black feet deep with  
Summer's rotting rooks,  
Like Thomas Head's and my time's  
Unlamented, springless, passed.<sup>12</sup>

But when it comes to Assia's dream of the pike with the golden eye, Koren and Negev can go no further than 'likelihood' based on two different but equally partial kinds of local knowledge. One is their reliance on David Wevill's testimony: when he spoke to them, he had no memory of her telling the dream, but thought it uncharacteristic, too freighted with myth, for a woman who did not make a habit of sharing or recording her dreams, and this allows her biographers to conclude: 'Assia by nature did not have an exceptionally vivid dream life, but in any case, pike would seem to be an unlikely dream motif for an urban woman like her.'<sup>13</sup> The other is a version of Middlebrook's argument, based on assumptions about casual recent readings, though with a different conclusion. Though 'in all likelihood, Assia had read' *Lupercal*, Koren and Negev consider that amongst the 'numerous other creatures and fish' Hughes writes about in that collection she:

could not have known the mythic, symbolic import -- indeed, the fixation -- that Ted attached to pike in particular. So did the scene in which Assia related a dream take place in Hughes's fertile poetic imagination?<sup>14</sup>

Without for the moment answering that rhetorical question, it turns out that in their claim that Assia Wevill 'could not have known' in 1962 of the peculiar totemic value of pike for Hughes, something which of course has become common knowledge to his readers in the half century since, Koren

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<sup>12</sup> Koren and Negev, p.68.

<sup>13</sup> Koren and Negev, pp.88-9.

<sup>14</sup> Koren and Negev, p.89.

and Negev were wrong. She could have known it. And recovering the circumstances in which that knowledge was both possible and indeed had become likely casts a new light both on Hughes's susceptibility to her story of her dream and on his account, in 'Dreamers', of Plath's 'maybe envious' response to it.

I was prompted to make this discovery by an earlier letter Hughes wrote to Gerald and Joan; an extract appears in Reid's edition of Hughes's letters. It is dated 24 February 1957, and the date of the letter as well as Reid's explanatory note is as significant in what follows as its remarkable content, in provides early evidence not just of the fertility of Hughes's own dream life, and his readiness to record and interpret it for others, but of the susceptibility, the vulnerability to exploitation, to which that led. In the letter Hughes records that 'Though I haven't been fishing for 7 years I dream every single night that I am fishing.' (LTH 96) Sometimes the location was a version of the Rochdale Canal at Mytholmroyd, but:

mostly it is Crookhill. ... There's always a big fish – and whenever I catch that, the day after I sell a poem. One night I dreamed I caught the grandfather pike at Crookhill[...] You and Johnny [Wholey] were pulling at its fins, and I was heaving down the slope – we had twenty feet of it out – and still most of it was in the pond. The next day I sold my first poem and got married. Sylvia is my luck completely. In these fishing dreams my great enemies are eels. (LTH 96)

In view of that comment about Sylvia, which, perhaps because of its peculiar situation between pike and eels, has always seemed to me to slither free of the more expected note of celebration in favour of something more like fate, 'just my luck', Reid's note makes provocative reading:

In Plath's story 'The Wishing Box', in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977), a dream of a mighty fish, similar to the one recounted here, is attributed to the character Harold, whose inexhaustibly fertile inner life is the envy of his wife Agnes.  
(LTH 96)

So, of course, does 'The Wishing Box' itself, and the bibliographical information supplied by Hughes in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. In the second, enlarged edition of these stories and other prose writings, in which a number of pieces from the Lilly Library are also included, Hughes provides dates of composition where known: for 'The Wishing Box' this is 1956. Acknowledgements indicate that the story was the second of Plath's to be published in *Granta* magazine, and that it appeared in 1957.

But only when I read the text as it first appeared, on pages 3-5 of the issue published on 26 January 1957, seven months after their marriage and that first sale of a poem to *Poetry* but only four weeks before Hughes's letter to his brother and in place, did I begin to appreciate the ambivalence as well as gratitude that he was then expressing. It wasn't just this dream that Plath had transposed from Hughes's Crookhill, becoming in the story, as 'Harold informed Agnes one sultry August morning', 'the most enormous pike you

