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Editorial

Welcome back to *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*. A year and a half has passed since the last issue—itsself only appearing after a lengthy break—so for those readers who have not entirely given up hope of reading, on a regular basis, the journal’s inspiring, scholarly and thought-provoking articles again, expectations are understandably high. Change has been afoot and, having sadly had to say goodbye to our previous editor, James Robinson, to whom we extend our gratitude and warmest wishes, we are pleased to introduce our new editorial team. The journal is now headed by two co-editors who aim to bring together their differing skills and backgrounds to create, going forward, a more diverse and inclusive go-to platform for the ever dynamic and exciting world of Ted Hughes studies.

First meet the editors:

Catherine Macnaughton, a former journalist and magazine editor, discovered Ted Hughes’s poetry by serendipity. Her husband bid at a charity dinner for a trip to Cambridge to meet Mark Wormald and view his College’s collection of Hughes’s fishing gear. Before meeting Mark, they admitted to knowing nothing about fishing but liking poetry, although they were not Hughes scholars. Shortly afterwards Catherine won a place at Cambridge, where she wrote two dissertations on Hughes, supervised by Mark, one of which was published in the last issue of the *Journal*, while the second will feature in a forthcoming book of papers from the 2022 International Ted Hughes Conference. She is currently completing an MA in Modern Culture at University College London.

David Mullin is an archaeologist by training but has been inspired by Hughes’s work since childhood. He currently lives within sight of Hughes’s birthplace in West Yorkshire and spends much of his time tracing the footsteps of the poet in the landscape. He is an active member of the Elmet Trust and currently runs a project examining material left at the grave of Sylvia Plath in Heptonstall. He has written and edited a number of books and academic papers, mostly focussing on his research focus of the Neolithic and Bronze Age of the west of Britain. He is also a specialist in earlier prehistoric pottery from the UK and previously worked in archaeological publishing and research.

Terry Gifford remains as Reviews Editor and the *Journal* is supported by a skilled Editorial Board and a team of academic referees to blind review articles for publication. Behind the scenes, Anna Stevenson is compiling an online index of past

volumes of the *Journal* and their content to aid readers to access relevant content. In a significant move, those issues which are currently behind the Society's password-protected paywall will soon become publicly accessible.

This is the last volume of the *Journal* in its current format. Volume 10 will still be available for free on the Society website but will be renamed *Ted Hughes Studies: the Journal of the Ted Hughes Society*. Society members will also have access to a new Newsletter, published quarterly, for members only. This will be called *Recklings*, after Hughes's third collection, published in 1966.

This edition, Volume 9 Issue 2 of the *Journal*, features papers and reviews by both established and emerging scholars of Ted Hughes's work. Michael Jones returns to the treasury that is *Crow*, with an erudite interrogation of writing on the anthropology of Shamanism to highlight the poems' motifs of shamanic election and flight and how they shape the text's protagonist. Mike Sweeting delves into Hughes's dream world as revealed in his letters and his critical work to explore how they shaped Hughes's poetic sensibility. Jessica Ann De Waal looks at Hughes's children's writing through the tentacular lens of Donna Haraway's theories of the Chthulucene and the cyborg, in which she includes *Timmy the Tug*, a rhyme story co-written by Hughes and Jim Downer, the text of which was discovered by Carol Hughes in 2007. For those of you unfamiliar with the book, we would draw your attention to Downer's Afterword, which offers a fascinating glimpse into the vanished world of 18 Rugby Street, which in the 1950s had no electricity, no bathroom and only an outside toilet in a coal cellar. Mark Wormald's in depth review essay on *The Letters of Seamus Heaney* offers not only forensic insights into the tension between the scholarly and the personal perspectives at work in editing volumes of letters but also reveals much of Heaney as man and poet in recalling his own interactions with Hughes's great friend.

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List of abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes

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

And by Sylvia Plath

- JSP* *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2000)
- LSP1* *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Volume I, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017)
- LSP2* *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Volume II, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2018)

Little Cub Hierophant: Shamanic Election, Magical Flight and Ted Hughes's Protagonist of Crow

by Michael Jones

Ted Hughes's understanding of poetry as a shamanic vocation is well-documented. After reviewing historian of comparative religions Mircea Eliade's book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951) in 1964, Hughes pursued an enduring interest in the shaman's magical flight to the spirit-world as 'one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event' (*WP* 58). Like the shaman, the poet – and most particularly the visionary poet who summons the potencies of folktale narrative – seeks wisdom and renewal through contact with an abstract vision; he or she travels 'temporarily out of the dimension of coherent reality into that depth of imagination where understanding has its roots and stores its X-rays' (*WP* 226). Terry Gifford has delineated Hughes's poetic project as a set of 'stages of healing the wounded shaman', in which the shaman-poet forges, with his creations, a personal journey out of grief that also seeks to heal the natural world in which he lives.¹

This essay reads the mobilisation of two stages of the shaman's journey, shamanic election and magical flight, in Hughes's main sequence of *Crow* poems, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (Faber 1972 edition)². In Gifford's compelling overview of the biographical significance of shamanism to Hughes, poetry as a shamanic activity introduced the poet to a 'two-way notion of healing,' in which 'personal woundedness and cultural health' could each be cured through the writing of poetry.³ *River* (1983) is read as an 'ecstatic, reconnective poetry' that spurs Hughes's political advocacy for river health in the southwest of England.⁴ Rather than interpreting Hughes's version of shamanism from a biographical

1 Terry Gifford, 'Hughes's Notion of Shamanic Healing,' *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Vol. 6 Issue 2, p.16.

2 After the 1970 first Faber edition of *Crow*, Hughes added seven extra poems for the 1971 American edition, six of these were retained in the expanded Faber edition of *Crow* published in December 1972. This expanded edition also contains 'The Contender', one of the twelve poems published in *Crow Wakes* (1971), and remains the edition presently published in paperback, in Marina Warner's fiftieth anniversary edition by Faber (2020) and provides the copy text for Paul Keegan's *Collected Poems* (2003). As I argue in this paper, Hughes' choices about these additions to and omissions from the 1972 text prove instructive for thinking about the role of shamanism in *Crow*'s mythic narrative. Page references are to the paperback edition.

3 Gifford, p.10.

4 Gifford, p.14-15.

standpoint, I treat the work *Crow* as a world apart, separate from the unwritten world, and I read both the individual and communal potentialities of shamanism as they affect the world inside *Crow*'s fictive membrane. Specifically, I highlight the poems' motifs of shamanic election and flight and consider the shaping effects these motifs have on *Crow*, the text's protagonist. *Crow* is a jejune shaman, one who is kept in a stunned, adolescent state in the extant *Crow* sequence. His potential for healing the disaster-world into which he is born is suspended by a deliberate absence of shamanic initiation, and by the poems' presentation of flights to the spirit-world from which *Crow* returns empty-handed. These shamanic motifs do not fail accidentally, or on account of *Crow* being an unfinished work. I contend that lightning-election and magical flight orient *Crow*'s position as protagonist in the poems' world, before shunting him off the shamanic path and shifting the narrative's direction towards other folkloric and philosophical traditions. Shamanic figures are intrinsic to *Crow*'s form. They create *Crow* as an open, self-interrogative protagonicity that in turn renders the poems' disaster-world open to transformations.

In reading *Crow* the protagonist as a potential shaman, I have drawn extensively on Mircea Eliade's landmark study *Shamanism*, alongside more recent fieldwork and ethnographic research conducted in Alaska, Mongolia and Nepal by Dorothy Jean Ray, Kevin B. Turner and Brigitte Steinmann respectively. As Gifford glosses, Eliade's book presents a paradigm of shamanic vocation that is acknowledged today as 'partial, and even contested'.⁵ Stuart Ray Sarbacker has unpacked Eliade's distinction between the 'ecstatic' (flying outwards or standing *without*) modality of shamanism and the 'enstatic' (or standing *within*) modality of yoga, showing how these modalities are 'dynamically related rather than mutually exclusive'.⁶ Wendy Doniger notes Eliade's tendency to essentialise shamanism as an 'immemorial religious tradition', making claims for 'universal' experience where a contemporary ethnographer would observe patterns amongst discrete traditions.⁷ I have made extensive use of Eliade's book not to argue that his model of shamanism is universally applicable, but for two reasons: to delineate the specific, coherent narrative *Shamanism* constructs of the shaman's election, initiation and flights among the Siberian and Mongolian peoples, the Buryat, the Yakut and the Altai, and to compare *Crow*'s journey with those traditions. Eliade's account of the stages

⁵ Gifford, p.8.

⁶ Stuart Ray Sarbacker, 'Enstasis and Ecstasis': A Critical Appraisal of Eliade on Yoga and Shamanism,' *Journal for the Study of Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2002), p.22.

⁷ See Wendy Doniger, 'Foreword to the 2004 edition' in Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Oxford: Princeton UP, 2020), pp.xi-xv, as well as M. Eliade, *Shamanism*, p.12.

of the shaman's journey made a clear imaginative impact on Hughes, so that tracing continuities and departures from that journey in *Crow* proves instructive for interpreting the poem sequence.

The Shamanic Election in *Crow's* Birth and Agape Adolescence

The shaman as a historical function in Siberian, Mongolian, Nepalese and Inuit religious cultures is 'singulariz[ed]' by election, 'by "choice", establishing the "radical ontological separation" of a person elected to this role from the rest of his or her community'.⁸ Shamans are a 'small mystical elite [that] not only directs the community's religious life but [...] guards its "soul".'⁹ Though a version of healer or medicine-man, the shaman is set apart from priests who oversee everyday rituals such as births, marriages and animal sacrifices by his or her ability to abandon their body, fly to the spirit-world and return again. In Eliade's account, the shaman's use of this ability establishes the dimensions of a shamanic ritual. Many religious persons can officiate a wedding but only a shaman can 'protect the newly married couple from the evil spirits'; others can sacrifice a horse but only a shaman can 'conduct the animal's soul on its celestial journey'.¹⁰ In her study of Alaskan Inuit shamans' masks, Dorothy Jean Ray notes how the mask's use signalled the specifically shamanic ability of flight. The shaman did not need the powers lent him or her by a spirit's mask when working as a healer administering to 'individual cases of help', but used the mask to 'consult with spirits at a time of crisis' such as a 'storm, severe ice conditions, a number of mysterious injuries, or an epidemic'.¹¹

Shamanic election most commonly occurs in adolescence, at which time a candidate is apprenticed to a shaman either according to 'hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession [or] spontaneous vocation... [i.e.] the "call" of the gods or spirits'.¹² Ancestral inheritances are rooted in origin myths of 'first shamans'. Eliade cites a story from the Buryat people of Mongolia and Siberia in which the gods 'sent an eagle' to help mankind combat evil spirits spreading 'sickness and death over the earth':

The eagle saw a woman asleep under a tree, and had intercourse with her. Some time later the woman gave birth to a son, who became the 'first shaman'. According to another variant, the

8 Eliade, p.32.

9 Eliade, p.8.

10 Eliade, p.181-182.

11 Dorothy Jean Ray and Alfred A. Blaker, *Eskimo Masks: Art and Ceremony* (London: University of Washington Press, 1967), p.18.

12 Eliade, p.13.

woman, after her connection with the eagle, saw spirits and herself became a shamaness.¹³

Eliade rejects any human dynastic dynamic emerging from these supernatural origins. Shamanic inheritance through kinship descends, he insists, from the 'mythical "first shaman" created directly by the Supreme Being';¹⁴ the principal motif is a 'direct' election through contact with the divine. Brigitte Steinmann, meanwhile, notes how the Tamang people's adaptation of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal has remained 'half-shamanic' partly *because* of its attachment to clan lineages.¹⁵ In the Tamang hierarchy of priests, the tamba serves as 'genealogist' guiding marriage-matches by 'listing the names of up to seven generations of ancestors to avoid incestuous unions'.¹⁶ The shaman intervenes when taboos including incest are broken and malevolent spirits threaten the clan; the shaman's 'main role is to save people from the devil and from demonic attacks'.¹⁷ Even though the shaman's enduring function here is to protect familial clan organisations, his or her role is not this-worldly but ecstatic, emerging when the community's relations with the spirit-world are destabilised.

Whether chosen by family lineage or a spontaneous 'call', the shamanic apprentice will always 'exhibit exceptional traits from adolescence' that signal his or her election: among the Mansi people, 'he very early becomes nervous and is sometimes subject to epileptic seizures'; among the Yurak-Samoyed '[t]oward the approach of maturity the candidate begins to have visions, sings in his sleep, likes to wander in solitude'; among the Yakut in Siberia '[o]ne destined to shamanship begins by becoming frenzied, then suddenly loses consciousness, withdraws to the forests, feeds on tree bark, flings himself into water and fire, wounds himself with knives'.¹⁸ In an interview with Kevin B. Turner conducted in Mongolia, the Buryat shamaness, Altantsetseg, describes experiencing the onset of shaman's illness when she was fifteen: 'I fainted, and I was unconscious for hours. When I awoke I didn't eat or speak for ten days. The spirits had taken me deeply into their worlds; I was simply speechless'.¹⁹ These adolescent exhibitions of illness and hysterical episodes are interpreted as the individual's election by the gods or spirits. Their ecstatic character, featuring nervous shocks to the body, mark the shaman and shamaness'

¹³ Eliade, p.69.

¹⁴ Eliade, p.71.

¹⁵ Brigitte Steinmann, 'Buddhist ways of looking at history and society' in B. Steinmann, Mukta Singh Tamang and Thuden Gyalchen Lama, *Exorcising Ancestors, Conquering Heaven: Himalayan Rituals in Context* (Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, 2020), p.30.

¹⁶ Steinmann, p.38.

¹⁷ Steinmann, p.48.

¹⁸ Eliade, p.15-16.

¹⁹ Kevin B. Turner, *Sky Shamans of Mongolia: Meetings with Remarkable Healers* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016), p.123.

connection to the celestial Supreme Being or sky god. Lightning and the sky are important shamanic symbols. While Altantsetseg reports the kinship link of her older sister also suffering with shaman's illness, Buryat shamanism additionally includes accounts of 'gods choos[ing] the future shaman by striking him with lightning'.²⁰

The shamanic context of an *election* by shocks to the body erupting, metaphorically or literally, from the sky bears immediately on Hughes's characterisation of his Crow character early in the main *Crow* sequence. Crow, the hero of the poems' unfinished 'epic folk-tale', is nominated in a series of vying myths of his birth.²¹ The setting is an 'abandoned world [...] / Exposed to infinity forever', the world's ontological damage made banal and immediately real through Hughes's use of tautology (11). 'Black' floods bodies and landscapes (1); there is no sun and the stars are noxious light-sources, 'fuming away into the black, mushrooms of the nothing forest' (10). This world is the infant Crow's 'egg of blackness', ontologically submerged, 'one inch under' (1). Under an immense pressure, black 'muscles / Striving to pull out into the light' Crow's births are narrated. The fourth poem, 'A Kill' presents the most violent of these births, in which Crow is shocked into being by a lightning flash of murderous violence:

Flogged lame with legs [...]
Shot blind with eyes
Nailed down by his own ribs [...]

Seeing his life stab through him, a dream flash
As he drowned in his own blood [...]

He managed to hear, faint and far – 'It's a boy!' (4)

Impassive verbs without subjects – 'Flogged', 'Shot', 'Nailed' – recount generative acts of violence that shove (and flog and shoot) Crow into bodily life. The negative dialectic of Crow's biological composition, in which his eyes blind him and his ribs grievously impale him, present Crow as a creature *made* of the very material and forces of the world's black, exposed disaster. Like the Yakut teenager for whom election by the gods has him 'fling[ing] himself into water and fire, wound[ing] himself with knives', Crow's election to protagonicity is one of immediate bodily exposure, a visionary 'dream flash' forming him open and vulnerable (4). That Hughes imposes this condition on Crow from birth, rather than staging an election in adolescence, is consistent with his description in the critical essay 'The Snake in

²⁰ Eliade, p.19.

²¹ Neil Roberts, Ted Hughes Society *Website Introduction to Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* <<http://thetedhughessociety.org/crow>> [accessed 12 January 2024].

the Oak' of the infant Samuel Taylor Coleridge, running into the Devon wilderness after attacking his brother, as a 'little cub Shaman... freezing to death' and calling on a spirit (in this case, his mother) to 'manifest herself' (*WP* 408). Hughes's post-Freudian adaptations of shamanism explore the wandering, frenzied inchoateness of election in stunned infancy.

Crow's election is a repeated motif in the *Crow* sequence. We follow him from the shocks of birth into an exposed, receptive adolescence, during which time no mentor appears to show Crow what to *do* with his lightning-nominated self. In Eliade's overarching paradigm of the shamanic vocation, the shock of election precipitates a longer apprenticeship with an adult shaman that prepares the candidate for shamanic initiation. The initiation involves travel to the otherworld and dismemberment, for example the Yakut legend of evil spirits cutting the initiand 'into small pieces, which are then distributed to the spirits of various diseases. Only by undergoing such an ordeal will the future shaman gain the power to cure'.²² The first lightning-exposure of the candidate's body is thus a prelude to more comprehensive dismemberment and acquaintance with powers. Though one could read a shaman's 'dream flash' election *and* his 'nail[ing]', 'stab[bing]' initiation compressed into 'A Kill's black creation myth, there is no elaborated apprenticeship or initiation for Crow in the poems' main sequence. In 'Crow Communes', Crow seeks guidance from an unconscious colossus-God who lies 'agape, a great carcass' and his questions get no reply (20). The only advice he gets is from eating a 'mouthful' of the giant corpse, which unexpectedly works and presents us with:

Crow, the hierophant, humped, impenetrable.
Half-illuminated. Speechless. (20)

The *Crow* poems are so preoccupied with Crow's activity as he darts around the broken world, struggling to discover what he has been made for and 'waiting for something / To use him for some everything', that this moment of pause in which the animated verbs turn to adjectives catches us off-guard (43). The poem *looks* at Crow, 'humped', '[s]peechless' and still. He is named 'hierophant' after Eliade's term 'hierophany', which describes a religious shock or 'sudden irruption of the sacred in the profane world', one that grips a community.²³ Yet despite his now-established office as interpreter of the mysteries of his disaster-world, Crow remains '[h]alf-illuminated'; he is '[s]peechless' and furtive like a Buryat teenager elected by the gods but still un-apprenticed and unsupervised in their practice. He continues in this state in the poems' sequence. In 'Crow Improvises' we watch him

²² Eliade, p.37.

