



The Ted Hughes
Society Journal

Volume VI Issue 2

The Ted Hughes Society Journal

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Contents

Editorial.....	4
List of abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes	6
Hughes's Notion of Shamanic Healing.....	7
Terry Gifford	
Hughes and Lawrence.....	24
Neil Roberts	
Like Fury: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath at Cambridge	40
Heather Clark	
Irishwards: Ted Hughes, Freedom and Flow	58
Mark Wormald	
The Parochial Courage of Ted Hughes	78
Steve Ely	
Mayday on Holderness: Ted Hughes, National Service, and East Yorkshire	86
James Underwood	
Reviews.....	99
Contributors	106

Editorial

Though this issue may be the second of Volume VI of this *Journal*, it is in several other respects – at least one of which members will already have noticed, and I hope enjoyed – an important first. While a face-lift is alas beyond the hope of its editor, the beauty of the Society’s website, designed as it is maintained so scrupulously by James Robinson, had begun to feel like the gentlest kind of reproach to the journal it hosts. At any rate, it offered an opportunity for the *Journal* to scrub up too, and our membership secretary David Troupes has risen magnificently to this benign challenge. I hope you like the look of it, and that the new clean lines of the journal’s design and font – Merryweather, however appropriate that feels for the poet of ‘Wind’ and ‘Bringing in New Couples’ and ‘Stump Pool in April’ – make the experience of reading its contents even more satisfying.

The contents themselves represent the first fruits of an outstandingly successful inaugural colloquium hosted in June 2017 by the Ted Hughes Network at the University of Huddersfield on the theme of Ted Hughes and Place. The next issue will contain a selection of the many excellent presentations an international gathering heard over two full days, and will be guest-edited by James Underwood. But the current issue contains the plenary lectures that book-ended those long mid-summer days, revised for publication by the speakers and are presented here, along with versions of the papers given by the colloquium’s hosts, Steve Ely and James himself. Between them, these contributions do respond to the theme, sometimes literally – Cambridge, Ireland and East Yorkshire are among the precincts revisited here – sometimes from different kinds of heights. Shamanic healing in Hughes’s work, inflected and informed by his environmental consciousness, might to the uninitiated seem a long way from the importance, hitherto largely overlooked, of D. H. Lawrence for Hughes, but all kinds of connections between these two discursive and imaginative terrains are opened up by Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts. Heather Clark’s fascinating account of Hughes and Plath in Cambridge, informed by the publication this autumn of the first volume of Plath’s *Collected Letters*, which she also reviews in this issue, also marks an important step into the wealth of new material those letters reveal about their creative partnership, and represents an important instalment in her new biography of Plath, which is nearing completion. And Ireland and Irishness features in at least three of these presentations, most

extensively my own, which I am grateful to Terry Gifford for editing. When six Hughes scholars, two doctoral students among them, presented papers in November 2017 at the Plath conference at the University of Ulster in Belfast, and extended invitations to Plath scholars to return the compliment by joining us at the next international Hughes conference, *Poetry in the Making*, to be hosted at Gregynog Hall in Powys in August 2018 by Carrie Smith and the University of Cardiff, it felt both like the consolidation of an Irish bridgehead, and the opening of a new and more positive chapter in relations between communities of scholars too often separated by perceptions of contested literary history. All Hughes readers are hawk-eyed, of course, so will not need me to tell you that the list of abbreviations of texts likely to feature in contributions to this journal has just grown a little longer, to reflect this confidence.

Finally, it was in the hope that scholarship of high quality will reach the wider readership it deserves, and that the excellent progress towards enlargement of the membership of the Ted Hughes Society over recent months will continue, that at a meeting of its Council in Huddersfield in June the last of this issue's innovations was decided. This is the moment at which the *Journal* steps from behind its firewall and into open access, catching up with the realities of academic expectations and a number of recent precedents. Members of the Council, as well as the *Journal's* editor, trust that the *Journal's* readers will help us spread the word.