could imagine – it must have been the great-great-grandfather of all the rest’;<sup>15</sup> it was also Hughes’s dream of the burned fox, which in ‘The Wishing Box’ ‘ran through his kitchen, grievously burnt, its fur charred black, bleeding from several wounds’.<sup>16</sup> Given the care that Hughes subsequently took in his own accounts of this dream both to share the configuration of his bedsitting room at Pembroke College and to withhold its exact location -- telling Keith Sagar in a letter of July 1979 both that ‘The dream had total reality’ (*LTH* 422) and that it took place not in his own room but, I can confirm with the benefit of local knowledge, ‘on K staircase, 1<sup>st</sup> floor’, in the set of rooms occupied at the time by the Senior Tutor of the College (*LTH* 423) -- it’s hard not to feel some sympathy for the originator of these dreams, notwithstanding the happy update Plath’s story provides, when, secure in marriage to Agnes, Harold dreams the reappearance of the red fox, ‘miraculously healed, with flourishing fur, to present Harold with a bottle of permanent black Quink’.<sup>17</sup>

As for Agnes’s reaction to Harold’s dreams, as ‘nothing if not meticulous works of art’, Reid’s description of her ‘envy’ begins to look like misleading understatement. Early in the story we see Agnes

wrestling with the strange jealousy which had been growing on her like some dark, malignant cancer ever since their wedding night three months before when she had discovered about Harold’s dreams.[...] Gradually, Harold’s peculiar habit of accepting his dreams as though they were an integral part of his waking experience began to infuriate Agnes. She felt left out.<sup>18</sup>

The horrifying consequences of this contrast, sharply felt, between Harold’s imagination and the evidence of her own infrequent dreams, ‘so prosaic, so tedious, in comparison’,<sup>19</sup> I leave readers unfamiliar with ‘The Wishing Box’ to discover in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. But Plath’s account of the way Agnes seeks various means of evading ‘the gaping void in her own head of which Harold had made her so painfully conscious’, and becomes increasingly depressed at ‘the utterly self-sufficient, unchanging reality of the *things* surrounding her’,<sup>20</sup> seems germane to a striking claim Hughes made in the introduction to the enlarged 1979 edition. ‘This limitation to actual circumstances, which is the prison of so much of her prose, became part of the solidity and truth of her later poems.’<sup>21</sup>

In preparing the text of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Hughes is likely to have consulted this issue of *Granta*. And he would have seen, at a rough midpoint in the passage between that visit from the Wevills, fateful or not, and the publication of ‘Dreamers’, one other curious and certainly

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p.51. I cite this edition for readers without the benefit of convenient access to the Cambridge University Library.

<sup>16</sup> Plath, p.50.

<sup>17</sup> Plath, p.51.

<sup>18</sup> Plath, pp.48-9.

<sup>19</sup> Plath, p.50.

<sup>20</sup> Plath, p.53.

<sup>21</sup> Ted Hughes, ‘Introduction’, in Plath, p.12.

germane feature of its contents page. 'The Wishing Box' occupies pages 3-5; 'ceramics', a poem by David Wevill, then his final year of undergraduate study at Gonville and Caius College, appears on page 10.

It is inconceivable that, in the early months of their relationship, Assia Lipsley, who had spent Christmas 1956 in London with Wevill and was now dividing her time between Hertfordshire and Cambridge, would not have taken pride in this issue of *Granta*, and in fact as the poet's closest reader, in more than the literary sense, she must have read 'ceramics' lovingly, lingeringly. Wevill's poem observes a potter working all day in a white room:

the hands were strong  
but the clay crumbles  
and falls from the fingers  
that leave no print as they close the door<sup>22</sup>

Whether or not Assia Lipsley read, and whether or not as Assia Wevill five years later she retained a memory of, 'The Wishing Box', or was informed by it in the dream of that pike with a golden eye for which Hughes's 'Dreamers' is now our only source, are questions that cannot be answered definitely. In any case, those lines from David Wevill's poem should check any biographer, or for that matter reader of literary texts – especially that obviously describe or deploy artifice in pursuit of, or flight from, the realities that dreams are made of.

Nevertheless, 'The Wishing Box', and that strange early conjunction of dream story and poem in that issue of *Granta*, will perhaps in future be considered among the texts that contributed in some way to the emotional dynamics of Hughes's own life and work. Re-reading 'Dreamers' after it, not least with that positive, insistent final refusal to interpret Assia's dream, except to wonder at Sylvia's envy of it, the balance of its cast of 'Puppets' seems to have shifted; for those of us learning the limits of our knowledge, the fascination, if not the horror, of these lines may have changed places.