²³ Wendy Doniger, Foreword to Eliade, *Shamanism*, p.xiii.

harness the lightning-shocks that elect shamans and that created him in 'A Kill's' 'dream flash'. He attempts to combine objects and concepts from the world, so as to improve on Creation, but only ends up repeatedly shocking and maiming himself. Combining a 'dead vole in one hand' and 'Relativity in the other', 'The spark that gored through gouged out his wordage' (here he's speechless again); pressing a horse's skull to a 'baby's fairy-bait molar' tooth, 'The spark that banged burned out his weeper' (here he's shot blind again) (57). Crow's chronic repetitions of the election's scorch result from his having no teacher to guide him. In *The Catch*, Mark Wormald succinctly captures the presence of an adult Inuit shaman in 'Snow Song', a poem from 1971's *Crow Wakes* collection that Hughes later chose not to incorporate into the main sequence. This is a fully initiated shaman who has 'suffered great pain and great insight' in the spirit-world, Wormald explains, 'so that he can return to the human world with a life replenished by the three aboriginal animals [elk, salmon, bear] he encountered there'.²⁴ Wormald cites this shaman as the implicit performer of the 'Two Eskimo Songs' at the end of the main sequence that 'sing... [Crow] back into energy'.²⁵ Hughes's rejection of 'Snow Song' from the main sequence keeps this potential guide hidden. Between this withdrawn Inuit shaman and the unconscious carcass-God in 'Crow Communes', Crow has no active mentor and divines advice through the improvised rituals of eating flesh and hearing anonymous song.²⁶

In Hughes's unfinished epic, Crow thus never grows beyond a shamanic adolescence, elected but uninitiated. In her excellent evaluation of the influence of the Welsh myth cycle the *Mabinogion* on *Crow*, Katherine Robinson unpacks Crow's poetic resemblance to Morfran, a boy so ugly that his goddess-mother brews him a potion bestowing great wisdom as compensation. Another boy drinks the goddess' potion; like the ill-fated Morfran, Crow is 'left untransformed and ugly' by Hughes.²⁷ I would argue that Crow's 'untransformed' quality also pertains to his not receiving a full shamanic initiation. The insistent motif of shamanic election *without* further transformation to adult shamanic power orients Crow's young condition of bodily exposure. He is 'agape', to borrow from the description of his colossus-God (20). The poetics of Crow's 'gaping' protagonicity, begun in 'A Kill' where we see him '[g]laping' at the violence that births him (4), are expanded in

²⁴ Mark Wormald, *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2022), p.69.

²⁵ Wormald, p.69.

²⁶ Both 'Snow Song' and 'Crow Wakes', which stages an Inuit initiation rite involving seeing one's own skeleton, were published in the 1971 twelve-poem collection *Crow Wakes* but neither were incorporated into the expanded 1972 Faber edition of *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*. See CP pp.1254-1257.

²⁷ Katherine Robinson, 'The Remains of Something: Mabinogion Tales as Poetic Substructures in Ted Hughes's *Crow* and *Cave Birds*,' *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Vol. 5 Issue 2 (2016), p.38.

‘Crow on the Beach’, where his ‘utmost gaping of brain in his tiny skull’ wonders why the ‘ogreish’ sea is ‘hurting so much?’ (32). Hughes’s written commentary on this poem affirms that Crow is jejune here, ‘still infantile – he evades the reality in himself’ (*WP* 242). The evasion is not deliberate but traumatic, since the uninitiated Crow cub wonders receptively enough, *wanting* to understand. His body, composed out of the world’s disaster, is agape and receptive to that reality in himself. He intuits the reality in ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’, in the ‘fossil[s] of murder[s]’ and the ‘living dead’ that ‘root’ like pigs ‘in his nerves and his blood’ (40). A secret pertaining to the disaster resides in Crow himself, and Crow is, abidingly, a seeker of himself and of the disaster’s hidden meaning in the extant *Crow* poems. There is an echo of the Buryat hereditary transmissions of shamanic powers, and of the Tamang shaman’s responsibility for protecting clan lineages, in Crow’s untangling of the corpses in his nervous system and his feathers – as if he were a descendant of one of these peoples abandoned as a baby and struggling with a black, unreadable inheritance. The extent to which Crow, as protagonist, can turn back on himself and get at this secret within him is figured by the poems’ version of shamanic magical flight. As we will see, flights approaching the hidden reality in Crow’s tarry DNA will eventually point the poem sequence off Eliade’s path of shamanic initiation completely towards other folkloric and philosophical contexts, most prominently the Gnostic and pagan cults of the goddess that achieve primary importance in Hughes’s cosmology.

Magical Flights and Veering Off Into the Gulf

The initiated adult shaman has the ability to fly to the spirit-world and ‘consult with spirits at a time of crisis.’²⁸ After the ritual dismemberment and reassembly endured in the spirit-world during initiation, where infernal spirits teach the shaman the natures of diseases, the initiated shaman ‘knows the roads of the extraterrestrial regions’. As guardian of the community’s harmony with its spirits, he or she can ‘go below [to the underworld] and above [to the sky] because he has already been there’.²⁹ The community relies on the shaman’s power of magical flight as a connection to angry spirits causing epidemics, severe weather and famine. The shaman returns from his or her journey to the spirit-world with messages of how to assuage the spirits and stories of the souls of the dead. For example, Inuit shamans descend to Sedna or Takánakapsáluk, the ‘Mother of the Sea Beasts’, when she causes famine by keeping all the fish and marine animals in her deep-sea house. The shaman witnesses Takánakapsáluk suffering, her ‘hair hang[ing] down over her face’ with the ‘effect of men’s sins... the secret miscarriages

²⁸ Dorothy Jean Ray and Alfred A. Blaker, p.18.

²⁹ Eliade, p.182.

of the women and breaches of taboo in eating boiled meat'.³⁰ The shaman combs Takánakapsâluk's hair before returning to the surface and compelling community members to confess their transgressions to end the famine. The Buryat hero Mumontó's shamanic 'descen[t] to the underworld in his father's stead' proves protective and instructive for the community: 'on his return to earth, [he] describes the torments of sinners.'³¹ Buryat stories readily associate shamans with the power of flight, owing to the origin myth we have seen in which a 'first shaman' or 'shamaness' results from sex with an eagle. Where the figure of the shaman has been partially incorporated within a dominant religion, such as the Tamang people's version of Buddhism in Nepal, his or her flights to the underworld become 'heroic' and 'sacrific[ial]'; the shaman intervenes when spirits are angered, 'sav[ing] people from the devil and from demonic attacks'.³²

Hughes was explicit in expressing his interest in shamanic magical flight, both when discussing *Crow* and in 'The Snake in the Oak', his critical account of Coleridge's poetic visions. Asked by Ekbert Faas in 1970 about the influence of the Tibetan Book of the Dead on *Crow*, Hughes immediately redirected the discussion from Tibetan Buddhism to the 'special weirdness and power' of shamanism:

Once fully-fledged he can enter trance at will and go to the spirit-world... he goes to get something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community's affairs.³³

Gifford has emphasised Hughes's interest in poetry's shamanic capacity for curing the community, contributing to 'cultural health.'³⁴ This capacity derives from the motif of magical flight. In 'The Snake and the Oak' the poet pinpoints an episode in Coleridge's poem 'The Destiny of Nations', in which a 'Greenland Wizard in strange trance / Pierces the untravelled realms of Ocean's bed... / Where dwells the Fury Form', as a 'straight transcription of an early ethnological account of the Shaman's flight', the Inuit descent to Takánakapsâluk described above (*WP* 412). With the sweeping ambition characteristic of his literary criticism, Hughes claims Coleridge as the 'first poet in English to refer to the Shaman's flight as technically such' and roots the famous Mariner's errant sea voyage into Death's icy waters as a 'shamanic flight-path... into the otherworld' (*WP* 421-423).

30 Eliade, 294-296.

31 Eliade, p.213.

32 Steinmann, p.48.

33 Ekbert Faas, 'An Interview with Ted Hughes' in E. Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Boston: Black Sparrow Press, 1983), p.206.

34 Gifford, p.15.

Maintaining our critical lens on Crow's protagonicity and reading Crow the *character* as a potential shaman, we must reflect that, at least within the paradigm of shamanic vocation assembled by Eliade, Crow is not capable of magical flights because he does not undergo full mentorship and initiation; using Hughes's term, Crow is not a fully-fledged shaman. This is, in fact, borne out by the representation of shamanic flights in the main *Crow* sequence. Crow is born 'lying', hatched from the world's 'egg of blackness' and sketching his 'black rainbow' across the sky in 'Two Legends' (1). Margaret Dickie observes how the opening poem establishes Crow's 'enigmatic vitality' with its final word 'flying', 'signifying the irrepressible energies of this uncapturable Crow'.³⁵ His flight repeatedly expresses his blithe survival amid the world's disaster. After scouring himself with those misguided efforts at harnessing shamanic lightning in 'Crow Improvises', he just '[f]lew off into the air' (58); 'The Smile' recounts how he 'slipped between the atoms' and textures of the devastated world and 'swept out and away' (55-56); 'Crow Blacker Than Ever' affirms him '[f]lying the black flag of himself' (62). Nevertheless, the flying motif never carries Crow to the spirit-world. The poems' black world is clearly suffering a 'time of crisis', in Dorothy Jean Ray's words, but its hierophant Crow discovers no passage to spirits that might help or be assuaged. Instead, as we have seen, a secret pertaining to the disaster seems to lurk within Crow's being, as if he *were* the aggrieved spirit as much as its earthly contact. We know Crow as an elected adolescent in a stunned, amnesiac predicament, beached on this world and unable to read its grieving secret within himself.

The failure of shamanic flight is most concretely staged in 'King of Carrion', along with its Eskimo Song double, 'HOW WATER BEGAN TO PLAY'. 'King of Carrion' stages a completed shamanic flight that returns with no answer for the poems' world and reaffirms Crow's election and his abidingly adolescent position. Crow is presented as sovereign of '[t]he empty world'; the void setting echoes the Bible's Old Testament Flood but Crow's crown of boat fragments, made of the 'last splinters / Of the vessel of life', suggests the wreck of a Noah's Ark and the drowning of all other species (85). In this kingdom of 'last' things, Crow is in the company of a 'last cry':

His kingdom is empty –

The empty world, from which the last cry
Flapped hugely, hopelessly away
Into the blindness and dumbness and deafness of the gulf

³⁵ Margaret Dickie, 'Ted Hughes: The Double Voice', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 24 No. 1 (Spring, 1983), p.58.

Returning, shrunk, silent

To reign over silence. (85)

These lines stage a denuded flight and return. The cry has launched itself from this 'empty world', a shaken place initially ruled by no-one. The plaint took flight, '[f]lapped' bird-like into the gulf in a bid to escape its own ruin and, finding the negating 'blindness and dumbness and deafness' out there, it returned as that dumbness. Having flown away and come back, the cry *is*, now, in the poem's present, that 'silent' negation of its own noise but it is also a reigning monarch: Crow. The world, meanwhile, has become Crow's 'kingdom'.

It quickly becomes apparent how Crow's position in this poem forecloses the availability of a successful magical flight. It isn't Crow who sets off into the sky, but an anonymous cry generated out of the immense pressure of the environment's desolation. The final call or vocal spasm of a dying world is flung off into the abyss and Crow joyrides its mute return, hijacking the failure of a magical flight that carries back no answer and declaring the unsaved world his 'kingdom'. Crow arrives on the world as the cry's failed return, rendering 'King of Carrion' yet another creation myth for Crow, despite the poem's placement late in the extant sequence. Crow is forever being born. His diaphanous relation to a semi-autonomous cry that doesn't quite belong to him is presaged in 'A Kill', where his election by impalement, 'shot' and 'stab[bed]' with his body parts, has him '[g]aping his mouth and letting the cry rip through him as at a distance' (4). The filmic operation of a lag or 'distance' between the gawped mouth and the sounded cry, like a badly synchronised diegetic soundtrack, produces the impression that Crow's own agony is felt from without, beginning somewhere outside his own body; this open, lightning-struck orientation of his body once again characterises his '[h]alf-illuminated' hierophantic activities in the poems (20). As a casual part-owner of the cry in 'King of Carrion', he cannot take responsibility for the cry's movement of flight and return. He only actively hops on for its second part to be play-king of the abject present circumstances.

Without the prepared, deliberate journey of an adult shaman who knows the roads to the spirit-world, 'King of Carrion's' magical flight reels off the 'shamanic flight-path... to the otherworld' (*WP* 421-423) that Hughes saw in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and into the 'blindness and dumbness and deafness' of the poem's 'gulf' (85). The gulf is a forbidding constituent of *Crow's* cosmology and the poems' images frequently threaten the world's entire teetering over into it. These images include the swallowing toxicity of the star-scape in 'Crow Alights' 'fuming away into the black, mushrooms of the nothing forest' (10), as well as the cacophony of machine warfare in 'Crow's Account of the Battle' that becomes a 'tearing deafness',

like a 'torrent in a dark cave' (15). Here, the oxymoronic 'tearing deafness' communicates the sensorial limit of *Crow's* gulf, where a 'tearing' assault of noise tips over into traumatic silence. *Crow's* gulf provides a perilous, abyssal backdrop to the poems that is distinct from the Romantic poets' Miltonic darkness, the 'Abysm' of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* that is 'mystic darkness, dark revelation'.³⁶ The loamy, crackling negative potentiality of Shelley's hole is discrete from the numbing gulf where 'King of Carrion's' cry shrivels up. Hughes's magical flight misses the spirit-world and hits this insensate terrain, returning exhausted and with no revelation, cure or message. The echo of 'King of Carrion's' movement of flight and return in 'HOW WATER BEGAN TO PLAY' emphasises a motif of returning empty-handed. The poem's water 'wanted to live / It went to the trees they burned it came weeping back... / It went searching through all space for nothingness / It came weeping back it wanted to die' (87). In the interplay of verbs for the water's movement, the title's relaxed, pastoral image of water 'play[ing]', suggesting a human admiring a water feature, contrasts with the urgent, appealing journeys by which the water 'went' to the trees and 'went' to space like a hierophant in need of spiritual aid. The quiet, inconsolable verb of the empty shamanic return's coming 'weeping back' pitches us again onto that numbing fringe between sound and silence – crying that makes little or no noise.

Leaving the Shamanic Path for the Goddess

Magical flights thus fail to locate spiritual aid in the main *Crow* sequence. Within the Eliadian shamanic schema we have followed, these misdirected flights' empty-handed returns are due to *Crow's* uninitiated, jejune character and his subsequent lack of responsibility for the flight-path taken. There is a final comparison to note between this schema and Hughes's deployment of it in *Crow*, one that proves instructive for divining the ultimate mytho-narrative direction of the unfinished epic 'Life' of *Crow*.

Hughes chooses to complete the full shamanic motif of flight and return in a sterile, 'hopeless' form, rather than having the religious flight stopped short (85). The deliberate, insistent character of this completion of empty flight *and* return is apparent when we review the ready availability of examples of interrupted journeys to the otherworld in the traditions. Eliade notes the consistent trope that shamans 'must cross a bridge in the course of their journey to the underworld [...] this crossing is difficult; [...] is sown with obstacles and not all souls succeed in

³⁶ Percy Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, quoted in Lucy Newlyn's account of the Romantics' 'infinity of God' and the sublime. See L. Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p.203-204.

traversing it; demons and monsters seeking to devour the soul must be faced, or the bridge becomes as narrow as a razoredge when the wicked try to cross it, and so on'.³⁷ In southern Siberia, the Altai people's tradition of shamanic flight and return to the underworld involves the shaman, in trance, first climbing the 'Mountain of Iron, [...] whose peaks touch the sky'.³⁸ The terrain is 'sown with the whitened bones of other shamans, whose strength did not suffice them to gain the summit'. Across the mountain the shaman finds the "hole that is the entrance to the other world, [...] the 'jaws of the earth,' or [...] the 'smoke hole of the earth'." After entering this hole, he must cross a bridge the breadth of a hair. Here he sees people being tormented by their earthly crimes, such as a 'man who, having listened at doors in his lifetime, is now nailed to a post by one ear'.³⁹ The perils of this journey are apparent, as the 'whitened bones of other shamans' figure the threat of dying en route to the spirit world while the path flanked with tormented eternal souls, familiarly Dantean in a European literary context, present the danger of getting lost amongst the dead. In Buryat and Teleut shamanism, meanwhile, the shaman faces amorous obstacles on his flight to the sky. The shaman's celestial bride, whom he might first 'meet' during the lightning-shock of his first election, delays him with temptations during his 'ecstatic journey' to the sky god:

My darling young kam!
 We shall sit together at the blue table [...]
 My darling husband, my young kam,
 Let us hide in the shadow of the curtains
 And let us make love to one another and have fun,
 My husband, my young kam!⁴⁰

The spirit-bride proves an amorous obstacle seeking to delay the shaman's journey to the Supreme Being; she lies, 'assur[ing] him that the road to the sky has been blocked'.⁴¹ Despite these multiple traditional and concrete narrative options of arrested shamanic flight – death or irrevocable disorientation on the journey, delay by female temptation – *Crow's* 'King of Carrion' stages a full flight *and return*, which is then echoed in 'HOW WATER BEGAN TO PLAY'. Hughes's modulation is that the completed return does not bring answers from the spirits. *Crow*, our cub shaman, arrives back as a shrunken form: weaker, not stronger, than the cry that flew out looking for help, and carrying back not an answer for the community but burdening, existential questions concerning himself and the world.

37 Eliade, p.482-483.

38 Eliade, p.201.

39 Eliade, p.202.

40 Leo Sternberg, 'Divine Election in Primitive Religion.' *Congrès International des Américanistes, Compte-Rendu de la XXIIe session, Pt. 2* (1924), quoted in Eliade, *Shamanism*, p.76.

41 Sternberg, quoted in Eliade, *Shamanism*, p.76.

I believe that Hughes's epic deliberately departs from the shamanic path here, shifting the narrative's direction towards the other folkloric and philosophical traditions in its arsenal. Crow's empty return from the gulf turns him back on himself, losing his maiming, scorching games on himself as he tests the make-up of the desolate world. We watch his antic play, his deathless undeterred capering to decipher the 'living dead' clamouring in his own flesh (40), his longing to be put to use for 'some everything' having been 'so carefully made... / Of nothing' (43). The failed but complete magical flight premises this autoimmune turning-back of Crow on himself, a 'pirouette' movement that, as in Seneca's philosophical care of the self, 'fix[es] our aim... towards the center of ourselves'.⁴² In elevating the question *Who is Crow?*, Hughes's version of magical flight not only opens on to this new context of the Roman practice of the self but on to other rich contexts from the *Mabinogion* as read by Katherine Robinson,⁴³ to Neoplatonist philosophy as read by Ann Skea,⁴⁴ to the poems' Christian figures of Garden, Apple and Crucifixion. Having nominated Crow as the poems' cub hierophant with its lightning-shocks, the shamanic context now hands off the further development of Crow's protagonicity to these other sources.

Of all the 'new' folk and religious contexts whose narrative influences emerge once the poems step off the shamanic path, the Gnostic and pagan cults of the goddess prove the most potent. In his later book-length study of Shakespeare, Hughes dubbed this female divinity the 'Goddess of Complete Being,' a 'myth of the Female as the [male] hero's own soul, the Divine Truth of his being, from which he is somehow alienated, and which he tries to repossess'.⁴⁵ Crow remains a cub in the extant poems, in a condition of ripped-open receptivity, in expectation of being reunited with a goddess. Kieran Cashell, presenting at Steve Ely and Helen Melody's *Ted Hughes's Expressionism* symposium (2023) on how Hughes's play-scripts for *Seneca's Oedipus* and *Orghast* create 'conditions for a visionary theatrical event', argued that the shamanistic frame Hughes used to create space for irruptions of ecstasy in performance is inextricably bound to the Orphic '*katabasis*', the movement of Orpheus' descent to the underworld to rescue the Female and 'capture

42 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York: Picador, 2005), p.207-213.