Mark Wormald

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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

- LSP1* *The Collected Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Volume 1, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017)

Hughes's Notion of Shamanic Healing

Terry Gifford

In January of last year an obituary in *The Guardian* caught my eye. The painter Derek Hyatt was said by his obituarist, the art historian Tim Barringer, to have 'collaborated [...] with the poet Ted Hughes, whose work he greatly admired'.¹ Derek Hyatt's name appears in Sagar and Tabor's *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography* in entry A47 since, as a lecturer at Leeds Polytechnic, he and his students made broadsides for Hughes poems exhibited at the 1975 Ilkley Literature Festival. Hyatt's triptych etching for 'Wodwo' included the complete text of the poem. But five years earlier Hyatt had made an oil painting given the title of the poem 'Wodwo'; this is reproduced in Derek Hyatt and Peter Woodcock's 2001 book *Stone Fires-Liquid Clouds: The Shamanic Art of Derek Hyatt* which was the result of three years of correspondence and interviews with Hyatt.² However, at an exhibition of Hyatt's work at the Art Space Gallery in London last year I talked to his daughter, Sally Gallagher, to discover that she had found no correspondence from Hughes in her father's papers, and in the exhibition catalogue essay Tim Barringer this time makes no mention of Hughes. Intriguingly, *Stone Fires-Liquid Clouds* includes an essay by Hyatt titled, 'Wodwo, Ted Hughes and The Wounded Healer' about Hyatt's reading of Hughes as an inspirational shamanic artist. Hyatt writes: 'It's a pity that we can't hold our poets in greater respect for the dangers they go through to make deep poetry'.³ But he makes no argument for his title and it is left to Woodcock to explain it in his introductory remarks: 'In Hyatt's view, Hughes was a wounded healer, a poet of intense power and shamanic qualities whose recognition was overshadowed by the suicide of his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath'.⁴

In his book *The Ethnopoetics of Shamanism* (2014), the Brazilian literary scholar Marcel de Lima offers the following definition of the shaman:

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/13/derek-hyatt>

² Derek Hyatt and Peter Woodcock, *Stone Fires-Liquid Clouds: The Shamanic Art of Derek Hyatt* (Glastonbury: Gothic Images, 2001).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The shaman is the healer wounded by death itself, the one able to restore the mortal evils by means of controlling the spiritual spheres found in the invisible forces of nature commanded by him or her alone. The shaman is indeed the manifestation of the powers of mystical healing [...] the shaman acts according to the commandments of nature; he or she goes to knowledge as those who go to war, willing to spill his or her blood on the battlefields.⁵

Here is an explicit endorsement of Hyatt's awareness of 'the dangers [our poets] go through to make deep poetry'. Marcel de Lima is clear that whilst Mircea Eliade's book on shamanism, which Hughes reviewed in 1964 and included under the significant title 'Regenerations' in *Winter Pollen*, was the first historical study of the subject, it was a partial, and even contested one. But its focus upon the individual and his psychic journey enabled Hughes to characterise it as 'one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event' (WP 58).

There's something almost innocently positive about Hughes's need to find a 'regenerating drama' in 1964. When twenty years later he came to confront Leonard Baskin's life-sized image of 'The Hanged Man' he struggled, in his Introduction to *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin*, to counter its force, by way of an assertion of 'transformation', with that of 'The Dragonfly'. It is in this essay, also in *Winter Pollen*, that Hughes writes most knowingly about the wound. What Hughes calls 'mana', and Lorca, he says, called 'the Duende', is divine healing knowledge that comes from deep suffering (WP 93). 'It is a common mythological and folklore motif that the wound, if it is to be healed, needs laid in it the blade that made it' (WP 95). The experience, the deep knowledge, of both the cause of the wound and the wound itself, is a pre-requisite of possible redemption:

That moment of redemption, where healing suddenly wells out of a wound that seemed fatal, is not enough. The beauty of it has to blossom. The dead man has to flower into life. And this skinned carcass, so wrapped and unwrapped in its pain, is becoming a strange thing – a chrysalis [...] The old terms of suffering have become the new terms of grace. The Hanged Man has become the Dragonfly without having ceased to be the Hanged Man.
(WP 97-8)

So this is not really a transformation, since the wound itself must remain and is not to be denied; it is rather that the quality of pain has become more complex. Or to put it another way, if a version of *Birthday Letters* had been published years earlier, the poems would not have stopped coming, just as *Crow* could not have avoided a certain kind of laughter: 'The Hanged Man's laughter, that flinging off of everything,

⁵ Marcel de Lima, *The Ethnopoetics of Shamanism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 5.

deep down among the roots of the unkillable thing in nature, is the voice of *mana*' (WP 99).