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<sup>22</sup> David Wevill, 'ceramics', in *Granta* LXI No.1169, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1957, p.10.

## Reviews

***Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, biology and technology in contemporary British and Irish poetry***, by Sam Solnick, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017, 224pp., £90.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-94168-7

Sam Solnick has found a letter in the Emory archive in which Hughes makes the case for claiming in his Laureate expenses his subscription to *New Scientist* as 'relevant to my job as Poet Laureate and the business of writing poems' (16). We know that latterly he also read the *Scientific American* (*LTH* 599). Some of the most obscure references in his poems will eventually be traced to reports in these scientific publications. What, for example, are we to make of the sandfly in the uncollected poem titled 'Waste', published as early as 1983? It is 'the blue-eyed sand-flea / Who argues so quietly / Through the Geiger Counter' in the poem's concluding lines (*CP* 687). Readers will be so puzzled by the quiet argument from this small creature that they will be in danger of missing its point altogether, unless they know that in the early 1960s Dr David Raup collected sand fleas from radioactive beaches from Myrtle Beach South Carolina down to Fernandina Beach, Florida. For a British poet to making such a 'quiet' reference to scientific research in the early 1980s was not only unusual, but represented a reverse of Hughes's earliest references to scientists that were typical of the era of the 'Two Cultures' debate in Cambridge during his education. As Sam Solnick recognises in this book, in 'Crow's Account of the Battle', 'From sudden traps of calculus, / Theorems wrenched men in two' for the good reason that 'political, economic and scientific theorems, because they cannot adequately disclose the complexity of the reality they describe, provide all-too-real, all-too-human and all-too-final solutions to theoretical problems' (84). Always curious about the evidence for toxic water pollution since his period in America and about nuclear radiation (one reason cited for moving away from London to Devon (*LTH* 519)), it seems likely that his son's interest in fish biology led Hughes to extend his interest to the *New Scientist*.

In *Poetry and the Anthropocene* Sam Solnick considers, from a contemporary recognition that the Anthropocene – the name for the geological epoch in which there will remain evidence for the human influence upon nature – how the work of three poets, Ted Hughes, Derek Mahon and Jeremy Prynne (and in Solnick's Conclusion Jorie Graham), can now be read as engaging with the process that produced the Anthropocene. Tracing what he calls 'evolving systems of (eco)poetry' (19-64) beginning with Gary Snyder, Solnick makes a useful critical summary of various ecocritical ways of reading the emergence of ecopoetry. He is critical of a tendency for competing terms and modes of ecopoetry to be closed to each other and prefers an 'ecologically orientated systems theory' approach which 'highlights how biological, psychic and communicative systems register and respond to changes in their environment', including 'how some systems may observe their own (or other systems') operations' (57). Of course, the proof of this is in the pudding of the following chapters on the poetry, the first of which is on 'Hughes, mutation and technology' (65-105).

Solnick takes as his starting point Hughes 'asking his readers to consider aspects of ritual, mythic and poetic, in terms of technology' whilst at

the same time recognising 'the influence of more primordial but still-operational evolutionary [animal] inheritances' (67). Fishing is the first adaption discussed in both aspects in the poem 'Pike': 'The technology that enables both catches, [fish and poem] the rod, so to speak, is of course poetic language' (69). So the technology of language has, for Hughes's address to the modern reader disconnected from the inheritance of myth, the evolutionary function of the embodiment of contact with the primitive being from which modernity has alienated us. But this, in itself, requires an evolutionary adaption of myth in *Crow*, for example. Solnick quotes Jung here to demonstrate Hughes's purpose in the new use of old symbols 'to induce a mutation in the old ones so that they better adapt societies to their environment' (75). The treatments of St George in *Crow* are then discussed to show how form and self-reference 'play with the idea of myth as evolution' (76). Indeed, whilst exposing the absurd tragedy of 'the depredations of modern technology' (79) upon the repressed body and its sexuality through an emphasis on 'corporeal reality', *Crow* offers a self-conscious model of mutation, adaption and transformation – 'new "linguistic and conceptual combinations" [as suggested by Bruce Clarke in his book *Posthuman Metamorphosis*] which might in turn engender behaviours and technologies better suited to an environment in crisis' (97).