43 Robinson, 'The Remains of Something: Mabinogion Tales as Poetic Substructures in Ted Hughes's Crow and Cave Birds.'

44 Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition,' *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Vol. 6 Issue 1 (2017).

45 Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 2021), p.213.

something back'.⁴⁶ The primacy of the goddess in Hughes's oeuvre led him to reshape shamanic motifs around her. We can see this in 'The Snake and the Oak' essay, where a *katabasis* to reclaim the goddess is made the *telos* of Coleridge's poetry's shamanic flights. As we have seen, the magical-flight tale that Hughes asserts as the paradigm for Coleridge's poetic visions is the Inuit shaman's descent to Takánakapsâluk, Mother of Sea Beasts, who withholds fish and marine animals from the community's hunters when taboos have been broken and whom the shaman must comfort by brushing her neglected, tangled hair. Eliade's account of this tale insists that while Takánakapsâluk plays an important role in the practical and religious life of Inuit communities, she does not 'affect the veneration of Sila, the [male] Supreme Being, of celestial structure'.⁴⁷ For Eliade, shamanic powers descend from sky gods – he insists on the primacy of male gods and lightning. Since the submerged Inuit goddess controls food supply, Eliade groups her with the shaman's celestial brides whom we saw as figures of delay in the Buryat and Teleut traditions – secondary 'helping spirits' who first stall and then permit the shaman's onward motion in his ecstatic journeys.⁴⁸ Hughes, meanwhile, endeavours to characterise the Inuit flight to Takánakapsâluk as a *typical* example of the 'Shaman's flight and return' (*WP* 413), even though other magical flights such as the Buryat and Tamang journeys to the underworld catalogued above do not foreground a goddess. 'The Snake and the Oak' essay privileges the hairy bedraggled Female as being, *in herself*, the answer that the shaman needs, the awful 'Nature and Mother' whom the infant Coleridge invokes like a supposed 'cub shaman' when he runs out into the storm, hoping 'she will find him, sing him a lullaby that will recreate Paradise' (*WP* 407-408). Magical flights are subsumed within magical reunion with the Female, which becomes the *telos* of Coleridge's major visionary poems.

A journey to reclaim this goddess likely would have overtaken the Eliadian shamanic journey in a finished version of *Crow's* epic folk-tale, too.⁴⁹ She lurks in the backdrop of the main *Crow* sequence. In her 'Fury' or 'Ogress' form, we hear her in 'Crow on the Beach', sounded in the 'sea's ogressish outcry and convulsion' that

46 Kieran Cashell, 'Linguistic Carnality: Visionary Aspects in the Poetry of Ted Hughes.' *Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity Symposium*. British Library, London. 15 September 2023. Paper presentation.

47 Eliade, p.294.

48 Eliade, p.81.

49 Hughes's 1977 interview with Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and Gaudete', indicates his intended reunion with the goddess in the *Crow* folktale. The poet describes the *Cave Birds* poem 'Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days', in which two lovers caressingly mend and reassemble each other's destroyed bodies, as belonging 'right at the end' of *Crow's* story. The Female 'eventually becomes [Crow's] bride,' in Hughes's words. See E. Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Boston: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p.213.

the cub Crow, with the adolescent receptivity of his ‘gaping of brain in his tiny skull’, hears but doesn’t understand (32). The submerged peal is ‘pain’, Hughes’s commentary on this poem from 1985 tells us – pain issuing from the ‘womb of [Crow’s] Beloved – which he will find when he [...] learns what he is looking for (and what is looking for him)’ (WP 242). For the moment, while Crow *hasn’t* learned this *telos*, he doesn’t find the Female; his playful, irresponsible, diaphanous relation to her cry continues so long as he doesn’t yet fully identify himself with it.

The very narrative space or interval of the extant *Crow* poems and their mischievous hierophantic protagonist are made possible by that temporary distance from the submerged Beloved. For as long as the distance persists, the shamanic motifs of election and magical flight stand out. The purpose of these shamanic motifs is to premise the world of *Crow*: lightning-shocks of election and empty flights out into the gulf establish an exposed, leaking environment explored through a mutually exposed, ‘agape’ antagonicity. Crow never returns from his flights with answers or cures for the environment, only with more wondering questions about a secret mutually embedded within the world’s disaster and within his own feathers: his flights only deepen this uncertain exposure. Having turned the protagonist back on himself like this, the shamanic motifs have served their purpose in the *Crow* narrative, which is now set up to pursue that eventual reunion with the Beloved embedded in the disaster-world and heard in its sea’s ‘outcry’ (32). Structurally, therefore, shamanism is not *simultaneous* with the poems’ rich arsenal of aforementioned folkloric and philosophical touchstones, from the Gnostic-pagan Goddess of Complete Being to the *Mabinogion* myth cycle, Seneca’s care of the self and Neoplatonism. Distinct from these touchstones, *Crow*’s versions of shamanic figures *come first* when constructing the epic narrative, because they create Crow’s open, self-interrogative antagonicity. The question of who Crow is and how his activity might transform the poems’ disaster-world, premised by shamanic motifs, can then be taken up by the other traditions, and Hughes’s uninitiated ‘little Cub Shaman’ can evolve away from the Eliadian shamanic path (WP 408).

Ted Hughes – ‘No Falsifying Dream’

by Mike Sweeting

The aim of this paper is not simply to draw attention to Ted Hughes’s interest in dreams and the act of dreaming. Rather, the goal is to look at the consequences of that approach for his poetic sensibility, and to look at how he saw this at different points in his poetic career. The focus is upon his letters and his critical work, rather than on the poems, partly because these add insight, and partly because dream themes are so common in the poetry that it would take us far beyond the task of a single paper.

Hughes wrote about his personal dreams in his poetry, in his prose, in his stories, in his letters – and in the dream diaries that he kept for much of his life, now to be found in the British Library. He portrayed characters like Prometheus or Crow in the act of dreaming. He discussed his dream life with relatives, friends and lovers. He adopted poetic styles that mirror the content of dreams and the progression of dreams.

Much elucidation has come from material published after the poet’s death, giving the opportunity to look at the whole matter more closely. Meanwhile there has also been progress made in dream theory. The theories of Freud and Jung were still fresh when Ted Hughes was a young man, and the Jungian interest in archetypes was naturally of interest to the poet. However, dream theory became a backwater of psychological study until the new millennium. Cross-fertilization between disciplines started to bear fruit and practical application sought once more. It is not insignificant that when Robert Moss published *The Secret History of Dreaming* in 2009, not only dream researchers and psychologists endorsed the book, but also Iain R. Edgar, then professor of Anthropology at Durham University. Edgar had made his name linking psychological research to anthropological endeavour, writing that ‘dreamed realities have generated core historical realities across time and space.’¹

More recently, Otto Rheinschmiedt has come at the same topic from exactly the other direction. He took his experience of teaching dream analysis at Bath University and applied it to literary analysis. He gave particular attention to the work of Hughes in his 2017 *The Fictions of Dreams*. Such fresh insights help in a

¹ Robert Moss, *The Secret History of Dreaming* (Novato, California: New World Library 2009), rear dustcover endorsement.

modest way to further investigate the treasury of Ted Hughes's letters and the 'back-story' writings in *Winter Pollen*. Here, matters implicit or allusive in his poetic works received elucidation well beyond the material in early prose, or the fox dream often referred to during his readings.

Robert Moss looked closely at the seer aspect of dreaming. He divided seers into categories: 'There are three kinds of seer: the receivers, the travelers [sic], and the far-seers'². He characterised the receivers as those who receive both waking and sleeping visitations. Hughes's encounter with the fox and then the leopard at Pembroke College could be placed in this category. However, much of the time Hughes seems closest to Moss's traveller category. 'The traveler learns things by going to places where knowledge is found, in this world or in other dimensions of reality. This is the shaman's way.' This way 'involves developing a strong working relationship with guardians who can protect the dreamer and guide the journey. As young children and shamans know, there is no better escort for these journeys than an animal guardian'³. The stories in 1995's *The Dreamfighter, and Other Creation Tales* are a typical Hughesian synthesis of these twin aspects.

The third category is elaborated to include 'scryers'. To Moss these are people like Edith Hughes – observers of signs, interpreters who often use physical tools (today, cards and crystal balls; before, entrails and celestial phenomena.) Moss concluded that all three approaches have a potential healing function. The first he called 'guided imagery', using the healing power of ritual. The second he simply called the 'healing power of story'. It can be said that the former often eluded Hughes both in daily life and in his poetry. Quite the opposite is the case with the latter. Straight narrative never really enthused Hughes much, though. It was literally too prosaic. Rather, it was *transformed* narrative which drew him time and time again.

The search to find healing and to deliver healing led Hughes to transformational tales. One track followed was through his translations and adaptations. We can see how much he loved taking ancient tales and transforming them – tales from Ovid, Racine, Seneca, Aeschylus, Lorca, Wedekind. Ovid's work, of course, has numerous *magical* transformations as internal themes as well. But we can also see a theme of *character* transformation; for instance, in Admetus as he faces the choice that he has made to sacrifice Alcestis.

Another track taken by Hughes was to chart the transformations or attempts at transformation by 'star quality' central figures like Crow, Prometheus, Reverend Lumb, the Iron Man and Woman. In each of these cases, the reader or listener is

² Moss, p.260.

³ Moss, p.261.

invited to identify with a suffering, transforming protagonist at some level or another. It is interesting that the child-orientated *The Iron Man* has been taken to so many young hearts, while the (very!) adult-orientated *Gaudete* has been taken to very few grown ones. Although the themes are equally serious, one has the patina of a childhood dream, the other the stuff of nightmare.

As we turn to look at Hughes's own descriptions of past dreams, each of the above themes can be seen. Our task is greatly assisted when he gives his own gloss on an experience. It is not hard to conclude that he did regard his dreams as sources of guidance, as signifiers of pivotal healing opportunities, as correctives, etc. What will always be a challenge is identifying to what degree his poetic output was intentionally meant to be transformative for others. We know that in *River* Hughes wanted to 'speak up' for the rivers in his own way.

At this point, it is worth adding in an important distinction made by Moss. He contrasted the Western idea of dreams as a function merely of sleep with the attitude of all other societies. In those, a dream can be an awakening, a shamanic journey, a reverie, an entry into the Dreamtime, etc. Many cultures regard coincidence and life synchronicities as part of the dream life as well. The loss of such a wider view is quite recent in one sense. Spencer's *The Faerie Queene* and many Shakespearean plays have significant elements of that lost dream experience still in full view.

Ted Hughes's own research on Shakespeare has left us with *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. However, the core thesis here is extremely hard to access, never mind digest. My own route to some semblance of understanding has been to start with the very informative and matter-of fact footnotes, then to branch out into sections that are close to stand-alone essays, whilst finally plunging into central matters than I would say tell us far more about Hughes at that time than about Shakespeare. I interpret the epigraph at the front of the book from W. B. Yeats to be a remark more about the book's author than the book's subject. 'I have often had the fancy that there is one myth for every man, which, if we knew it, would make us understand all that he did and thought' (*SGCB* Pre-Introduction).

The most direct commentary regarding his own view of dreams can be found in Hughes's footnote on Eliade-style Shamanistic dreaming, (despite it being a 67 word long single sentence):

Dreams of this type become significant because, when the whole world's contributions are put together, they are so consistent in producing the mythic essentials (familiar as fossils or vital organs in the evolved religions), and because they project the inner experience, consistent and archetypal, of a spontaneous human transformation that always tends to produce the same end result:

a healer who exercises his power through public, dramatic performances (*SGCB* 88).

It is now time to look at some of the main dream descriptions that Hughes has left for us, mainly in letters to those he engaged with personally, a few of which he saw fit to share more widely, *recurrent* dreams first. When writing to his son Nicholas in 1998, Hughes described a recurrent dream which he had experienced from teenage years. However, the year before in a letter to Jutta and Wolfgang Kaussen, he said it had occurred for ‘most of his life’. All punctuation is as written.

The crashing aeroplane dream

‘One series of dreams I had, from my teens on. Occasionally still have ... is an aeroplane. Sometimes I’m in it. More often, it goes over – in trouble. On fire, or driving out of control. It crashes – usually just out of sight. (But about a month ago, it crashed on the building I was in – a huge troop-transport carrier. I was trying to smash the windows of the office I was in – blast-proof glass, military building – when a friend suddenly managed to open one by simply turning the handle. As we got out I was expecting the whole building to go up in flames.)

When it crashes, I go towards it and always find someone who either fell out of it or crawled from the wreckage. I wrote a poem once about one of those dreams – thought it might stop me having them, but it didn’t...these dreams record how – whatever it is trying to reach me out of myself – I am somehow rejecting it, evading it, not accepting it’ (*LTH* 708).

This is the same dream referenced in the poem ‘Casualty’ from *Hawk in the Rain*:

This was a description of one especially striking instalment of a recurrent dream that I have had on and off most of my life ... I thought that if I wrote about it I might stop having it – and did for some years. Then it crept back in various guises. I’m told it’s a dream image of the return to the body after an out-of-the body flight. Or by Jungians, that it’s the image of some new psychic material breaking in from beyond ego – arriving as an ‘accident’ because the ego does not know what to make of it, how to accept it or catch it ‘safely’. But who knows (*LTH* 700-1).

I find this account significant because it was Hughes’s latest evaluation of his earliest recorded dream. The early versions resemble scenes in a war comic or mimic a ‘Biggles’ story by Captain W.E. Johns. According to his own interpretation, Hughes was his own worst enemy, particular in terms of self-knowledge! To me this dream sequence speaks of regular self-sabotage. Another way of looking at it is that the dream’s protagonist is the common denominator in so many crash scenarios, saving a few by luck. The dream depicts a protagonist who is constantly active, but a survivor rather than a saviour. The indestructibility of Crow echoes these dreams. Our task is not to psycho-analyse Ted Hughes. However, what is always the case is

that the dream material always comes through the brain of each dreamer. The moment that dream is remembered, it becomes a part of the person who has dreamed in a relevant way.

The fishing for a big fish dream

Hughes's twenties were dominated by nightly variants of a fishing dream, although defined by a single dream about a fox. He had fished from a very young age; and would become a dedicated fisherman again in later life. However, at this stage, when he was not fishing in practice at all, the dreams were catching him poems – and exposure for those poems as well. Writing in February 1957 to his brother Gerald and family, Hughes speaks of a dream that he had been having repeatedly since he was about 20.

Though I haven't been fishing for 7 years I dream every single night that I am fishing. Often it is the canal at home – vastly altered, sometimes flowing swift & very deep, with sharks, – mostly it is Crookhill. I have every kind of fishing adventure. There's always a big fish – and whenever I dream I catch that, the day after I sell a poem. One night I dreamed that I caught the Grandfather pike at Crookhill – at the corner near the outflow. You and Johnny were pulling at its fins, and I was heaving down the slope – we had twenty feet of it out – and still more 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).

The day before his marriage to Sylvia Plath in 1956, Hughes dreamed a variant of this dream. Rather unusually, this information was only disclosed in 1994 – in an interview for a US Angling magazine reprinted by The Guardian newspaper five years later. 'Poet, pike and a pitiful grouse' was printed in *The Guardian Review* on 8th Jan 1999. This article particularly fascinated Otto Rheinschmiedt in *The Fiction of Dreams*. He noted that Hughes regarded this 1956 version of the 'big fish' dream as a marriage dream where: 'I hooked a pike at tremendous depth. As it came up, its head filled the lake. I brought it out and its girth filled the entire lake. And I was backing up, dragging the thing out.'⁴

Rheinschmiedt found it natural to then attempt some psychoanalysis of the marriage partners. 'At the root of any dream, beyond image, symbol, metaphor, and narrative, always lies a dream thought. 'What lies at the bottom of the marital lake?' Put simply, for Hughes it was a conquest at the bottom, while for Sylvia it was a Hell. Her reaction was thus: 'Waking is heaven, with its certainties. Why these

⁴ Otto M. Rheinschmiedt, *The Fictions of Dreams: Dreams, Literature, and Writing*. (London: Karnac Books, 2017), p.82.

dreams? These last exorcisings of the horrors and fears beginning when my father died and the bottom fell out. I am just now restored. I have been restored for over a year, and still the dreams aren't quite sure of it. They aren't for I'm not (sic). And I suppose never will be' (*JSP* 283).

The same dream was explored by Mark Wormald in his 2022 *The Catch*. He reminded us that Ted 'believed in dreams so did his mother Edith, and Olwyn, two years his elder. They'd shared them, interpreted them. A family habit.'⁵ Wormald pointed out that this 'family habit' was extended into Hughes's relationship with his new wife, with several unintended consequences, as we shall see.

Animal confrontation dreams

Hughes had a vivid dream life in 1959 in America, as described to his son Nicholas only in 1998, information made available to us yet again through the *Letters*. They are not as full of portent as those that we have already considered but do demonstrate the poet's interest in the richness of dream experience for its own sake, not just for its convenience as a tool of creativity.

The ape dream

I was in a vast quarry, like the Grand Canyon (which we'd visited earlier that summer). I was suddenly aware of something moving in the depths of the quarry, then saw that it was a colossal ape coming up towards me at great speed. I was very alarmed, and scrambled away up the quarry side. On the brink was a flimsy building – a sort of builder's caravan. Just ahead of the Gorilla [...] I got into the caravan, and dragged in after me my old leather first world war trench coat (which was my big link to authentic life, I suppose). But the ape grabbed the hem of the coat. I tried to shut the door, but the coat, halfway in, halfway out, prevented that. So I stared at the ape through the gap of the partly opened door. As our eyes met, he let go of the coat, and very gently, with a sort of amused expression in his eyes, lifted his hands and put a forefinger tip into each of his ears. As if to say (I've thought later) 'No more Italian please!' But to me, the main point was I'd made a contact that stayed open and was friendly (*LTH* 708-9).

I love the way Hughes dislikes writing 'both' here. Instead, he refers to 'each of his ears', as if some creatures have more than two. His urge to interpret is strong here too, with the dream not really lending itself to that approach. However, the satisfaction in having had such a dream can be clearly identified. There is also that arresting image 'I stared at the ape through the gap.' Some might regard that as a summary of Hughesian intent!

⁵ Mark Wormald, *The Catch*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p.41.

It was natural for Hughes to group the next batch of dreams together, since they share a common theme, with the differing totemic creature adding a degree of nuance. Two took place at Yaddo in upper New York State.

The bear dream

I had a series of animal confrontation dreams that all ended badly. These dreams came up so vividly, I expect, because I had isolated myself to do nothing else but make contact with the other side. [...] In one of these dreams I fought a bear and actually seemed to be winning. First it stood over me, breathing into my face. Then I was on top of it and crushing its throat with an iron bar (*LTH* 709).

Here, intent is the most significant factor. Hughes was determined to dream, to 'make contact with the other side'. We know that he was using more mechanistic means to attempt the same contact during this same period – Ouija, seances, Tarot, etc. However, clearly the shamanic journey was uppermost in his mind at this point due to the totemic nature of the animals.