One possibility of imaginative 'new combinations' would be the cyborg images of *The Iron Man* and *The Iron Woman* which Solnick treats, in the latter case, as 'more than just an eco-parable', but as, in Hughes's words, 'a myth about writing a poem' (100). So what does it mean when the Iron Woman says, 'I am not a robot. I am the real thing.' It seems hardly adequate when Solnick writes that she 'knows this foolishness of separating the technical from the human' (100). If much of my summary of Solnick's readings sound familiar, this might be the limitation of my reading of Solnick. However, one does wonder whether, for all his detailed scholarship, his new ecocritical language and the deftness of his conceptual thinking, he has actually uncovered anything new about the elusive imaginative life of Hughes's art works. To his credit Solnick admits the mystery of the Iron Woman's enigmatic statement and he ends his chapter with the idea that new readers may discover 'the possibility that the story's pattern and images might function in new, and unpredictable, ways' (100). In 1997 Hughes was aware of global warming, Solnick reminds us (212), that is, that maladaptation and apocalypse were possible. But Solnick emphasises the role of Hughes's poetics in creating 'a future-orientated ecology' that admits both 'error and adaption' (198) in agencies beyond and including the human. Perhaps this is exactly what the Iron Woman's creator meant by characterising her as 'the real thing'.

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***Assia Wevill: Una amante de la sinrazón***, by Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, translation by Aurora Echevarría, Barcelona, Circe Ediciones, 2014, 438 pp., €19.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-84-7765-298-4

It recently came to my attention that Circe had published a Spanish translation of Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev's *Assia Wevill: A Lover of Unreason*. So why write a review about a Spanish translation of an English biography that has already been reviewed to death? What caught my eye, and what I suspected could also be of interest to a non-Spanish reader, was not the biography itself, nor Aurora Echevarría's accurate though over-literal translation, but the first four pages written under the title 'For our Spanish Public' by the authors in 2014. However, after eagerly reading both this introduction and the book itself, I was, if anything, disenchanted to say the least and exasperated at how easy it appears to be to sell an old book with a new-fangled cover to a fresh audience.

The authors begin, rather unconvincingly, by trying to sell the reader the idea that 'Spain was to hold an important role in the life of all the members of the condemned quartet who feature in this book: the two married couples, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, and Assia and David Wevill. For whom it had both an emotional bond and would become a place of exile' (9). Whilst a lot of the information is not new, what could possibly be considered as new evidence, lacks precisely that: evidence. Korean and Negev provide no documentary sources to support their claim that Hughes grew up fascinated by his family legend that he had Spanish Arab ancestors and whilst studying in Cambridge made plans to live in Madrid and study English for a year, through a programme called 'Mango'. The book then goes on to reveal how Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes chose Spain for their honeymoon in July 1956 and after spending five days in the 'vilely hot' city of Madrid (clearly sourced from *LTH*: 45) they decided to head for the coast and ended up in the small fishing village of Benidorm, where the donkey carts were the main traffic. (This was no doubt sourced from Plath's poem 'Fiesta Melons' which tells how 'In Benidorm there are melons, Whole donkey-carts full'.) Apart from describing the working details of the couple (which already appear in both *LTH* and Plath's journals) it informs the reader of how, after using up all of Plath's £270, they could only afford a day-trip hitch-hiking to the nearby city of Alicante. (They actually had originally travelled to Alicante from Madrid before catching the bus to Benidorm.)

Even when it appears to shed some new light it fails to provide evidence. The biographers write that, whilst leaving Sylvia Plath in Ireland with Richard Murphy thinking that Hughes had left them suddenly for fishing with Barrie Cooke, Hughes had actually returned to Benidorm later that summer in 1962 with Assia Wevill where 'Ted had the chance to compare the two women: Sylvia hated Spain whilst Assia, who had lived twelve years in the Mediterranean Palestine, flowered' (11). As anybody who has read this biography in English knows, the two Israeli authors are not stylists, but write instead in what *The Guardian* accurately reviewed as the tone of 'a black-edged issue of *Hello!*' (October 28, 2006). In the same vein they tell the Spanish reader how 'This situation was to repeat itself over the following years, until the shadow of Sylvia became a burden too unbearable for her [Assia]' (12). The preface ends by describing how David Wevill went to Spain,

thanks to a literary scholarship, and wrote Assia love letters in which he said he would often go to the airport in Barcelona in the hope of seeing her come off a plane. At the end of October 1963 he returned to UK after visiting Malaga, Alicante and Madrid. In true *Hello!* magazine style, they conclude by stating that, 'Although the couple lived together, neither the trip to Spain could save their marriage nor put an end to the troubled love affair with Ted Hughes' [my translation] (12).

Indeed, sadly almost ten years after publishing *A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill* (2006), in which Hughes is clearly depicted as a domestic tyrant and bully, it would appear that the authors are still trying to spark the debate as to who was to blame for Assia's tragedy.

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**London Review Bookshop: Bernard Schwartz and Alice Oswald on Ted Hughes**  
**7th March 2017**

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:  
Something else is alive

"The Thought-Fox" encapsulates Alice Oswald's view that Ted Hughes did not perform the poem as he read, but that "the poem performed him." Hughes, she thought, was being played by his own music.

This event, organised by Peter Howarth of the School of English and Drama at Queen Mary University, London, was devised by Bernard Schwartz, director of the Poetry Center at 92Y in New York, which has been known for its recordings of poets for the past seventy years. Schwartz, a visiting fellow at Queen Mary, had wondered if it would work to have a live evening with a current poet listening and commenting on the recording of a past poet, and hence Alice Oswald was asked to speak about Hughes' recordings from 1971 and 1986.

The first recording was from 1971 with Hughes introducing and reading "The Thought-Fox" as the first poem he felt was worth keeping. He tells us that he wrote it about two years after his infamous "departure from studies in academic English." However, before he recounts the famous "burnt fox" story, he tells of two other foxes who influenced him. Firstly, when he was between thirteen and fifteen, going out in the mornings, shooting one "blue dawn" by the, "big, dirty, poisoned, dead river," he was looking along the hollows for rabbits and rats. He tells of a high bank with weeds, which held an animal path and on his hands and knees he crawled up the path and looked over the ridge; peering over he came face to face with a fox doing the same thing and

for a moment they were both “looking at each other.” The next fox, curiously, comes from a Swedish documentary, filmed on a Swedish farm, which he had watched a fortnight before writing the poem. The fox was coming through the woods in the snow and its eyes were lit by the camera. This second fox “intruded” and “hijacked the poem.” Finally, he tells the Pembroke fox story: how he fell asleep after trying to write his essay on Dr Johnson (“like him, like his poetry, but could not write the essay”) and the huge fox, walking on his hind legs and with a man’s hands, told him, “You must stop this. You are killing us.” He describes in detail the bloody hand of the fox on the essay - “a palmist’s print ... lines and everything ... you could have read your fortune from that print.” For the poem, he had to “try to patch him up.”

Oswald then talked about how she came to Hughes; as an undergraduate she felt she was, “narrow minded about poetry” but like Hughes she stopped her academic studies and looked for a looser style, but one which still meant that, “every brick” would count. Finding this in Hughes she called it his “compulsory inner music.” He was not a Nature poet in her opinion; rather, by fusing the different foxes, from one of which, who had human hands, the poet created a mythic fox, a metaphorical fox, Hughes was a “preternatural poet.”

“Pibroch” came next, Oswald placing it in a Beckettian world, where there were stones and wind and “A tree [that] struggles to make leaves” reminding us of *Waiting for Godot*. Redeeming us from this nihilism, Hughes’ “upbeat sound”, the colours of red and black and the “nobility of humans” speak of “the gift of life.” Listening again, I heard that positivity:

And this is neither a bad variant nor a tryout.  
This is where the staring angels go through.  
This is where all the stars bow down.

We then heard “Littleblood”, one of the *Crow* poems, given to Crow by an eskimo. Oswald reminded us that (in his essay for *The Epic Poise*, ‘Omen and Amen: On “Littleblood”’) Heaney discusses ‘Littleblood’ in relation to to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* fairies and then Ariel, particularly the spirit in “Freedom of Speech” from *Birthday Letters*, where the spirit of Ariel belongs to Plath,

At your sixtieth birthday, in the cake’s glow,  
Ariel sits on your knuckle.

She also referred us to “Skylarks” and their song, “Joy! Help! Joy! Help!” Once more, Hughes seems to have brought together disturbing images, but finishes with hope, so after, “Sucking death’s mouldy tits”, comes, “Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood.” It felt strange therefore that Oswald did not read at all; it would have been uplifting to hear the voice of the dead, speaking in the living. Hughes’ legacy to us is surely, not only what we have from the past, but what it stirs within us for our lives and literature now and in the future.