The wolf dream

Another dream, night or two later, I saw a wolf under a tree, watching me from behind the trunk. Next thing, it was loping towards me at great speed. All I had in my hand was a spade. As it came towards me, I became blind. I tried desperately to strain some chink of sight through the fog in my eyes, and hit the wolf with the spade, as hard as I could. I then went on batter it to death. Suddenly my eyes cleared, and I had killed – a kitten (*LTH* 709).

Not only is this report bathetic, but, as with the one prior, a shaman would not regard either dream as a 'success'. Yes, he had defeated the bear, but to what end? Yes, he was triumphing, but over kittens.

The pike/water-leopard dreams

Whilst clearly in the same chain as the dreams from the earlier 1950s, the obvious difference from the 'catching a big fish' dream is the addition of water-leopards! It is also an outlier in that it is later than the seven-year period that the author had previously assigned as being the period of recurrence of the dream. And finally, rather than grouping it with the other fish-catching dreams, here it is added on to the 'animal confrontation' group. Clearly, he is seeking to encourage Nicholas regarding his own frog dream.

When I began to write, I began to dream about Crookhill pond [...] In my dreams, that pond was always different. When I was in good contact with myself, the pond would be full of big pike. Once or

twice, the pike were big water-leopards [...] Other occasions it would be empty of any except one or two very tiny pike. That meant – a general state of being in very poor contact with myself. Once or twice it was lined with tiles and empty – that meant total breakdown of communication between me and myself (*LTH* 709-10).

Not only does Hughes link this dream sequence with the Yaddo dreams, but he now starts to relate specific life and artistic lessons from what he recalls, in an attempt to assist his son with his own dream life. From the context, and his stated shock at the draining of Crookhill pond, we can deduce that this is not a late conclusion but a reiteration of what had become a lifelong habit. These kinds of dream were, for him, psychological and ultimately artistic thermometers. Thus, for Hughes, it was natural to move in the same letter, on the same theme, to an entirely successful animal dream.

Salmon dream night before departure for Ireland

I was walking down the upper Taw stream – on Dartmoor, thin acidic pools, with skinny dark tiny trout. The moor ended at a cliff [...] As I got to the bottom of the cliff, and stood beside this big river, I saw that masses of huge salmon were rushing up it. As they went, they leapt clear of the water, writhing their bodies as they do going up a weir, and this shaking snaking movement of their flanks hurled milt and roe out of their bodies and plastered me head and foot (*LTH* 710).

This dream is at once both realistic and exaggerated, like but unlike. It is close in style to many of the poems, in fact. Its great significance for Hughes was as a promise of artistic fertility.

What it meant – as it turned out to be true – was that going to Ireland broke me out of that arid sterile alienation from myself that my life at C.G. had trapped me into, and with a single stride plunged me right into the productive, fruitful thick of my best chances. And in Ireland I did make a big breakthrough – in my writing and in everything to do with myself (*LTH* 710).

For Hughes, a dream with an epiphanic timbre initially seemed to offer poetical and personal relief. A number of hard years, the years that generated *Crow* and *Cave Birds*, would result in a freeing of a kind while in Ireland.

Rheinschmiedt relates the case study of a Yugoslav immigrant obsessed with the poems in *Crow*. This derived not from reading the poems but by unremitting crow dreams that led him to the book. He felt that this work was by the only author who understood his agony. Zlatan was a doctor who had not only lost two of his brothers, his wife and three children to the Balkan war but his entire hospital and

its patients in an artillery strike. He was one of a handful of survivors. After two years of living in the UK as what he called a 'working machine', Zlatan discovered that a confidante had feelings for him. It threw him into rages, since he believed did not deserve love, having failed his entire family and nation. His quotes in therapy came from 'Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door'. Eventually Zlatan found peace but had to let go of his 'form of identity [...] lament and chronic mourning'. This was eventually achieved as the result of an epiphanic dream, following a period of what Rheinschmiedt calls 'dream diving'. Incidentally, he initially reacted as badly to the epiphanies as he had done to being loved.⁶

The dream the night before the Hughes family departure for Ireland can be taken to reflect at least partially effective 'dream diving'. However, there was still clearly psychic progress that needed to be made – as the next dream Hughes recounts in the letter, a dream from 1975, demonstrates.

Laden ship dream: salmon and jaguars

I had a visionary dream. I was beside an estuary, near a harbour. A ship was coming in – quite a large ship. Brilliantly coloured. I then noticed it was loaded way above the gunwales with enormous salmon, piled high, a floating small mountain of giant salmon, and on top of them scattered like cloths or carpets, many jaguars, as if they were asleep.

This linking of salmon and jaguars is in the same vein as Hughes's earlier dream linkage between pike and leopard (*LTH* 711).

As it came towards me, at the wharf – another dream superimposed itself. A theatre stage – onto which I wandered (to perform my part?) totally drunk, so drunk that I had to sit in a chair. From that position, I somehow fished the whole scene of the dream – the estuary, the ship loaded with salmon and jaguars - drunkenly, with one of those wretched reservoir rods, and a Grouse and Claret Fly. I then got up and simply – wandered away, drunkenly, dazed.

Hughes gifts us with his own regretful interpretation of this dream. Five years had passed since the publication of *Crow*, but only in retrospect, months before his death almost twenty-three year later, could he discuss in a letter the fact that he had 'muffed it'.

So that boatload of truths, insights, wisdoms from the other side, inspirations [...] turned into a huge, laden treasure boat gift from the gods, I simply abandoned. I wasn't up to it. I was so hopelessly

⁶ Rheinschmiedt, p.55-8.

mentally scrambled by the life I was leading – I couldn't grasp it. So I lost it – just as surely as if I had slammed the glass door on it. That was probably the best opportunity of my life – to enter a wholly richer, more productive, more complete existence, as a person and as a writer. And I muffed it. Instead – I took up real salmon fishing ... But I should have done it internally, through my work on myself, rather than simply gathering happy outer experiences. I should have done both, perhaps, simultaneously.

The above takes us to the heart of Hughes's view of dreams as actual life guidance, guidance that should have been acted upon, as source of poetic inspiration and direction, as triggers of new revelation. The posthumously published *Alcestis* contains this sentence from Hughes, speaking, on Euripides's behalf, as Admetos: 'The mind tries to be its own doctor'.⁷ As before, Hughes's art and his selfhood are caught up together. Taken as a group (which is what Hughes presents them as), the five dreams are very much in line with the points made by Rheinschmiedt in a section of his book devoted particularly to the work of Hughes. The chapter on 'The Primary Human Drives' leads the author to a section he entitles 'Ted Hughes' animal consorts'.⁸

Unsurprisingly, Rheinschmiedt commences with 'The Thought-Fox', quoting Hughes's description of it in his own *A Dancer to God: Tributes to T.S. Eliot* as 'a compact index of everything to follow'.⁹ Rheinschmiedt opines that 'In a single dream he had found his foundation myth'. He even goes so far as to compare it with Freud's own signature dream of 'Irma's injection'. He then moves on to 'The Hawk in the Rain' and 'The Jaguar', the other two parts of what he views as a triumvirate of foundation poems. Rheinschmiedt easily accepts the poet's own interpretation of the fox dream. He treats the other two poems as if they were also part of Hughes's dreamscape. He interprets the hawk as symbolic of the Greek sky god, Uranus. Apparently ancient dreamers felt that this symbol spoke of 'the retrieval of the soul and the emergence of soul life'. He takes a similar approach to the jaguar, seeing there Eros on the prowl for female victims, exactly, of course, as Plath describes it in *her* poem 'Pursuit'.¹⁰

Rather than a summary, Rheinschmiedt now makes a comparison. He moves on to a lengthy, and interesting, case-study of a client called Stephanie, intended to illustrate what he has said about Hughes. The Crow-like violence and fecundity of the client's dreams are unmistakable, as is the fact that 'power animals' commonly

⁷ Hughes, *Alcestis*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p.67.

⁸ Rheinschmiedt, p. 165-9.

⁹ Rheinschmiedt, p.165.

¹⁰ Rheinschmiedt, p. 166-7.

accompanied her in those dreams, particularly a wolf or a 'beautiful black horse'. As her dreams altered, so she altered, one always a reflection of the other.

The case study demonstrates that power animals have a tendency to show up in the final furlong of a patient's analysis, which is tantamount to saying that the psyche on the way to recovery needs to be strong enough to entertain the dreamer coming into her own power.¹¹

Rheinschmiedt felt that *Crow* was an attempt at the above but that:

Something needs to be in place first; the prerequisite to inviting power into one's life is a solid emotional foundation made up of self-love, kindness, compassion, and generosity, not to mention the establishment of the ethical sense and spiritual inclinations. Without this, the power rests on shaky foundations and will become a destructive force.¹²

In his view as a dream researcher, the final resolution of lengthy Uranian mourning, hindered by uncontrolled Eros, released again the 'White Muse' in the form of the later *Birthday Letters* poems. It is not insignificant that so many participants at Ted Hughes's memorial service in Westminster Abbey referred to kindness, compassion and generosity in their encomia.

Dreams of Sylvia

A single dream group is reported in the *Letters* between the fourth and fifth animal confrontation dreams – recurrent dreams of Sylvia alive in the present. However, here we must be cautious. This paper is determinedly focussed upon experiences attested to by Hughes outside poetic usage – so at this stage only one such dream will be directly considered. It is unsurprising that Hughes himself sought no discussion of these dreams, other than through the poetic prism, as in *Birthday Letters*. Even there, he would rather refer to Sylvia's dreams than his own, as in the poem 'Dream Life'. Of course, there is also the spine-tingling *Howls & Whispers* poem 'The Offers', but we do not know for sure what that 'dream that was no dream' truly was (*CP* 1180). We do know from a Ted Hughes diary note held by Emory that one such dream took place two days before his birthday in 1968. The dream is summarised in Koren and Negev's biography of Assia Wevill:

Ted was overwhelmed by a dream; Sylvia had returned to life and met all her friends and spent a day and night with her children. Something could have been done to make her stay, but he didn't

¹¹ Rheinschmiedt, p.177.

¹² Rheinschmiedt, p.177.

know what. At the end of the day she fell asleep and never woke up. This time he sadly acknowledged her death was final (*LTH* 422).

Again, our goal is not to act as omniscient analyst of Ted Hughes's dreams. Rather it is to relate the effect these dreams had upon his view of the world, and consequently on his work. Having said that, it is easy to see the direction of this particular dream.

Let us now consider some of the poet's other core dreams.

The fox dream

Dropped into the middle of the nightly fishing dreams of the early fifties was the famous 'fox dream' of 1953 and its lesser-known sibling, the 'leopard dream' the following night. This well-recorded dream is given its most detailed description thirty-six years later in the 1993 dated essay 'The Burnt Fox' in *Winter Pollen* (WP, 8-9). In a letter twenty-six years after the events, the same dream is interestingly paired with an additional dream, about a leopard. The 1979 reported version of the dream covers ground already made quite familiar elsewhere:

Then I dreamed that I was still sitting at my essay, in my usual agonising frame of mind, trying to get one word to follow another. The door opened & a creature came in, with a fox's head, & a long skinny fox's body – but erect, & with human hands. He had escaped from a fire – the smell of burning hair was strong & his skin was charred in places cracking, bleeding freshly through the splits. He came across, & set his hand on the page & said 'Stop this. You are destroying us' He lifted his hand away, & the blood-print stayed on the page. The hands in particular were terribly burned (*LTH* 422).

Hughes made additional commentary on this dream after recounting it in the *Winter Pollen* version: 'the impression of reality was so total, I got out of bed to look at the papers on my table, quite certain that I would see the blood print there on the page.' (WP 9).

The leopard dream

The following night, I dreamed that I woke with the knowledge that somebody had come through my door. 2 or 3 steps led down from the door, into my room, - I could make out a tall figure standing on these steps. I got out of bed (in my dream) & went down to see who it might be. As I crossed the room, the creature opened two eyes & I saw that it was a leopard – but standing erect. My exclamation 'It's a leopard' is the most vivid thing about the dream. As I spoke it stepped towards me & began to push me back, – I resisted & wrestled for a moment, before it pushed me backwards over my armchair (*LTH* 422-3).

This dream and the fox one re-appear as dreams of the character Harold in Sylvia Plath's story *The Wishing Box* in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. There, Harold is depicted as bluff and insensitive, wrapped up in the magic of his own dreamscape, unaware of the effect on his young wife Agnes. The Hughes family habit of sharing one's dreams was rebounding upon Ted. Sylvia brazened the thing out stating that she had 'shamelessly plagiarised' the dreams. The miscalculation was in the assumption that plagiarism would be all that might concern her husband (*LSP1* 1,292).

In the *Wild Steelhead & Salmon* interview, Hughes elaborated on the leopard motif. 'When I was feeling good, I'd have dreams full of giant pike that were perhaps also leopards.'¹³ In the same interview, Hughes expressed regret for the thoughtless killing of so many small creatures as a child. It is not a big step to conclude that (among other things, of course) the fox represented mauled Nature – while the leopard represented the way out and ahead. An *Independent* newspaper's reviewer, Blake Morrison, opined in 1994:

A fascination with predators has often been a clue, as Hughes points out, to larger social movements: between the wars, so Jung claimed, Germans dreamt more frequently about panthers and lions; and the late Serbian poet Vasko Popa was alarmed to find that, whenever he appeared in public, students would demand that he read from his sequence about the Serbian national saint, St Sava of the Wolves ('I fear very bad things,' Popa told Hughes). Perhaps Hughes's predators, while on one level ushering in the environmental movement, also express the brute spirit that destroyed the welfare state. For Hughes, works of imaginative literature are 'a set of dials' on the front of society, where we can read off the hidden energies beneath.¹⁴

The murder dream

In 1957, Hughes sent another letter to his brother and family in Australia. The dream it related this time was a dream of murder.

Last night I had the most unusual dreams – the main theme was a murderer, who took his victims to an old empty house, summoned the spirit of the house - in darkness – and accused his victim-to-be before the spirit of the house – or asked what the sentence was. Then the victim was given a chance to defend himself or herself – but they were each time cut short by this voice from the dark, empty house, sentencing them. The murderer then attacked them. He buried the bodies anywhere – under pavements, in gardens. I was both detective and observer. Although it was so morbid it was a

¹³ 'Poet, pike and a pitiful grouse' – interview with Thomas Pero for *Wild Steelhead & Salmon* magazine, reprinted in *The Guardian*. First published on Friday 8 January 1999.

¹⁴ Morrison, Blake. 'Myth in the making'. *The Independent*. Sunday 6 March 1994.

pleasure to dream at all -spontaneous mental life seemed to have died out. Today however I was in good form, and I got ideas for about twenty fable style stories, one or two might make poetic plays, one or two are realistic. I haven't been so awake for years (*LTH* 100).

This dream report is particularly significant because of the weight put upon it by Hughes. Firstly, it shows the poet's relief at having any dream again following a fallow period. Secondly, we are shown the direct connection he makes between his level of creativity and his dream life. Thirdly, he understands the deep truth that being truly 'awake' is very different from merely not being asleep.

Hughes did not just report dreams though. He engaged with others about their meaning and worth. The importance that Hughes set upon *all* of his own dream life, not just 'crisis' dreams, can be found in comments he made to his old friend Lucas Myers in a July 1957 letter. He advised Myers that "The main evidence in favour of a life doing nothing but write & nose into other folk's affairs only in so far as you need exercise, is that your dreams become long and coherent & beautiful" (*LTH* 106).

Keith Sagar's elk-beast dream

Meanwhile he could, generously, seek to assist others in their own dream solutions. Letters to and from Keith Sagar demonstrate the assistance the latter received regarding his own elk-beast dream of 1978. This dream is recounted in *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*. Hughes said of it:

Propitious dream. Though it depends on how you follow it up in your behaviour. No doubt there are other interpretations. But I think that it is important to interpret dreams – if at all possible – positively. And this dream is so general, it seems quite clearly good (*LTH* 394).

We can see two emphases here that may not have been so clear to the poet before. In the light of his perceived 1975 failure, his 1978 advice is to make sure that action follows. His second emphasis is that a dream should always be interpreted positively if at all possible. This resonates with the recommendations of Rheinshmidt in both the case studies he connects to Hughes's work. As a third throwaway contribution, Hughes's view then was that general dreams portend good.

We can thus conclude that Ted Hughes derived meaning from his dreams that he applied both to his life and his poetry. He sought the positive over the negative, felt that once the core import had been grasped, action was necessary. It is also clear that to get to this point he had a habit of discussing his dream life with

both his mother and sister, and beyond that at the very least, his first wife and the critic who became a friend. To Keith Sagar he indicated a *liking* for ‘general’ dreams or dreams based on past memories, since they had a positive feel to them (although that may be interpreted just as him being kind to Sagar regarding his own dream). However, what it seems he *wanted* were directive or confirmatory dreams, and what he *got* was often Crow-like nightmare.

The direct causal link made several times in examples above, between ‘good’ dream and ‘good outcome’, is obvious. Sometimes this was measured in terms of the acceptance of his poems for publication, certainly in early years where both the funds and reputational gain were vital. Sometimes Hughes measured in terms of being in touch with himself or freedom from a woe, which enabled the creative in him to be expressed more fully.

It is clear that the poet consciously harnessed the experiences he had in particular dreams to produce specific powerful poems. We must remember that the dream which set Hughes free from the toils of F.R. Leavis and his literary criticism, did not only have a causal effect – his transfer to reading Archaeology and Anthropology, rather than English Literature at university. It also led in a straight line to the poem ‘The Thought-Fox’, a poem with a deliberate dreamlike quality, not just a poem owing its existence to the prior dream. This is also one of the few poems where we can take ‘soundings’ from subsequent writings and later years. His perception of its meaning did not alter. The only other equivalent ‘sounding’ over a lengthy period of years is found in his interpretation of dreams regarding fish, also unchanging.

However, the poetic transformation of these dream experiences was, inevitably to become more nuanced through experience. The author of ‘Pike’ became the author of ‘The Morning before Christmas’, with its ‘wealth of eggs’ headily echoing the 1965 dream. Clearly, the poet’s confidence rose after dreams of abundant salmon – and jaguars too – since he regarded being in ‘good contact’ with himself as an important prerequisite for creativity. Clearly his own crow dreams reflected similar processing of pain and grief to those of the traumatised doctor, Zlatan.

Many Hughes poems include some level of meditation on the inner world, and of ‘dream’ in the wider sense, as mentioned earlier as core to the non-Western perception of dream life. An early example would be ‘Out Part 1’, which makes clear its connection to the Australian aboriginal Dreamtime. Parts of *Crow* and *Gaudete* owe a great deal to shamanic dream patterns, as I indicated in my PhD thesis many years ago. The same can be said of *Cave Birds*, with its roots in Sufic poetry and Sufic trance-life.

Having, albeit briefly, looked at the way that trauma tends to produce certain kinds of dream (Crow-like dreams for Zladar, Wolf and Horse dreams for Stephanie as she exited her difficult period), we can fairly deduce unconscious as well as conscious attraction to animal themes in Hughes's poetry. A childhood full of dreams, leading to an early adulthood full of dreams, led to a lengthy period where they were hidden. We cannot yet determine whether remembered dreaming itself was denied to Hughes, or whether the dreams *were* remembered – but too awful, too personal, too difficult to share. Dreams of 1965, 1968 and 1975 are made noteworthy by the long periods of time between them – and also because they are not discussed- in a way the author might consider to be for posterity – until 1997. Of course, Hughes had also learnt hard lessons. In some way, he connected the sharing of certain key dreams with Sylvia to consequent negative outcomes. That there were negative outcomes is clear from the thinly veiled parallels in the tale of Harold and Agnes in *The Wishing Box*. Sylvia portrayed herself/Agnes as threatened by Harold's fertile dream life. Agnes also belittled it. Dreams – and who had them – became part of marital warfare, reaching a climax when the WMD of Assia's pike dream was deployed at the meal table.

Dreams, whether deeply painful or near-epiphanies, were a deep source of truth for Ted Hughes. He always sought not the 'falsifying dream' of creative stupor but the empowering dream of truth.

Ted Hughes, the Chthulucene, the Cyborg and the child audience

by Jessica Ann De Waal

In this article I argue that Donna Haraway's theories of the Chthulucene and the cyborg can be used as a lens through which to view a selection of Ted Hughes's children's writing and to consider what effect this may have upon the child audience. Donna Haraway's theory of kin will be aligned with Hughes's children's collection *Meet My Folks!* (1961).¹

Haraway's theory of kin means building relationships with entities and species other than those tied by ancestry and genealogy, paying particular attention to the idea of tentacular thinking and mutual entanglements with both nonhuman and 'other' species. She writes that 'Kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate'.² Furthermore, I note that Hughes foreshadows Haraway with his own ideas of 'meshes' and entanglements between human and nonhuman entities.

Haraway's concept of 'natureculture' focuses on companion species and traces the different ways in which humans can 'become' one as we connect to all that is nonhuman. This concept opens up a dialogue between the human, animal and nature because it highlights that humanity does not equate to superiority but is instead mixed up in relations between species that should not be separated. By blurring what we consider culture and nature, we stop taking for granted what has been previously set out as fact by humans. When we extend the subjectivity of the human to include a fusion with nonhuman entities, the 'traditional' human being is disputed. As Haraway states, 'A dialogue commences interrogating the intimate experiences found in the boundaries between culture/nature, human/nonhuman, organic/inorganic. From this vantage point, we can see ourselves as fully implicated in the world and as cohabiters with others.'³

Whilst Haraway acknowledges an acceptance of the Anthropocene, I argue here that her development of the term 'Chthulucene' is more usefully applicable to Hughes's children's writing. The origin of the term 'Cthulhu' stems from the

1 Ted Hughes, *Meet My Folks!* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961).

2 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 2.

3 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1991), p. 181.

fictional cosmic entity created in 1928 by H. P. Lovecraft.⁴ Echoing the Greek word ‘chthonic’ (‘of the Earth’), the creature in his story ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ has a malevolent personality. Due to Lovecraft’s outspoken racism however, Haraway denies any relation to his Cthulhu-monster and uses the change of spelling to reflect this difference when describing her theory. She writes,

I am calling all this the Chthulucene – past, present, and to come [...] the diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things. [...] ‘My’ Chthulucene [...] includes the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus [...] some of the many thousand names proper to a vein that Lovecraft could not have imagined or embraced.⁵

As Gough and Adsit-Morris note,

By focusing on what she dislikes about Lovecraft’s ‘misogynist racial-nightmare monster’, Haraway overlooks his contributions to a rich vein of creative artistry [...] In ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1928) Lovecraft hints at his familiarity with early 20th-century art movements in his description of sensitive artists being moved by visions to create artworks that only ‘the vagaries of cubism and futurism’ come close to describing.⁶

It is impossible then to deny any relation to Lovecraft’s idea, when it is obvious that Haraway has adapted and reconfigured this weird entity, primarily using an example of his tentacular thinking with her reference to the spider *Pimoides cthulu*. Through this, Haraway illustrates the point of loopy tendrils, roots and routes and continuous spinning around to describe ‘tentacularity [...] wound with abyssal and dreadful graspings [...] in the generative recursions that make up living and dying’.⁷ Haraway illustrates this theory further to describe that ‘Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something.’⁸ Savi then develops this theory by relating it to the theory of evolution whereby ‘everything is connected to something, irrespective of genetic binding’.⁹ Haraway’s Chthulucene is used as one of the central concerns of ecocriticism here; and it is argued that the Chthulucene replaces the Anthropocene. It is important to note, however, that the ideas of the Anthropocene allow writers and theorists to think about place, scale, planet and ecological interconnection. As

4 H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).

5 Haraway, *Trouble*, p.100-1.

6 Noel Gough, Chessa Adsit-Morris, ‘Troubling the Anthropocene: Donna Haraway, Science Fiction, and Arts of Un/Naming’ *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, 20 3 (2020), 213-224 (p. 219).

7 Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 33.

8 Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 31.

9 Melina Pereina Savi, ‘The Anthropocene (and) (in) the Humanities: Possibilities for Literary Studies,’ *Estudos Feministas*, 25 2 (2017), 945-959 (p. 949).

Reddick argues in her recent book, ‘Defining the Anthropocene is a decision loaded with cultural, political, and ethical implications. This means that scholars in the arts, humanities, and social sciences are well placed to enter the debate.’¹⁰

Haraway, however, suggests that, unlike the Anthropocene, making ‘kin’ is of the upmost importance in the Chthulucene. She writes that, ‘Kin making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans [...] the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense’.¹¹ The effect of this idea deepens our connection to, and responsibility for, other species, and reevaluates the anthropocentrism of many narratives told about humankind. Haraway states that:

The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; [...] I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge. So, I think a big new name, actually more than one name, is warranted.¹²

Whilst the Anthropocene situates humans as the single most influential species on the planet and responsible for causing significant global warming, Haraway’s ‘Chthulucene’ presents a radically different interpretation. She argues that the Anthropocene is too focused on the future and that there should be no clear distinctions drawn between humanity and the nonhuman world, and that there needs to be a relentless focus on the present.¹³ Unlike in the dominant markers of Anthropocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene. Many argue that the Capitalocene is more appropriate term than the Anthropocene, as it signifies capitalism as a way of organising nature in a competitive world-ecology. Steering away from these dominant and competing theories, however, I argue that the Chthulucene is a more appropriate mechanism for debating multispecies importance and the possibility of living harmoniously between human and nonhuman. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in precarious human-driven times attempting to merge the ‘self’ and ‘other’ binary.¹⁴

10 Yvonne Reddick, *Anthropocene Poetry: Place, Environment, and Planet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

11 Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 103.

12 Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 100-1.

13 Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 110.

14 The use of ‘self and ‘other’ is portrayed through Hughes’s children’s writing such as *The Iron Woman* (1993) and will be explored through Haraway’s cyborg theory later in this chapter.

Haraway's tentacular thinking, entanglement theories and multispecies importance can all be applied to particular children's writings by Hughes, given that throughout his career he made interconnections between nature and culture through ecologically-charged messages. Reddick notes:

When Hughes is at his most prescient of post-humanist theories, he deconstructs a human-centred sense of our species as superior to others. [...] By turns humorous, unsettling and radically green, these thoughts have potentially profound implications for the way we treat other species.¹⁵

Hughes's early children's poems, *Meet My Folks!* describe each member of an extraordinarily strange family, often in comical ways. As Bate suggests however, 'His feelings about his mother [...] were too deep and complicated to capture: she is the one absence from the feast of *Meet My Folks!*'¹⁶ When describing the assortment of poems in a 1959 letter to Esther and Leonard Baskin, Hughes writes, 'The general drift of the poems is – "Man as an elaborately perfected intestine, or upright weasel"' (*LTH* 147).

'My Other Granny'¹⁷ embodies vivid images of mutual entanglements with the Grandma character as an octopus, linking her tentacles between nonhuman and the human narrator. The poem opens matter-of-factly:

My Granny is an Octopus
At the bottom of the sea
And when she comes to supper
She brings her family. (ll.1-4).

The imagery given to the child reader presents the normality of the Granny being an octopus and a viable part of the human family. This is further developed when Hughes writes:

Some of her cousins are lobster
Some floppy jelly fish –
What would you be if your family tree
Grew out of such a dish? (ll.13-16).

This poem asks children how they would respond if their relatives were indeed sea creatures and allows for the idea of acceptance of the nonhuman as mutual Kin, supporting Haraway's desire for 'flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages'.¹⁸ Throughout Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* she discusses the octopus through

¹⁵ Yvonne Reddick, *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and Ecopoet* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) p. 37-8.

¹⁶ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (New York: Harper, 2015), p. 45.

¹⁷ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems for Children* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 43-4.

¹⁸ Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 101.

a symbolic lens, stating, ‘Octopuses are called spiders of the seas, not only for their tentacularity, but also for their predatory habits’.¹⁹ The comparison between spiders and octopus relates to Haraway’s ideas of mutual entanglement between animal species and human and nonhuman entities. She continues, ‘They are good figures for the luring, beckoning, gorgeous, finite, dangerous precarities of the Chthulucene [...] Mobile, many-armed predators, pulsating through and over the coral reefs.’²⁰ In line with Haraway’s entanglement between human and nonhuman, Hughes’s octopus-Granny can be read in a similar way. The poem continues with the narrator’s father asking the octopus-Granny how things are ‘Down in the marvellous deep?’ (l. 29). In response ‘Her face swells up, her eyes bulge huge/And she begins to weep’. (ll. 30-31). Hughes’s choice of an octopus highlights the emotional intelligence of the animal-human character of the poem. As Adams and Burbeck write, ‘Adult octopuses are clever, adaptable and rapid learners. Experts speculate that most octopus behaviours are learned independently rather than being based on instinct.’²¹ In light of this, the octopus-granny possesses the emotional capability to differentiate between the nonhuman and human worlds and therefore evokes great sadness at that realisation that she will never fully be part of the human family. The poem closes:

Then out of her eyes there bring two drops
That plop into her saucer –
And that is all she manages,
And my Dad knows he can’t force her.

And when they’ve gone, my ocean-folk,
No man could prove they came –
For the sea-tears in her saucer
And a man’s tears are the same. (ll.36-44).

The motif of the octopus-Granny crying into her saucer challenges the child audience to question why she could be upset, yet again confirms that she acknowledges that she will always be ‘other’ compared to her human family. The comparison to a man’s tears as being the same as her ‘sea-tears’ also links with mutual entanglements and kinship between the human family and their nonhuman relatives. The humans are accepting and respectful of her. This, despite her physical differences, aligns with Haraway’s call for the flattening of any supposed

¹⁹ Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 55.

²⁰ Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 55.

²¹ Sam S. Adams, Steve Burbeck ‘Beyond the Octopus: From General Intelligence toward a Human-like Mind’ in *Theoretical Foundations of Artificial General Intelligence* eds. Pei Wang and Ben Goertzel, (Amsterdam: Atlantis Press, 2012), p. 49-65, (p. 51).

interspecies hierarchy and that although ‘Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar.’²²

Haraway’s theory of ‘self’ and ‘other’ can also be applied to Hughes’s children’s story *Timmy The Tug*.²³ Hughes’s collaboration with Downer dates to 1952, when they both had flats at 18 Rugby Street. Downer describes their relationship:

We both had the Yorkshireman’s puritan work ethic; we had both spent our teenage years walking the wild parts of the country. [...] Ted, always generous, was kind about the verses, and then quietly asked if I would like him to provide his own version [...] somehow, I did not get *Timmy* back from Ted. I was leading a busy life, and so was he, we had moved on into different worlds.²⁴

More than fifty years later, Hughes’s widow, Carol Hughes, found Hughes’s original manuscript and returned it to Downer.²⁵ The story was subsequently published in 2009, complete with Downer’s watercolours, bringing to light an enchanting and appealing tale for children.

Hughes’s verse recounts how Timmy is a tugboat who manages to escape from his moorings and enjoy adventures on the high seas. It begins:

Timmy the Tug sat patiently there.
The ropes rubbed sore, his rivets ached.
He was up to his eyes in oil and tar.
[...]
This was more than he could stand.
He closed his eyes, he counted ten:
“I’d be far better off as a house on land,
Or a triangle in a bad brass band,
At least I’d be useful then.”²⁶

Timmy’s outlook is pitiful. Once loved and enjoyed by his owner, he has been discarded for a faster, newer and more aesthetically pleasing model. Timmy is given human emotions as the text rejects any notion of the boat as being ‘other’. The use of entanglement in Haraway’s terms is applicable here, supporting her theory that ‘Kin is making person, not necessarily as individuals or humans’.²⁷ When discussing kin and companionship, she uses all manner of man-made objects, and so, the man-made entity of Timmy the tugboat relates to the necessary and often inquisitive

22 Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 103.

23 Jim Downer and Ted Hughes, *Timmy The Tug* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2009).

24 Downer, *Timmy The Tug*, Afterword.

25 Lorraine Kerslake, ‘Hughes’s Collaboration with Artists’ in *Ted Hughes in Context* ed. by Terry Gifford, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 133-142, (p. 133).

26 Downer, *Timmy The Tug*, p.4

27 Haraway, *Trouble*, p. 103.

human relationship with the ocean. Feeling challenged and hopeful, Timmy has an idea:

He would escape! At his fierce look
The gulls hid in a cloud,
The quays trembled, the harbour shook.
He would escape!²⁸

The sense of defiance emanating from Timmy scares even the gulls while his impending escape potentially brings a sense of hope and happiness for the implied child reader. Various encounters of struggle then ensue where Timmy feels responsible to save stranded ships:

The waves grew higher, the sea grew deeper,
But he never once looked back.
[...]
'You shall not long sit high and dry,
I'll set you sailing perfectly.'
Here was his chance at last.²⁹

The heroic portrayal of Timmy encourages the child audience to feel involved with his endeavours at sea, seeing him more as a human character with a boy's name, rather than an inanimate object. Onwards Timmy sails and experiences the power and ferocity of nature.

Timmy sailed on, and on further,
Into the dark North.
All the weather was foul weather,
Tumbling the geese and the clouds together
For all it was worth.

The hail fell. There was no sun.
Like a hammer the wind beat.
But Timmy sang as he sailed on:
'I'm more than a match for anyone
Or anything I may meet.'³⁰

The descriptions of nature provide terrifying yet awe-inspiring imagery. In spite of this, the humanised Timmy has determined feelings in the face of the ferocity of nature. As Cochrane writes:

'The feeling that comes from confronting something [...] uncompromising, hostile or just profoundly indifferent. And this can be grasped in a single

28 Downer, *Timmy The Tug*, p.6

29 Downer, *Timmy The Tug*, p.18

30 Downer, *Timmy The Tug*, p.26

perceptual experience that startles or overwhelms the spectator, or it can emerge more slowly in contemplation.³¹

The effect of Timmy's robust attitude and his inability to be deterred by 'foul weather' presents a positive outlook and this anthropomorphic behaviour is intended to be inspirational for children. The story then closes with Timmy finding a female boat companion after rescuing her from rough waters:

High with pride is Timmy's prow
As home he leads his lady now
The happiest tug in the land.³²

This passage brings Timmy's story to a happy end, giving the child audience the sense of a traditional and satisfied resolution. The depiction of Timmy throughout praises his determined personality.

Even though he is nonhuman, Timmy is given consciousness, emotional intelligence and a life partner, thereby having much in common with Hughes's Iron Man (1968) who is a manufactured man-made entity, but one which is humanised throughout the novel.

Haraway's theory of the cyborg allows a further nature/culture binary and includes a crucial and compelling discussion of the relationship with 'self' and 'other'. The respect for non-human 'other' objects and subsequent mutual entanglements is most strongly felt through Hughes's children's books, *The Iron Man* (1968) and *The Iron Woman* (1993). The term 'cyborg' originated out of the emergent field of cybernetics in the work of Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline in the 1960s. They imagined the cyborgian man-machine hybrid would be needed in the next great technohumanist challenge, space flight. They proposed to 'allow man to optimize his internal regulation to suit the environment he may seek [...] we propose the term "Cyborg"'.³³ From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. Because of this, nature and culture are reworked as the cyborg theory unpicks this binary.

Perhaps the most significant text which supports the abolition of the nature/culture binary through the depiction of the cyborg is Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991).³⁴ She argues that 'A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of

31 Tom Cochrane, 'The Emotional Experience of the Sublime Author(s)', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 42 2 (2012), 125-148 (p. 130).

32 Downer, *Timmy The Tug*, p.33

33 Manfred E. Clynes, Nathan S. Kline 'Cyborgs and Space,' *Astronautics* (1960), 26-76 (p. 25).

34 Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction'.³⁵ Haraway also argues that the cyborg is 'simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted'.³⁶ The theory allows for an interrogation of the boundaries between human and nonhuman and from this vantage point, we can see ourselves as fully implicated in the world as cohabiters with 'others' participating as equal subjects rather than objects. The *Cyborg Manifesto* aims to fight the oppression of the Anthropocene by placing cyborgs within the Chthulucene. As previously discussed, throughout his children's writing, Hughes has much in common with Haraway's 'Kin' where cohabitation between 'self' and 'other' is key and where the effect on the child audience encourages an understanding of the need for a mutual respect among species.

Hughes's children's novels *The Iron Man* and *The Iron Woman* both reconfigure kinship by engaging with an urgent ecological crisis at their core. This moves our perceptions away from – the anthropocentric belief that humans are the central and most important entity in the universe to biocentrism, which presents a more ethical point of view by extending inherent value to all living things. Kerslake aptly asserts that:

Instead of writing about a physical nature that is untouched and separate from a human being, [Hughes's] poetry bridges the gap between the human and the non-human allowing the reader to cross the boundaries between both worlds.³⁷

Hughes's strange tales of the giant Iron Man and Iron Woman are halfway between modern fairy-tale and science-fiction, depicting intelligent robots that engage with human society.

According to Solnick's reading, 'For Hughes, the human being is a "prosthetic creature" and frequently a "technological animal"'.³⁸ This combination of both technological and animalistic qualities of the Iron Man assigns attributes of man-made advancement whilst also emphasizing human qualities such as naivety and innocence. Hughes offers a story that positions machines ambiguously in the centre of human technological progress, taking time to describe the disjointed and inhuman nature of the Iron Man, whilst at the same time attributing a humanised quality. As Solnick identifies:

35 Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 4.

36 Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 6.

37 Lorraine Kerslake, *The Voice of Nature in Ted Hughes's Writing for Children: Correcting Culture's Error* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 6-7.

38 Sam Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, biology and technology in contemporary British and Irish poetry* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 12.