“How Water Began to Play” followed where water is mineral, a universal element and not a geographical feature. The poem uses the structure that Hughes developed from “Hawk Roosting”, where a line is flung

out and then another and then another; all these intense, separate thoughts, juxtaposed and culminating in a poem like “October Salmon”, featured at the end of the event.

In a fascinating break from Hughes, there came a reading from the actress Irene Worth, who Schwartz told us appealed to Hughes not to read her any more Crow poems as she found them terrifying. Worth played Phèdre speaking to Theseus in a 1999 recording made in memory of Hughes. Other testimonies followed, first from Peter Brook who said that Hughes had the “ability to reach the active language” and then Derek Walcott who remembered that he had been in Lorca’s house when he had heard that Hughes had died. Oswald picks up on Lorca’s theory of “Duende” here, expressing her feeling, itself I suspect informed by the essay ‘Inner Music’ in *Winter Pollen*, that Hughes, influenced by Lorca’s work, expressed his soul.

Finally we reached the 1986 recording of “October Salmon”. Hughes had explained that when his father was dying, he stayed with him and they would walk in and around the village. The customary walk revealed the fish and through this introduction, the poem becomes yet more powerful in its observation of the great laid low; of the closeness of death, even at birth. As Oswald noted, Hughes’ incredible “agility” brings a Shakespearean majesty to the work. Indeed, Oswald also pointed out that Hughes uses the phrase, “king of infinite liberty” surely echoing Hamlet’s, “I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.” Going further, Oswald believes “October Salmon” is Hughes’ “What a piece of work is a man!” In the reading by Hughes, we hear Oswald’s reference to “rich, Elizabethan, Jacobean language”, his love of Shakespeare; of his father; of fish and of life. We also hear his heart-rending sadness that such beauty, such energy and vitality, “the savage amazement of life” as he calls it in the poem, comes back to a, “graveyard pool.”

Under the mill-wall, with bicycle wheels, car tyres, bottles  
And sunk sheets of corrugated iron.

One cannot but remember, as you listen, Hughes’ own life, the “Aurora Borealis/Of his April power” comes finally back to his October death and that “epic poise.”

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**Gaudete: an OBRA Theatre Production**  
**Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield**

There can be few readers of *Gaudete* who, alerted to its origins as a film scenario, have not taken a few minutes to gaze out a window and wonder just what sort of film it would have made. So much of the power of Hughes's text owes to his exploration of hidden psychological energies roiling beneath calm surfaces. But how to translate this off the page, and onto the screen – or stage? As Mrs Holroyd sunbathes, we are told that:

she is like a plant.  
The sun settles the quilt of comfort  
Over her sleepy contentment with herself –  
Which is like the darkness, secret and happy  
Inside the down soft skull  
of a new suckling baby.  
(G 59)

These metaphors are not incidental to the meaning of the scene – but how could such precise meanings be staged? *Gaudete* the book develops a kind of global dramatic irony, where what anyone or anything appears to be is never what they are:

**Lumb**

Is looking at the land. [...]

It feels very like safety. [...]  
But he knows everything he looks at,  
Even the substance of his fingers, and the near-wall of his skin,  
He knows it is vibrant with peril, like a blurred speed-vibration.  
(G 49)

The hybridity – or as the *TLS* cover flap blurb of my edition puts it, 'bastard form' – of *Gaudete* results in a would-be film script with almost no actual dialogue, a story in which the humanity of its characters, the very thing at stake, feels unable to withstand too much verbatim reportage.

These are just some of the puzzles facing any attempt to bring *Gaudete* to theatrical life. OBRA's attempt is both bold and purist: bold in the physicality of its performers, who bring Hughes's spiritually jaundiced characters to writhing, thumping life in front of us while also providing a backdrop of psychologically charged choreography; and purist in the decision to stick with Hughes's text. The text has been shortened, a few characters lost along the way, and the Epilogue is missing (for now, though plans are afoot), but everything you do hear is pure Hughes.

The hybridity of the original is therefore intact, with some additional paradoxes thrown in. Hughes's rich descriptions of the natural world are answered theatrically by a minimalist production with no scenery or staging beyond a few boxes and costume changes. Even props such as shovels and pistols are mimed. The dissonance of this is jarring at times, but equally intriguing. Even as we are told that 'The trees stretch, stirring their tops' and

'The humus lifts and sweats' (G 30), the characters before us appear trapped in an abstract netherworld of dim lights and grey fabrics, as if to underscore how lost they have become to world around them, bubbled in their fears and jealousies.