In 1968 Hughes published *The Iron Man*, a children's parable about technology and biological energy in which a metal giant becomes the world's defender: The Iron Man's arrival on the first page positions technology as not under human control but always ready on the scene.³⁹

In the story, the Iron Man falls from the cliff and is subsequently submerged in the ocean. This speaks to a strength and survival far beyond the scope of humans, who could not endure such a fall:

His iron legs fell off. His iron arms broke off, and the hands broke off the arms. His great iron ears fell off and his eyes fell out. His great iron head fell off. [...] The bits and pieces of the Iron Man lay scattered far and wide, silent and unmoving. (*IM* 2-3)

The vulnerability of the Iron Man at the beginning of the story helps children become involved and concerned with his welfare. The Iron Man is instead a creature situated in time and place, part of a material web which Haraway describes as 'becoming-with'.⁴⁰ However, he also represents a future world and the idea that the organism of 'life' no longer has human self-defined boundaries.

The protagonist of the story is a boy, Hogarth, who operates as a cipher for the openness of childhood and a hope for humanity, and is assisted by the mechanical 'other', the Iron Man. What emerges is a hybrid of machine and organism as Hogarth navigates the mechanised 'other' before him. For Haraway, it is the cyborg that offers an answer to the 'discredited breach of nature and culture', but for Hughes that job ultimately falls into the hands of a child.⁴¹

As the story progresses, it poses the idea of humans acknowledging and living with multispecies and nonhuman kindreds, where 'multispecies flourishing requires a robust [...] sensibility'.⁴² Although 'The Iron Man would go out, as the champion of the earth, against this monster from space' (*IM* 47), his antagonist, the Space-Bat-Angel-Dragon, is treated as distinctly 'other' from the rest of the characters: 'But it wasn't surprising. This creature has come from the depths of space out of the heart of a star.' (*IM* 45). Nonetheless, the end of the story, where 'the Iron Man is deemed the world's hero' (*IM* 61), points towards a desire for multispecies harmony. Hughes explains:

I created a parable in which the child's own nature and the Iron Man, who is a giant of the technological world, and the Space-Bat-

39 Solnick, *Anthropocene*, p. 33.

40 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 3.

41 Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 68.

42 Haraway, *Species*, p. 90.

Angel-Dragon, who is a monster from the depths of living matter, are fitted together into a working whole.⁴³

Hughes further develops this by writing:

The basic idea [...] is to dramatise [...] centres of 'power.' One is the child's nature – the child's sense of himself. Another is the giant Robot of Technology – terrifying and destructive, uncontrollable and inhuman, unless it is approached without fear, but with patience and good sense [...] approached without fear but with firmness, superior courage, open-mindedness, cunning and kindness.⁴⁴

The emphasis on the terms 'without fear' and 'superior courage' encourage the child reader to accept nonhuman entities as equals.

Ultimately, *The Iron Man* develops an ecological imperative that highlights how technology could be used to overcome the problems of industrialisation and to promote and heal the human relationship with nature. The Iron Man can be viewed as a symbol of healing and peace, to break the fusion of man and mechanism:

Suddenly the world became wonderfully peaceful [...] they stopped making weapons. The countries began to think how they could live pleasantly alongside each other, rather than how to get rid of each other' (*IM* 62).

This presents a further layer of kin-making between humans themselves. The conclusion therefore places nature and culture in harmony and encourages children to show open-mindedness and to overcome fear and see these as tools to accept others.

Hughes's sequel, *The Iron Woman*, also transcends boundaries between the artificial and natural. Despite a somewhat simplistic plot, the incorporation of surreal cybernetic fantasy for children allows readers to re-evaluate and rethink the relationships between human and 'other'. The Iron Woman is described in many multi-layered ways in comparison to the Iron Man who is simply iron:

The black shape was the size of two or three elephants. It looked like a hippopotamus-headed, gigantic dinosaur, dragging itself on all fours up out of a prehistoric tar pit. But now, still like a dinosaur, it sat upright. And all at once it looked human – immense but human. [...] A truly colossal, man-shaped statue of black mud, raking itself and groaning. (*IW* 4-5)

The image of the animal becoming human rejects any notion of 'other' and instead opens the way to developing her as increasingly human throughout the story. In

43 Ted Hughes, 'The Interpretation of Parables' *Signal*, (1992), 69, p. 147-152, (p. 150).

44 BL Add MS 88918/7/1.

addition, the Iron Woman knows the foolishness of separating the technical from the human. When Lucy asks, ‘Are you a robot? [...] Perhaps, she thought, somebody far off is controlling this creature, from a panel of dials. Perhaps she’s a sort of human-shaped submarine [...]’ (*IW* 18), the Iron Woman responds by saying, “I am not a robot [...] I am the real thing” (*IW* 18). This links with Haraway’s thinking which, as Alaimo and Hekman point out, ‘is replete with “material-semiotic actors” and such rich and revealing figures as the cyborg’; her essay takes on the question of what “nature” means in the complex practices of contemporary society.’⁴⁵ Furthermore, in line with Haraway’s theory of mutual entanglements, Hughes describes the Iron Woman as, ‘This immense creature [which] seemed to be made entirely of black slime, with reeds and tendrils of roots clinging all over’ (*IW* 14). This presents the Iron Woman as both organically made from the Earth as well as manufactured and inorganic, once again highlighting Hughes’s erasure of the tension between natural and artificial.

As in *The Iron Man*, Hughes uses a child as the protagonist in *The Iron Woman*. It is Lucy who ‘saw that this huge being was a woman. It was exactly as if the rigid jet of water were carving this gleaming, black, giant woman out of a cliff of black clay’ (*IW* 15). The Iron Woman’s face belies her robotic construction, while her curiously opaque assurance of ‘realness’ sets her apart from other integrations of human and machine.

Haraway’s idea of kinship is anticipated in *The Iron Woman*, when the titular character turns the male characters into fish so that they may experience the same pain as the creatures in the poisoned river. By turning the men into giant water-animals, they literally become animal and completely entangled with the nonhuman. As Solnick observes, ‘Here technology engenders an engagement with otherness, thereby transforming behaviour toward industrial technologies and improving the ways humans adapt to, and adapt, the ecosystem’.⁴⁶ In this context, Haraway’s ‘Chthulucene’ can once again be applied to show that Hughes’s cyborg-goddess, Iron Woman, symbolises a source of energy and life. She fights against the oppression of the Anthropocene and simultaneously educates children about the importance of living respectfully with and among the nonhuman. In addition, when Lucy contacts Hogarth to help him and the Iron Man fight the pollution caused by humans, he ponders:

if the Iron Man had any relatives, somewhere. They’d be hidden away, of course. Quite likely in some deep mudhole. Or in the sea.

45 Stacey Alaimo, Susan Hekman ‘Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory’ in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader: Routledge Literature Readers* ed. by Ken Hiltner (Routledge: UK and USA, 2015) pp. 143-153, (p. 149).

46 Solnick, *Anthropocene*, p. 72.

Or inside the earth. After all, the Iron Man had come from somewhere. Why shouldn't there be others? (*IM* 30).

The effect of this question allows the child audience to also interrogate The Iron Man as a species rather than a singular and separate entity. The use of 'relatives' presents the Iron Man as becoming increasingly humanised, allowing the reader to contemplate that there could be many more versions of himself in the biological sense, rather than only through a mutual respect between other species in relation to Haraway's 'kin'. As is the case with the poem 'My Other Granny', Hughes is building an alternative idea of family and kin networks.

Hughes also creates a hopeful conclusion to *The Iron Woman* when the men learn a stark lesson regarding the pollution of nature from their factories. This is perhaps based upon Hughes's first-hand experience with the poisonous water of the Calder Valley, a hopeful ending which fits well with the historical clean-up of the region:

The Calder, noted during the valley's industrial heyday for its toxicity and extraordinary colours, resulting from the many mills discharging effluent and dyes into the river. Such pollution lasted up until the 1970s, but happily the River Calder today is much cleaner and healthier.⁴⁷

The tensions between man, nature and technology is very much at play in Hughes's children's novels. He states:

The wish to protect the earth and save life is no part of that machine. Its power-base must be somewhere else, somewhere outside the machine, outside the greeds and the needs. [...] For most of history, among most peoples, it has been supplied by the depth of feeling that we call spiritual – the feeling that mankind and the natural world share a sacred bond, not to be violated.⁴⁸

Hughes's tension between his opposition to the use of machinery and machines and his desire to protect the Earth and its landscapes is reflected in his use of nonhuman machine entities in the Iron Man and the Iron Woman to create healing and hope for humanity. Hughes's justification for the use of a machine, rather than a human, can be aligned to Haraway's thinking that the human and the machine are actually integrated entities. She writes, 'It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines.'⁴⁹

47 John Billingsley, *A Laureate's Landscape: Walks Around Ted Hughes' Mytholmroyd* (Hebden Bridge: Northern Earth, 2007), p. 27.

48 London, British Library, Add MS 88918/6/12 Non-fiction drafts 25 Feb, 1993: No. '40.'

49 Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 60.

As the Earth moves into a geological Anthropocene epoch, marking humanity's irreversible impact upon the planet, it is important to recognise that Hughes's writing for children sought to empower them as open-minded environmental activists. His attempts to provide them with an appreciation of the nonhuman world is something which could and should be adopted in our present times. Even Hughes, however, remained ominously sceptical of the human response to profound environmental change: 'If the human race fails to survive all this it will be because it can't get interested in its own annihilation. Too interested in something else, presumably. As leopards go, I suppose it's not likely to change its spots.'⁵⁰

In this paper, my aim has been to show that Haraway's theory of the Chthulucene and her ideas of the cyborg can offer new insights into a selection of Hughes's writing for children. I hope to have shown that his literary reach remains relevant for diverse child audiences who are living in an era of intensifying extinction and, sadly, continual disjunctions between the human and nonhuman world.

⁵⁰ BL Add MS 88918/2/1.

Review Article: The Letters of Seamus Heaney, edited by Christopher Reid, London, Faber and Faber, 2023, xxvii + 820 pp., £40.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-571-34108-5

by Mark Wormald

When the Reviews Editor invited me to contribute a notice, rather than a full review, of this volume of Seamus Heaney's *Letters*, edited as the *Letters of Ted Hughes* were in 2007 by Christopher Reid, he invited me to address 'the question of whether the two letter collections match up to anything interesting'. Beyond the overwhelming answer to that question – for which I might have turned, as Heaney does often, to Philip Larkin and his 'enormous yes' – lies a much more complex story than a notice could attempt to tell. It's about the relative stature and intense mutual regard of 'the two finest poets in the English language', as their mutual friend British-born artist and fisherman Barrie Cooke described these two great writers.

Of the many complexities involved, the most obvious is the one behind that invitation: that the two selections share an editor. Christopher Reid was for nine years in the 1990s Faber's poetry editor, in the most distinguished of lineages, and so was in the privileged position of working with both Hughes and Heaney at the height of their powers. Reid followed Craig Raine and passed on that gilded baton to Paul Keegan, who went on to edit the monumental but still not entirely perfect *Collected Poems* of Hughes, published in 2003, not quite five years after his death. In introducing his selection of Hughes's letters in 2007 (I have always used the 2009 paperback, which adds a few more people to the enormous number acknowledged for their assistance in providing the letters Reid selected and omitted, extracted and footnoted, generally sparsely), the editor remarked on two things that had both helped and hindered his task. One – the fact that, as he observed, perhaps to the surprise of our Reviews Editor amongst others, 'Hughes scholarship is in its early days' – meant that he could predict with some confidence that some of the dates he had supplied for letters Hughes often left undated were wrong: 'I shall be apologetic, but not surprised'. The second was related: the 'wonderfully sustaining [...] goodwill' that had greeted his search for letters Reid attributed to 'a belief ... that, despite [Hughes's] undoubted literary eminence, his true stature has not yet been recognised'. Sixteen years on, twenty-five years since Hughes's death, ten since Seamus Heaney's (and eleven since the establishment of

the Ted Hughes Society and its *Journal*) much has changed, and markedly different conditions apply. Those differences are to some degree reflected in the quality and texture of this fascinating and at times very moving edition, in its notably distinctive character, as well as in one of the common threads that links the two selections of letters.

Before going further, I should note another complexity, not always admitted by reviewers. The *Journal's* Reviews Editor is acknowledged in both Reid's grand editions, and was the recipient and thus source of five letters included in *LTH*, and I should declare my own not insignificant interest in the current volume, in which my name appears in the two and a half page long list of those beyond the Heaney family and the Faber team as currently composed. The list's very length attests, as Reid observes, to 'the extraordinary position Seamus Heaney holds in the collective regard of his time and ours', and, as he then claims, 'his universally recognised generosity of spirit calling forth an answering generosity from those who knew him and his work'. As a doctoral student at Magdalen College Oxford at the start of his term as Professor of Poetry and supernumerary Fellow at the same college, I experienced Heaney's generosity of spirit myself. He invited me to breakfast in the President's lodgings, and announced his intention to fund an award of £100, to be named for Richard Ellmann, for the best poem in the magazine I then edited, *Oxford Poetry*, in each of the years of Heaney's tenure. He also gave us poems for publication in the magazine that would later appear in *Seeing Things* (1991) and even an extract from one of his Oxford lectures, on Robert Frost, which we published as 'Above The Brim' – Frost is one of the recurrent touchstones in this volume. And, of course, he wrote letters with all these submissions, which I still have, and did not think to offer to Reid.

Years later, in 2007, when on the organising committee of the 2010 conference 'Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to *Collected*', at Hughes's Cambridge college, Pembroke, I revived this contact and was astonished by the warmth and generosity with which the Nobel Laureate seemed to recall me and accepted an invitation to come and read from his own poems and from his old and much missed friend's. And four months after his sudden if gracious withdrawal, via a phone call I'll never forget, and a fortnight or so before the conference, in what the publication of the letters now makes clear began as 'a doldrum' and became what Reid describes as a period of 'heavy depression', I received a postcard this extraordinary man still had the presence of mind and generosity of spirit and care to write on 1.1.2011, thanking me for my generosity that autumn, wishing me well for the new year, and happily reporting that he was latterly restored to his old self. I have that postcard on my desk as I write this notice. I wonder how many hundreds or thousands of

Heaney's former students, in Ireland and at Harvard, keep similar tokens and treasures, beyond those Reid had to hand, and recognising, too, that some letters sought were refused. In due course I would work with Heaney, via emails and his assistant, on editing the lecture he had given, at Carol Hughes's invitation, in June 2009, as the first Ted Hughes Lecture for the Ways With Words Festival at Dartington Hall, 'Suffering and Decision', for inclusion in the conference volume I co-edited with Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts. I saw then his friendly professionalism and receptiveness to editorial suggestions which features in so many of the letters here. Alas, that lecture's publication as a book chapter in September 2013 may have been his first posthumous publication.

In 2020, when Pembroke College acquired Barrie Cooke's literary archive, and knowing this edition was underway, I sent Christopher Reid images of the letters and postcards Heaney wrote to him over the span of their friendship. Seven of these are included, the first of them, to Cooke and his wife Sonja Landweer, bearing the same date as, and – one of the thousands of local editorial decisions and moments of editorial exposure involved in ordering this generous but still necessarily incomplete selection – immediately following 'the earliest surviving letter from SH to Ted Hughes', on 19 March 1972. They span facing pages 78-79, with Reid's footnote to the latter creeping over into page 80. Both letters are doing essentially the same job, and both contributing to what Reid sees as the principal theme of his selection: Heaney's 'obligation to duty', evident even in the conduct of his friendships. He is thanking his friends for their part in encouraging the confidence he now had acted on, sharing news of his resignation from his lectureship at Queen's and explaining, with due differences in emphasis, the other enabling part of the move that was to follow. This was not, as Cooke had hoped, 'going the whole hog and buying a stake in Kilkenny', at Thomastown, Co Kilkenny, where he and Landweer's house The Island stood beside and sometimes in the River Nore, but to rent Ann Saddlemyer's cottage – Glanmore cottage – in the Wicklow mountains, on the estate that had once been Synge's. It's fascinating, here and on other letter-writing days, to notice how Heaney redeployed insights and phrases, with variations, writing where he could, at home in Dublin, or at the precious 'silence-fort' at Glanmore, or in transit: in airport lounges or travelling somewhere over Ireland and in flight to the States.

This earliest extant letter to Hughes thanks him for 'bolstering my confidence in myself' and wishes 'you and yours luck'. The letter to Cooke and Landweer is fuller, more detailed, more inclusive, more extensive, more obviously delighting in the transmission of that quality essential to writing and the family it was already supporting: 'Your confidence in us engendered confidence in

ourselves'. Other phrases are shared, but take flight in different degrees, whether or not, as Reid speculates in a footnote, the poem Heaney encloses for Cooke and Landweer, 'a kind of "grace before freedom", gathering its energy in some way from that sacramental moment in the pigeon wood', is the same poem as he describes to Hughes as 'just a "grace before freedom", so to speak'. The poem 'The Island' is certainly what he sent to Cooke and Landweer, the one manuscript fair copy Heaney ever sent Cooke. It was a poem he'd been reworking over the months since he and Marie first visited their house on 13 November 1971, and which he would continue to mine for years. Such work in preparation for the move, on Heaney's own terms, brought an excitement, and risks, rhetorical and political, which he was playing with here, again to different degrees: he tells Cooke and Landweer that 'to go freelance could ideally release energies as exhilarating and subversive as those that must rise in a guerrilla fighter when he joins up', but both condenses and then comes close to apologising for the variant of this phrase he deploys for Hughes, while wanting still to capture that excitement: 'I began to feel like a guerrilla-writer, which may be excessive, but the feeling of risk and possibility is in the air all round us here'. This feels to me as though it has to be both a second thought – a retraction of the first, fuller version: if the guerrilla-writer already strikes him as excessive, how could he go on to risk the 'guerilla fighter' line? This is an early indication of the self-consciousness Heaney was developing among his literary peers. It also foreshadows the risks he was to take, in finding rhymes at a carefully achieved and managed distance from the sectarian violence he was preparing to move away from and into the different kind of 'Exposure' he'd find in Wicklow as 'inner émigré', as he'd put it, in the final poem of *North* (1975). So my hunch is that Heaney composed the letter to Cooke and Landweer before rather than, as Reid thinks, after the letter to Hughes.

To spend so much time on two letters is also to notice one other aspect of the risks and pleasures, privileges and pressures, and the tilt towards established literary history, which the editor's own interventions, or lack of them, can take. Reid's footnotes are, as I'll explore, the mine of detail we would expect them to be, as well as a place of personal speculation, which his own personal experience of Heaney's company as a friend as well as a writer more than justifies. Sometimes that personal inflection provides more detail than others, as we will see. But they are also at times an opportunity that the existence of archival material now underpinning these letters suggests that Reid has missed, and his handling of this first exchange between Heaney and Hughes is a case in point. The penultimate sentence in Heaney's letter to Cooke reads: 'I've a child's story to show you, for a start'. As Reid would have known, a postscript to another letter Heaney wrote to

Cooke three weeks later, on 9 April 1972 – which he has not chosen to include in his selection, but which is crucial because he now enclosed that child’s story – suggests that Cooke provide an illustration for each paragraph. Both these letters and an annotated typescript of the story itself, ‘Ronan and the Riverman’, are in Cooke’s literary archive at Pembroke College, and a long essay I published in the *TLS* the month after the archive opened to researchers, ‘Beyond the Riverbed: Barrie Cooke, Seamus Heaney and Friends’ (*TLS* 18.3.2022, pp.11-13) discussed it. But while Reid’s footnote does suggest that that ‘grace before freedom’ may have been ‘The Island’, he claims that ‘neither copy is extant’ – perhaps because he has confused this new poem with one of the same title (but otherwise completely different in focus) in Heaney’s *Wintering Out* notebook at the National Library of Ireland, which he had asked his first editor at Faber, Charles Monteith, to drop from the book manuscript he had sent him on his return from Berkeley. However, Reid also notes that ‘a version was written by SH into Barrie Cooke’s guest book’. This is incorrect too. Both the manuscript fair copy of ‘The Island’ and earlier typescript drafts, ‘Initiate’ and ‘Hospitality’, that show his working towards it, do survive and have been available to scholars since February 2022. Heaney’s poems in Cooke’s guest book, written out in August 1990, are early versions of two poems that would appear in *Seeing Things*.

More materially, at least from a Hughesian perspective, Reid provides no comment on this reference to the child’s story, or identifies it. Only in a footnote to a letter two and half years later – long after Cooke had, on 18 May 1972, drafted his own letter in praise of Heaney’s ‘wonderful story’, marvelled at the way ‘your vision ... so miraculously matches my vision’, sketched those illustrations, and even suggested edits and rewrites of the story, then lost his nerve and failed to send it – does Reid identify ‘Ronan and the Riverman’, which Heaney sent to Monteith in October 1974, explaining that it was ‘a story I did for the kids three years ago’, and proposing – it turned out fatally, at least for its chances of publication in Heaney’s lifetime – that he should do another eleven, ‘with the months of the year as the structural principle’, and to ‘call it something like *Ronan’s Bedtime Calendar*’. Drawing on Faber archives, for this letter and its consequences, as he does much more heavily than had been the case in the *Letters of Ted Hughes*, Reid’s footnote now explains that it had been passed to Faber’s Children’s Books Editor, Phyllis Coad, ‘but nothing came of SH’s scheme for a whole calendar of stories – perhaps because its proposed design resembled too closely that of Ted Hughes’s book of poems for children, *Season Songs*, published by Faber in 1975’.

That sense of belatedness, alongside a sense of tantalising access to the operations of Britain’s premier publisher of poetry, also surfaces elsewhere in this

fascinating volume, as Faber developed its management of its two leading poets, certainly after T.S. Eliot, and in the first case, involving Hughes, very much alongside him. If that March 1972 letter is the earliest known letter by Heaney to Hughes, it's by no means the earliest letter by Hughes about Heaney. A footnote to a letter of thrilled delight in April 1966, in which Heaney acknowledges receipt of his first six author copies of *Death of a Naturalist*, two months in advance of its publication, reveals that Hughes himself wrote to Monteith, with what Reid describes as 'measured praise' for a poet to whom the more established poet already refers in the generous quotation provided here: 'Healthy as a fish, as Seamus here says, when they come off. At his best, a real artist. The other pieces seem to me still very much University pieces.' Reid comments (though whether on the basis simply that they are not on the list Hughes provides of his 'favourites', or because that letter to Monteith goes into more detail than he shares here, no one without Reid's access to the Faber archive can know): 'It is striking that Hughes seems to have had reservations about poems, such as "Digging", "Follower", and the title poem itself, that now stand among SH's most widely admired'.

Something else is striking here, though: it's the first instance of several when editing Heaney's letters has led Reid to point the reader towards, and here expose, material kept out of his selection of Hughes's letters. I'm also intrigued by two, perhaps linked, aspects of Hughes's reference to what 'Seamus here says', and to what he reports him as saying. Nowhere in *Death of the Naturalist* itself does the text include a line that could be construed or even misquoted as 'Healthy as a fish'. So had Heaney already made contact with Hughes? We know from *Stepping Stones* how crucial as 'a confirmation' the experience of borrowing *Lupercal* from the Linen Hall Library in Belfast in 1962 had been for Heaney. If they didn't already know each other, it's a sign either of the warmth of regard in which the Faber establishment already held Heaney, or of some form of personal contact, that Hughes refers to him as 'Seamus'. Could Heaney have heard one of Hughes's radio broadcasts for the BBC Home Service, whether for schoolchildren or even that 1965 June reading of 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning'?

A more tantalising case of the depth of the history of the friendship and deepening mutual admiration of the two men occurs much later in their relationship, which is, it must be said, generously represented in the letters to Hughes included in this volume. Between the collections of Heaney and Hughes papers at Emory University and the British Library, well over sixty of Heaney's letters to Hughes survive, even if some of them remain restricted by access conditions. That twenty-five of them are included here, most of them in full, along with fifteen resonant and beautiful letters Heaney wrote to Carol Hughes after her

husband's death, is itself eloquent testimony to the career-long importance of Hughes to Heaney. No other recipient except Charles Monteith (thirty letters) is more fully represented.

Some of them concern literary business, a number from the 1970s reporting that Heaney had chosen a poem by Hughes to appear in publications or broadcasts for schools, and hoping that Hughes might be prepared to record the poems himself. A qualified teacher, as well as a gifted broadcaster, Heaney followed Hughes in his work for schoolchildren. A letter to a former student of his at Harvard in 2006 reveals that he had 'taught/used Hughes's poems in the school in Belfast where I started as a teacher', though nothing came of 'the textbook idea' he floated to Monteith in October 1967 for an introduction to poetry with case studies, exercises and insights that would address the inadequacies of the 'general study of poetry as finished product', and pay compensatory 'attention to psychology of composition, processes of imaginative reduction of experience'. Perhaps Faber took the view that this was too close to that year's *Poetry in the Making*. Heaney's fascination with hearing and meeting Hughes, his admiration for him as a reader, a voice, only grew. The earliest confirmed contact between them was when Heaney attended two 'marvellous' readings Hughes gave in 1968, in Dublin and then in Belfast, the latter leading to 'a memorable evening' chez Heaney – 'Quiet and relaxed; and blessed with a sprinkle of poteen', as he told Monteith – with Hughes 'and Ass?ya (I don't quite know the girl's name)'. It's fascinating, here, to note the use of 'girl' for a woman twelve years older than Heaney.

More are notes in praise of Hughes's new collections. Some of these are slight enough, if still charmingly sensuous, especially when read amidst the dozens of such letters by which, it becomes clear, a poet as blessed with early and lasting celebrity as Heaney hoped to acknowledge the achievements of his peers, discharge that 'sense of obligation' to fellow writers who also happened to be friends. The American edition of *Season Songs*, published in 1976, was 'a beauty, lovely amplitudes and weathers in the poems, the colds of them taking me most. The wind that blew through Poor Tom's hawthorn is still raising gooseflesh', which provokes a comparatively rare Shakespearean allusion: Heaney recognised that, for all his own extraordinary accomplishment and professionalism as a lecturer and critic of poetry, the lyric rather than Shakespeare's verse drama was his real strength. Reid detects understandable 'bewilderment' at *Gaudete* the following year, about which Heaney wrote within a couple of days of its first hostile review in the *Guardian*; 'I've read *Gaudete* twice and was deeply pleased by it each time', he begins, which feels slightly like not mentioning the war. But if this is bewilderment, it is ingenious and intelligent as only Heaney could be, and indeed it deploys a metaphor that only a

Derry farmer's son would have known how to handle in a tight spot: 'Since there's nothing else like it, there's no ready-made lingo for saying what it does, but I feel that the shape of the story was a plough that got deep into the ground of your gift and opened it marvellously'. Even before the constant local 'abundance of the thing from line to line' of Hughes's writing leads Heaney to recall invoking Whitman when discussing *Gaudete* on Irish radio, there's no mistaking the easy familiarity now established between the two men in the colloquialism of 'ready-made lingo', or in the recognition of the shared complexities of their respective terrains. In crediting 'your gift', and its sheer strangeness, Heaney also seems to be alluding to one of his own deeply sexualised poems, *North's* 'Act of Union', where the 'imperial / Male' voice of British conquest looks back and forward on the issue of his violence to the feminine matter and land of Ireland and recognizes 'the big pain / That leaves you raw, like opened ground again'. The years when Heaney had bridled at Anthony Thwaite's patronising characterisation of him in a review of *Door into the Dark* as one of the 'Tribe of Ted' – captured here in a 1971 verse letter to James Simmons, itself composed a year or so after Heaney's first visit to Court Green – were now long gone.

But it would still be years before Heaney came fully to appreciate the true force and power of Hughes's achievement in a letter – one of the very finest in this edition – written in transit across America in May 1994. It's also one of those moments that reveals the complexity of this volume's relationship to Reid's selection from Hughes's letters. On 24 January 1994 Hughes wrote to Heaney, apparently solely to thank him for his 'lovely little book, the Merriman and the Ovid'. This was *The Midnight Verdict* (1993) in which, as Reid had explained, 'Heaney's rendering of a pair of passages from Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mhéan Oíche* was flanked by a pair of translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*'. Hughes's praise for Heaney's translation, which ensured that 'the poem comes marvellously alive into the present', opened onto a brilliantly extemporised reflection on the way Heaney 'realises the possibility [only] dimly divined' by Hughes and his friends in their undergraduate days at Cambridge of doing their own version of Merriman-inspired 'combination of baggy popular doggerel, Swift-style outrageous parable, music-hall surreal political lampoon, miracle-play poster-paint imaginative licence, unbreached lyrical scurrile manners, cartoon immunity etc.' (*LTH* 660) Hughes tells him he'd been reminded of all this by a recent reading of Coleridge's doggerel, and its influence on Shelley in *The Masque of Anarchy*, and then, more broadly, to reflect on the 'marvellous swerve' these Romantic hybrids in satire represented towards 'a whole literature that never followed. Yet not far from Merriman, no?' What Coleridge and Shelley had produced were 'just the buds of it, like thalidomide

fingers on a shoulder stump'. Hughes credited Heaney in doing what he had never managed, but might have done, 'if I'd had the single-mindedness and the savvy (and the guts, I suppose)' (*LTH* 661). Heaney, possessed of these qualities – and his single-mindedness and savvy are in evidence in page after page of these letters, managing the literary self – had done what Hughes couldn't, or hadn't, and 'smashed through the perimeter electrified barbed wire, and scampered clear of the Academy tower machine-guns' (*LTH* 661). Truly an exhilarating extract.

Heaney's response was penned, as so many of these are, in transit on his way back from two days in Missoula, Montana, which he wants Hughes to know had its priorities right, as 'a town with a river and fishermen almost at the centre of it, and a real sense of audience around the university'. The letter contains his response to *Winter Pollen*, the reading for and writing of which had of course been plunging Hughes so productively into Coleridge's 'doggerel'. Heaney, writing by chance on the Feast of the Annunciation, 25 March 1994, exploits the coincidence to claim that he has 'just heard the angel of poetry make her re-entry into English discourse – discourse in English, that is – in "Myths, Metres, Rhythms"', during the 'four hours' sustained silence on the way back to-day, when I rode the thermals of your pages'. Heaney's letter is a great tribute to 'a great book', but its greatness, and the greatness of Hughes's prose and insights, also depends on the relationship Heaney now sees between Hughes's criticism and the letter he'd been carrying around these past months, after Marie had forwarded it to him in Harvard.

It should be said that one of the not so incidental pleasures of Heaney's letters are the long paragraphs of graceful, comic and sometimes elaborate but formulaic apology for the delay in replying that begin a very significant proportion of them. But this letter hadn't been mislaid and then turned up, or merely thrust aside by 'the odd dislocation and hurry of Harvard' (itself a characteristic Heaney compound of abstract and verbal nouns that make the alliterative tradition of Beowulf and Hopkins such a reflex but hardly ever unnatural resource for him. These letters, like his poem 'Postscript', a product, we see here, of a trip to the Flaggy Shore in North Clare in the company of Brian Friel, are themselves 'a hurry through which known and strange things pass'). Instead, he admits he has lacked the resources, textual and otherwise, to respond to what else had haunted him in the letter. Heaney 'could not find Sylvia's journals, to take another look at your introduction'; more, 'somehow I felt inadequate to the job of saying anything commensurate with your own great "durance", as G.M.H. might call it'. (Hopkins was a crucial common resource for them both, well before and beyond the role he'd play in *The School Bag*, a long-sustained topic of discussion between the two men, and of course the subject of some of the most brilliant passages in 'Myths, Metres,

Rhythms’.) But this wasn’t a comment on that essay, more a matter of deep self-reproach: ‘There I was, walking around with a jewel of pain in my pocket, as it were, strenuously forgetting it in the trivial pursuits of the busy life’. The recent news of Aurelia Plath’s death had made Heaney think, as a friend, of ‘what new shockwaves and rebounds this would bring’ for Hughes and made him ‘wish I could have absorbed some of the shock that you are applying to yourself a bit better’. He goes further, hoping ‘that your self-flagellation has eased’, before turning on himself, and to a profound admission, marked by something finally equal to his addressee’s natural spontaneous exploratory way with language while also acknowledging his own comparative luck: ‘Which is easy to say: the fate that you have lived out and lived in for thirty years has only gradually dawned upon me: something to do with getting older, something to do with the – mild enough – experience of enmity and false-image making that inevitably has gathered up around me’. Then such comparisons are pushed aside, in favour, first, of a wonderful summary of ‘what one took for granted’ in that ‘immense complexity of your sorrows and constraints’ which comes to Heaney ‘more and more when I think of you’: ‘the abundance and ecology of your whole work’, which had always ‘seemed a marvellous feat of total integration, intelligence, total vocation, sacrifice of the social self to the imagined dimensions of the calling. But now even that profile of self-yielding and making seems a pale ghost of the “war within” you have undergone.’ That recognition issues in estimations of the ‘stunning display of power’ which Heaney finds both in *Shakespeare and the Goddess* and now in *Winter Pollen*, in ‘a magnificent sense of combat and exultant resource’ which, Heaney now realises, requires and expresses both ‘brilliance and desperation’. All he can do, he says, is to ‘say how I experience the great invention and resilience of your prose’, turning to Amergin and the Fomorians for analogies, praising ‘the parables of poetic life’ at the heart of ‘The evolution of “Sheep in Fog”’, and returning to where he’d begun, in ‘Myth, Metre, Rhythm’ to praise Hughes’s ‘marriage history of the anima/genius of the language’ as ‘one of the headiest – and funniest – riffs I’ve read’.

If this letter represents the peak of Heaney’s letter-writing, it is in part because of the epoch it marks in his most important literary friendship, the moment at which belatedness of recognition of the sheer and profound chasm between their two lives is acknowledged and then made integral to his admiration of Hughes’s work. I was already familiar with Heaney’s other great letter to Hughes here, written in the depths of intimacy, from which even Marie and Barrie Cooke were for the moment excluded, on reading the typescript of *Birthday Letters* in December 1997. It’s good – important – to see it in its entirety, even as it sends the reader back to the beautiful extract of Hughes’s much pondered and redrafted response, itself

available in the British Library. Again, it's the genuineness of the record of the reading experience that is so telling here: Heaney wants to share 'the effect of reading *Birthday Letters*' while it's open, raw. It 'has been to shake me into poetic wakefulness, if not action. The first time you did it to me was in 1962', when, in a rare admission of direct influence, inspiration, rather than the word he tended to favour, 'confirmation', he tells Hughes how 'I got the idea for a poem about turkeys, after reading "View of A Pig" – but this time I feel called upon to do more. To get through to "freedom of speech". We'll see.' He enclosed what he called the 'first fruits' of his response to that call, his poem 'Red, White and Blue'. This from a Nobel Laureate, bed-bound and in a plaster cast after a recent fall but also freed thereby from the pressures and privileges of his position into an unexpected chance 'to dwell with reading and – even – writing', to the man to whom he wrote at once, when the news of what Heaney came to call 'the N-word' reached him on holiday in Greece in October 1995; this from a man who admired, and envied, in that same letter, the first taste of Hughes's *Oresteia*, for 'the sense of nothing intervening, no translation, as it were, just the flame of telling licking along and firing up'.

What turns out to be Heaney's last letter to Hughes, in mid-September 1998, acting on his prior knowledge of the award of the Order of Merit, and describing his and Marie's response to *Phédre*, is plangent and ironic in what seems like genuine chatty optimism, written from the sylvan grandeur of Ballynahinch Castle and telling Hughes about the admirable and deeply literary contact there, Des Lally, in case he wished to come himself, 'silently and unapprehended'. Reid speculates in a footnote that 'Hughes may well have stayed there on one of his fishing expeditions', perhaps because one of Hughes's letters to Dermot Wilson that he extracted for his edition of Hughes's letters includes a postscript that mentions it. But having researched this and spoken to Lally and other locals who would have known, there is absolutely no evidence that he ever did.

In the months leading up to, and for ten years after his death, Heaney's loyalty to Hughes's memory, to his work and to his widow Carol deepened and matured. Only a careful reading of the entire edition will reveal how far. My paperback edition of the Hughes letters includes an acknowledgement of the corrections introduced then, and Reid's welcome frank acknowledgement of the dilemmas and risks of his own more expansive footnotes in his 'Note on the Text' in this edition ends with the observation that 'it is designed to set discussions going, not to be the last word'. So I would recommend that Hughesian readers of this hardback first edition do not confine themselves either to those forty letters to Hughes and Carol, or rely on the three indexes as currently printed: the first general; the second of Heaney's works, by year (where 'Ronan and The Riverman'

is misdated to 1975); the third of recipients. The general index's list of references to Hughes in particular needs to be supplemented by material on pages xiii, xvii, 186, 191, 194, 393, 493, 523, 641, 662 – that acknowledgement that he used/taught Hughes's poems as a teacher – 694, 700-1, 704, and 792 – a reference to having written 'a once-off, quick-quick semaphore to Ted Hughes', which Reid's footnote observes 'would have been this book if it had been traceable', but which might, I think, refer to that 1995 postcard from Greece, which is. In the same spirit of opening discussion and noting slips, Hughes's birthday was on 17 August, not 18 August; W. B. Yeats's birthday was on 13 June, not 20th; *Crow* was published by Faber in 1970, with the American edition following in 1971; 'Squarings', the sequence of 'twelve-liners' which so delighted Heaney and was quoted by Peter Sirr in the sleeve essay accompanying the magnificent RTE/Lannan box set of Heaney's *Collected Poems* – but in fact, as Bernard O'Donoghue and Rose Lavan's imminent edition of the *Collected Poems* makes me realise, more properly a *Collected Collections* – appeared in *Seeing Things* (1991), rather than *The Spirit Level* (1997).