The lack of spoken dialogue in the original text means that characters, especially Lumb (played by Oliviero Papi whose beautifully bony skull feels somehow like the centrepiece of the entire production), often recite their own sections, narrating themselves in the third person. Off-stage voicing is also used, leaving the actors to illustrate the story in vignettes of intensely physical emoting. Some of these vignettes are more effective than others. The nightmarish scene in which Lumb contends with a herd of cattle before swimming through a purgatory of mud with a cast of dead villagers is created ingeniously by players in heavy brown, hooded greatcoats. These hooded figures which surround the terrified Lumb are by turns the anonymous cattle, the seething mud and the villagers' drowned faces emerging from the muck, one purpose flowing into the next in a manner totally appropriate to an aesthetic of nightmare. By comparison, the acting-out of pub landlady Mrs Walsall's inner turmoil in frantically mimed soliloquies feels overplayed, out of step with her benumbed representation in the original.

The most successful creative interventions surround the character of Maud, Lumb's housekeeper and creepy cultic enabler. She lingers in the shadows of many a scene she is not directly a part of, brushing her fingers through the air and mouthing strange words as if in acts of magical espionage. She narrates several sections belonging to other characters, setting her up as a figure of authority and foresight, a vital part of the deterministic machinery that takes hold of the village and compels it toward the final tragedy. The nosy groundkeeper Garten, too, is seen skulking around at the edges of the other characters' sections, sniffing out clues and following Lumb as he makes his visits.

The decision (driven by practical necessity) to omit the Epilogue means that the story remains curiously unfinished: we see Lumb abducted to the spirit world but not returned, and we do not learn the fate of the Goddess figure he attempts to heal. The original *Gaudete* is fragmentary and elliptical in its construction, so this isn't a fatal omission, though anyone in the audience who has not read the book may struggle to relate the theatrical production's head to its tail. The play works best when thought of as a series of vivid set pieces each with its own sense of dramatic purpose, unified by a commitment to translating psychological turmoil into physical theatre. It is certainly a bold and risk-taking attempt to engage creatively with one of Hughes's most puzzling books.

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## Contributors

**Hugh Dunkerley** is Reader in Creative Writing and Contemporary Poetry at The University of Chichester. A poet and ecocritic, his most recent poetry collection is *Hare* (Cinnamon Press 2010). His prize-winning lecture, 'Some Thoughts on Poetry and Fracking', was delivered at the 2016 Hay Festival.

**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), *New Casebooks: Ted Hughes* (2015), and *Ted Hughes in Context*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press in 2018. He is a contributor to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment* (2014). He is Chair of the Ted Hughes Society.

**Fred Rue Jacobs** (1934-1999) was a librarian, professor and Ted Hughes scholar based in California.

**Robert Jocelyn** is the co-organiser and participant in the annual Ted Hughes conferences held at Doonreagan in Connemara, Ireland where Ted went to live for a while with Assia Wevill following the death of Sylvia Plath. He is a visiting lecturer at Galway University on landscape and 18th and 19th century landscape in particular. He is the author of "Tollymore, the Story of an Irish Demesne", an architectural and social history, and a biography, "Major John (D.M.) Kennedy M.C. - A Tribute". He has also edited "The Diaries of Lord Limerick's Grand Tour 1716 -1723".

**Mimi McKay** is a librarian and health policy consultant currently based in Los Angeles. While studying at Bakersfield College, she met Fred Rue Jacobs with whom she shared many passions including a love of literature and value of enduring friendships. She went on to earn higher degrees at U.C. Berkeley and the University of Texas at Austin.

**Ann Skea** is an independent scholar, author of *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (UNE Press, 1994). Her Ted Hughes webpages, at:

<http://ann.skea.com/THHome.htm>

are archived by the British Library and her extensive writing about Hughes's work is internationally published. She first met Ted Hughes in 1992; and in 1995 he invited her to stay at Moortown Farm to help him collate his archive

of manuscripts, a task he ultimately completed himself, having found things he thought lost and things he "wanted no-one else to see". She and Hughes remained friends and met and corresponded until his death in 1998.

**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*, *Anglistik* and *The Gamefisher* as well as in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*. *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* will be published by Little Toller Books in 2018.