My last word, though, is reserved for a letter and a note that shows how deeply and subtly Hughes remained a resource both for Heaney and their editor. Reid is I'm sure right to include letters Heaney sent to Carol Hughes and to Reid himself in fulsome praise of his own work on Hughes's letters – 'the book doesn't just complement the poems, it gets out (as Frost might say) by getting through, through into a new order or ether of art-knowledge'. This volume of Heaney's letters achieves this breakthrough in its rarer, more unguarded moments – including in the late letters to Hughes. Heaney goes on: 'Your perception of the artistic/musical score element in the actual written page is marvellous and points to the helplessly creative, truly Shakespearean nature of the whole barely credible effort'. He praises, in Hughes, a quality we see in these letters of Heaney: 'the self-determination and clarity of purpose, the strength of the early resolution to write and be his own man', in letters which Reid's Introduction had described as 'letters of learning and looking forward'. Heaney is right to say of Reid's introduction to Hughes's letters that it 'has both perfect pitch' and is 'true to the friendship, to the editorial requirement, close, kind, grave, loyal and loving'. These qualities are hard, perhaps impossible, to deliver twice. This edition is undoubtedly full of love, and more obviously personal. Reid is right to include a footnote declaring his own interest and his own sense of obligation in a quintessential Heaney letter thanking the poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch for his hospitality and a meal of fresh lobster at his cottage in Clare in 2003. The extract of Heaney's letter strikes a suitably Beowulfian note in its celebration of 'a sense of feast that had been fought for. Great debris and great

delight’, and Reid’s note points out that the dinner had been one evening in a week when Reid and his wife had stayed there, ‘free of charge’.

All this, and the terrible sadness of its occasion, makes the other letter to Reid included here, in full, all the more charged. As Reid’s moving footnote makes clear, Heaney wrote it the day after his editor’s wife, Lucinda Gane, died from cancer, and had willed her body to medical research. In due course, he would publish a prize-winning collection of poems, *A Scattering*, about her illness and his grief. Between her death and the gathering of friends in lieu of a funeral, Heaney risks sober searching play on their names: Lucinda ‘was to shine, to keep the light from going, as perhaps Christopher was to bear a certain weight of grief’. He invokes, entirely aptly and more soberly, those classical concepts on which Heaney himself trusted, and which he came to achieve in his own work and life: ‘*consonantia* and *claritas* and *integritas*’, but then completes the sentence after a semi-colon that admits a third party, another ghost, and his enduring element: ‘now she, like the utterly tested water, lies utterly worn out, and you who have been utterly tested also, must go to again’. The allusion isn’t noticed by Reid, as many quotations and misquotations are, but perhaps it is so palpably apt that it isn’t needed. It’s from ‘How water began to play’, the second of ‘Two Eskimo Songs’ near the end of *Crow*:

it went weeping back it wanted to die
 Till it had no weeping left
 It lay at the bottom of all things
 Utterly worn out utterly clear.

Reviews

The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath, edited by Anita Helle, Amanda Golden, & Maeve O'Brien, London, Bloomsbury, 2022, 268 pp., £130 (hardback), ISBN 0-978-1-3501-1922-2

Despite this handbook containing chapters by a number of scholars who have also written on Hughes, there is a dearth of original insights into Hughes's work contained within its pages. The outstanding exception is Katherine Robinson's chapter titled 'The Law of Similarity and the Law of Contact: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and Sympathetic Magic'. Robinson reminds readers that in this *Journal* Mark Wormald revealed that Hughes first discovered folklore in Arthur Mee's serialised 'The Children's Encyclopedia' sold in his father's Mexborough newsagents shop (*THSJ* VI. 2, 2017, pp. 58-77). Robinson also works out that both Hughes and Plath must have read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in their late teens and that both were struck by the magical potency of words that developed into an interest in psychic doubles. Here the case for similarity between the poets becomes a shared interest in 'the idea that the self could separate and divide' (170). At this point Robinson undertakes a brilliant close reading of Plath's poem 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head' and Hughes's 'Earthenware Head', exploring the sense of doubles in both poems. Finally sympathetic magic is traced from Plath's 'Daddy' and 'Man in Black' to Hughes's response in 'Black Coat'. Robinson concludes that both poets used, in remarkably similar ways, poetry as a medium for sympathetic magic with rather different outcomes.

Only one other of the twenty-seven chapters makes a direct comparison between the works of Plath and Hughes: Jennifer Ryan-Bryant's "'I am a miner": Long Poems and Literary Succession in *Ariel* and *Crow*' in which *Crow* is read as having four 'categories', or stages: 'origin poems, poems that depict his scavenging efforts, poems in which he gains new knowledge, and poems about his own – or the world's – end' (184). There is no recognition of *Crow*'s incipient learning experiences and therefore no sense of the importance and achievements of the final three poems of the sequence that make it so much more than an interrupted, incomplete or inconclusive work of art. By viewing Hughes's entire career as exploring 'the natural attributes of the English countryside' in a kind of continuum of landscape poems, *Crow* is seen as 'an interruption of sorts, not a culmination or an endpoint but a pause for ontological reflection' (179).

Di Beddow's chapter on 'Sylvia Plath's Cambridge' is good, as far as it can go in this context, on Plath's influence on Hughes's early poetry. Heather Clark charts the relationship between the Hughes couple and the Sillitoe couple with a focus, of course, on Sylvia and Ruth, with hints that more might be said about the two husbands. There are also many passing references to *Birthday Letters* poems, but no full engagement with this contribution to Plath's legacy, which seems a remarkable omission. Katherine Robinson's chapter indicates the rich rewards that might have been more fully achieved.

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Studying English Literature in Context: Critical Readings, edited by Paul Poplawski, Cambridge, 2022, Oxford, Routledge, 2015, 578pp. £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-108-74957-2

Terry Gifford's essay 'An Ecocritical Reading of the Poetry of Ted Hughes' (407-420) is one of 31 essays in *Studying English Literature in Context – Critical Readings* (edited by Paul Poplawski, 2022). The order of the book enables readers to gain insights into the progression of English literature over time and identify clear linkages between the different periods. Each essay can be read independently as a standalone piece, or in the context of its period to understand how historical pieces have informed and helped to shape more modern works. The critical reflections and suggestions for further study at the end of each essay are particularly helpful in challenging and signposting students to further research on each topic. Gifford's essay offers the reader an ecocritical overview of Hughes's entire poetic career, which is quite a feat in just twelve pages. He begins by affirming Hughes's role as an ecopoet, referencing an article from 1992 in which Hughes highlights mankind's inability to find a language to interpret and realign Earth's needs. Hughes was acutely aware of the impact humans were having on the Earth from a very early age, illustrated by Gifford in his essay 'Go Fishing: An Ecocentric or Egocentric Imperative'¹ where he writes 'When Hughes offered to sketch out for me the history of his greening as a poet for my book *Green Voices*, he referred to being aware as a boy in both his first and second homes in West and South Yorkshire that the rivers behind both houses were polluted' (1999). In Hughes's reminiscence of

¹ Jonny Moulin (ed.) *Lire Ted Hughes* (Paris: Editions du Temps), 1999, p.146.

his journey up onto the moors above Mytholmroyd as a child, in his essay ‘The Rock’ (1963), he is keenly aware of the impact of humans on the landscape, and in his *Remains of Elmet* poem ‘The Canal’s Drowning Black’ he stores minnows ‘On a windowsill / Blackened with acid rain fall-out / from Manchester’s rotten lung’ (1979), signalling the start of a lifelong awareness of what we now call the Anthropocene.

A profound connection to the natural world runs through all Hughes’s works and Gifford draws on much of his own earlier writing on ecocriticism to introduce readers to ecocritical concepts such as biosemiology, ecofeminism, natureculture, re-enchantment and post-pastoralism (the latter first introduced in Gifford’s 1994 essay on Hughes), using key texts from Hughes’s oeuvre to illustrate these themes. Gifford presents a strong case for Hughes’s work as ‘post-pastoral’ poetry, suggesting that it seeks to counter nostalgic idealism of the countryside and celebrates what Hughes called ‘the elemental power circuit of the universe’ at work in the inner life of humans, animals and landscapes (Faas, 1980: 200).² Anti-pastoral idealism is clearly evident in ‘Crow Hill’ where the gritty realism of living in the Yorkshire landscape cannot be achieved without exploitation of that landscape, but in ‘Crow Hill’ Hughes also introduces the idea of what ecocritics call ‘otherness’, firmly connecting us to ‘the elemental power circuit’, where humans are subconsciously influenced by external natural forces of which we have lost our understanding. Through the poem ‘Wodwo’, Gifford illustrates that this is something most humans today have lost – a real connection to Earth’s forces and the ability to fully listen to the world and discover our deeper selves. In ‘Wodwo’ Hughes recognises the difficulty we have in ‘listening to the world’, challenging the arrogance in assuming the only purpose for Earth is one with humankind at the centre.

The theme of ecofeminism is presented through several poems, with Gifford offering readers an alternative approach to *Gaudete* (1977), particularly focusing on the huge contrast between the farcical main narrative and the more shamanic epilogue poems left behind by the ‘original’ Lumb, which Gifford boldly suggests ‘strain with male inadequacy and humility in the face of a mysterious and marvellous feminised creation’ (414). In the critical reflections at the end of his essay, Gifford rightly opens the door for further discussion on *Gaudete*, questioning whether the epilogue poems go far enough to fully critique and counter the exploitative activities of the ‘wooden’ Lumb. Both environmental and ecofeminist themes can be more obviously identified in much of Hughes’s children’s writing

² Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press), 1980, p. 74.

with Gifford noting that Hughes's children's poetry and stories seem much more restorative than those of his more adult volumes. *The Iron Man* (1968) and *The Iron Woman* (1993) both have clear environmental agendas, with the latter alerting us to some of the 'deep, big, frights' that are, without doubt, direct consequences of the Anthropocene. By the mid-1970s Hughes had reached what Jonathan Bate, in his book *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised life*, referred to as 'The Elegiac Turn' (Bate, 2015: 332), culminating in the production of three volumes of poems, *Moortown Diaries* (1979), *Remains of Elmet* (1979) and *River* (1983), which in Gifford's words 'looked in more detail at the complexities of 'big, deep, change' in environmental attitudes 'in practical, cultural and metaphysical modes' (416). Gifford shares his interpretation of poems from each collection to illustrate the deep-rooted symbiotic relationships between man and nature ('natureculture'), recognising the rise and fall of cultural presences in the Elmet landscape as a natural flowering and decay cycle, much like the creative-destructive processes in his own post-pastoral theory.

One of the most informative and exciting sections of the essay is on Hughes's *Crow* (1970). As a Hughes scholar myself, I fully admit to finding the *Crow* (1970) collection more challenging to interpret than other works, but Gifford offers the reader a clear ecocritical interpretation, highlighting the constant battle between nature and culture as *Crow* repeatedly demonstrates the self-destructive nature of man through his own arrogance and inability to 'listen deeply' to the Earth. Gifford uses 'Crow and the Beach' to effectively pinpoint Hughes's awareness of global warming and rising sea levels back to the 1960s, explaining the pain felt by *Crow* as a form of biosemiology – the idea of listening deeply to interpret the sounds and signs within nature. Gifford suggests that the unconscious practice of biosemiology was one of the earliest driving forces for Hughes's poetry.

Gifford has done much to shape our environmental understanding of Hughes, and in this essay has admirably produced a succinct yet detailed analysis of Hughes's complete environmental journey to his establishment as an 'ecopoet'. The examination of the post-pastoral strands running through the poems certainly prompts the re-reading of collections by scholars of Hughes both new and old, and I particularly enjoyed how Gifford has drawn from areas of Hughes's work less obvious in its environmentalism – *Crow* (1970), *Cave Birds* (1978) and *Gaudete* (1977) – to help further curiosity and a re-ignition of ecocritical debate.

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Ted Hughes in Bangladesh: A Memoir, by M. Liaquat Ali Khan, Bangladesh: Generation PPA, 2022, vi + 128 pp., 53 illustrations, available from the author (see below), (hardback), ISBN 0978-984-91070-3-3

Liaquat Khan was a Civil Servant in Bangladesh in 1989 when he was asked to look after a prominent British Poet called Ted Hughes who the then President, General HM Ershad, had invited out to a three-day Poetry Festival. General Ershad fancied himself as a bit of poet and Liaquat, with some reluctance, agreed to pander to his whims.

To say that the following eight days, which included an extended trip around the natural and architectural wonders of Bangladesh, changed Liaquat's life, is something of an understatement, and goes to the heart of what makes this book so enormously charming and warm-hearted. Like Mark Wormald's ground-breaking book *The Catch*, this is as much about the author as it is about the poet.

Incredibly, this was Ted Hughes's first, and I assume last, visit to the subcontinent. Against the backdrop of Glasnost and the Fall of the Berlin Wall only a week before he left, the trip clearly had a lasting and very positive effect on him as well. The four occasional uncollected poems and three thoughtful speeches he gave whilst in the country (all included here together with one letter) are full of very powerful musings on the dramatic, and endlessly fluid, interplay between Eastern and Western ideas and attitudes.

Liaquat's memoir is filled with the most beautiful and minutely observed details which make the whole thing utterly compelling and readable. My personal favourites are the description of the dinner of lamb, prawns, and champagne that Hughes hosted (he claimed that Liaquat, a teetotaler, could drink champagne because 'it isn't wine'), together with the account of the crowd apparently offering up Hughes quotes to get his attention outside the festival.

Liaquat's love of his country is infectious and I challenge anyone to read this book and not instantly check how much it might cost, and how feasible it might be, to visit the exotic locations that inspired Hughes to write so freely and insightfully when he was there. On top of this the detail meticulously informs one's understanding of the uncollected poems, which are full of Hughes's usual love of exotic and interesting local place names and wildlife.

Sadly, Hughes didn't manage to spot a Royal Bengal Tiger on his trip to the Sundarbans (one of his many motives for going to Bangladesh) but his search, and the characters and situations involved, are worthy of a separate book (or film). Without giving too much away, Hughes managed to convince his experienced and

very disappointed trackers that he had, indeed, *smelt* a tiger, even though he didn't see one. This is Hughes at his most charming and eccentric.

What he did find when he was there though was a modest, intelligent, and highly likeable Government Liaison Officer called Liaquat Khan who seems to have reminded Hughes of the power, and deep lasting significance, of simple human friendship. He rewarded him by writing out 'Systole Diastole' in his notepad before he left, claiming he was only the second person to see this achingly personal poem.

In one of his three speeches in Bangladesh, quoted in full with accompanying photographs of the manuscripts, Hughes talks of poetry as being an 'act of love'. In no small way this is exactly what this book is – an unconditional, unapologetic, extraordinarily powerful and moving act of love.

[Peter Fydlar writes: Liaquat has kindly agreed to send an 'academic friendly' electronic version of his book to anyone in the Ted Hughes Society who is interested at email: liaquat5000@gmail.com]

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ASSIA a novel, by Sandra Simonds, Noemi Press, 154 pp., 2023, £15.24 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-934819-92-0

I've been disappointed so many times by these fictionalised accounts of the lives of Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and, more recently, Assia Wevill, that it's become almost a game to see how long I can last before I throw the book to the floor and put my face in my hands. Expectations were super high for this particular 'novel' because it's written by the US Poet Sandra Simonds, who also holds a Creative Writing post at Bennington College, famous for Brett Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt and, the Queen of Them All, Shirley Jackson.

Alas, I didn't even get to Page One. The epigraph, for which I assume Simonds didn't get permission, is a stanza from 'Lesbos', in which it's implied that Sylvia Plath knew about her husband's third (known) child three years before she was born. Surely it's been pretty well established that 'Lesbos' is about Kathy Kane, not Assia Wevill.

Anyway, I picked the book back up and, second time around, made it to Page Two. Here we have Ted Hughes, who narrates the first of 49 chapters from 10 different voices, talking about a red female fox. Now, if there's one thing Ted Hughes knew about it was foxes. He even dreamed about them and, as we all know, they apparently appeared to him in the flesh and helped him with some pretty

radical life choices. So he would have known, of course, that a female red fox is actually called a vixen.

So, I instantly don't believe that this is Ted Hughes talking, which obviously isn't going to help justify the £20 I paid for this tiny book. To be fair, though, *Assia* is about Assia Wevill and two thirds of it is in her voice (half addressed to her daughter and half "visions", which I'll get to later...), so let's give it another go. Third time round I make it to Page 12. Here it is boldly stated that Assia Wevill, in London in 1960, is 37 years old. Now, I wouldn't necessarily worry about things like this (the reader might not know that she was born in 1927) but, on Page 4, she had stated that, whilst in Tel Aviv in 1938, she was eleven. Which is correct. So, either Assia Wevill, who was obsessed with her age, was very bad at maths or Simonds (or her sub-editor, if she had one) just couldn't be arsed to check on a pocket calculator. Later on, in September 1968, she states that she's "almost forty". Wrong again.

Anyway, I thought the least I could do was jump forward to the key scene in which the Wevills go to Devon in May 1962 and Assia apparently seduces Ted Hughes having prepped beforehand by reading 'The Wishing Box'. The chapter is titled 'Court Green, August 1961'. On the dust jacket the fiercely intelligent and quite scary Emily van Duyn talks of 'the pedantry of what we think we know about Assia Wevill's life' and 'reimagining timelines'. But surely there is no creative benefit to changing the basic facts?

Nobody could possibly contest that Plath and Hughes didn't even move to Devon until August 1961 and that the infamous weekend happened nearly a year later (in 1962). To make it even more ludicrous Sylvia Plath answers the door with blonde hair (her famous Platinum Blonde Summer was in 1954). We're also treated to the slightly grotesque scene of Plath breast feeding a baby who hasn't even been born yet.

At least she didn't answer the door in her bikini.

Where this book does come alive though is through the 16 'Visions' that punctuate the narrative voices throughout. Here Simonds is obviously released from the requirement for a cohesive and believable narrative and her poetic imagination runs riot. More than this, though, we hear the voice of Assia Wevill at its creative peak; the voice of a woman pitching innovative and immediate first-person vignettes for her clients at London's most prestigious advertising agency. Whatever one's view of Assia Wevill, there is no doubt whatsoever that, like Sylvia Plath, she excelled (along with several other women) in an arena dominated by men and in this respect, if nothing else, she was way ahead of her time. These 'visions' do justice to this fact.

Not only this, but the immediate, dynamic, first person, present tense, voice of the imagination in full flow also reminds us of Simonds' poetic voice, perfectly suited to the exuberant advertising pitch, but it also sounds spookily like the voice of the *Gaudete* narrative, with which Assia Wevill was undoubtedly involved. Like the 45 vacanas at the end of *Gaudete*, they cleverly create an alternative, dreamlike, counterpoint to the very earth-bound main story; something that is, indeed, 'forged in the furnace of a fairy tale'.

Emily van Duynne claims that she 'couldn't put the book down'. I'm afraid my experience was the opposite; I threw it to the floor 13 times. My advice to you is to save yourself 20 quid, find a trendy independent book shop, buy yourself a coffee, and skim through the book reading just the 16 short 'visions' which are the only things worthy of the extra-terrestrial creative skills of its main protagonists, and the price tag.

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Contributors

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Mike Sweeting has a PhD from Durham University on the use of myth and patterns of initiation in Hughes's poetry. He contributed chapters to *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (1987) and *Dialect in English Poetry* (2019). His recent work has been on Hughes and the 1980s Establishment, including a paper given at the conference *Contemporary British Poetry and the Long 1980s: From Deregulation to Self-Regulation* at the Sorbonne in 2023.

Mark Wormald is College Lecturer and Fellow in English at Pembroke College, Cambridge. He is co-editor, with Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, of *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* (2013) and *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture* (2018) and edited *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* from 2015 until 2019; he is now the Society's Chair. Mark's book *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* was published in Spring 2022.