Of course, *Wodwo* pivots around the radio play titled 'The Wound' about which I wrote in 1978, just as it pivots around Plath's suicide, the poems of the third part being assembled to both engage with it and attempt to emerge from it by ending with 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' and 'Wodwo'. At that time I did not think of the play as a shamanic text, which it obviously is, although I did recognise it as 'an adventure into the realm of dissolution and death' that it shared with the poems and 'the ambiguous moral struggle that Ripley's fight for survival comes to represent'. But my conclusion about what I admitted was a flawed play, now seems prescient:

Throughout the play he refuses to acknowledge the wound in his head. This is both his limitation and his strength. He instinctively blinds himself to the weakness in himself in order not to capitulate. Thus sometimes with absurdity, sometimes hypocritically, nevertheless Ripley resists and survives at a price [...] Ripley is not fully conscious that the forces of dissolution, as well as of life, are exposed by his wound, to be in himself.⁶

When the book was published Hughes had a clear idea of its shamanic function for himself, as he explained in a letter:

[...] after an undisturbed relationship with the outside natural world, I receive a demand from behind – from a subjective world. The main event of the book - and of my life from 1961-2 onwards – is this invitation or importuning of a subjective world, which I refuse. I think I did refuse – or rather I deferred. And I paid for it quite heavily [...] The consequence of the refusal was a mental collapse into the condition of an animal. 'The Harvesting' is a story on the theme [...] The 7 years are over – and I think the book has had a great good effect on me. (LTH 274)

It seems to me perceptive of Hyatt to take inspiration – inspiration, note – from the notion of Hughes as a wounded healer because this would be one possible way of describing Hughes's life and work. There is evidence that the wound was felt to a certain extent before meeting Plath. But then, at the very end of his life, Hughes felt the combined wounds of having lost something in his late commitment to so much prose and the long suppression of *Birthday Letters*.

Hughes must have been aware for years that the suppression of *Birthday Letters* was damaging to himself. Consider his statement in the 1995 *Paris Review* interview: 'Art [i]s perhaps this – the psychological component of the autoimmune

⁶ Terry Gifford, 'A Return to "The Wound"', *Kingfisher*, 1.2/3, (1973), p. 53. <http://www.terrygifford.co.uk/TheWoundessay.pdf>

system. It works on the artist as a healing. But it works on others, too, as a medicine.⁷ It is the two-way notion of healing that I want to explore here, and a more general sense of Hughes the wounded poetic healer than the obvious wounds of Plath's death in 1963 followed in 1969 by those of Assia Wevill and his mother. Actually, evidence of different forms of the 'wound' are hinted at throughout *Birthday Letters*. In very first poem, 'Fulbright Scholars', Hughes admits to a sense of inadequacy in his early life before meeting Plath: 'At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh / By my ignorance of the simplest things' (CP 1045). The example that leads to these concluding lines of the poem is his first taste of a peach, but its purpose is to demonstrate a comparatively limited life experience before meeting one of the Fulbright Scholars, who were sufficiently exotic to be announced by a group photograph in a London newspaper. Then, of course, there was the notorious wounding by Plath herself described in the poem 'St Botolph's: 'the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks / That was to brand my face for the next month. / The me beneath it for good.' (CP 1052) One might ask how many men have met a woman who enacted such violence at a first meeting; one might also bear this in mind when considering Plath's later accusations against Hughes in a private letter reported in *The Guardian* recently.⁸

Finally, there is the concluding reflection omitted from the published ending of the memoir 'The Rock', broadcast and then published in *The Listener* in 1963. In the Emory manuscript draft of this talk there is a phrase, omitted from the published version, in which what has been called the fatalism of *Birthday Letters*⁹ can now be recognised as a kind of wounded foreboding: 'After each walk on the moor or along its edge I must have returned less and less of myself to the valley. This was where the division of body and soul began [that will no doubt cause me a lot more trouble].'¹⁰ Of course, in Hughes's mind, actually publishing that omitted phrase in brackets here would no doubt invite a lot more trouble. So when we think of Hughes at the end of his life as sadly regretful not only about the self-harm of not publishing *Birthday Letters*, but also about his years of commitment to prose and in particular *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, these regrets echo a lifetime of having a recurring sense of incomplete being that the poet, as the Lumb figure in *Gaudete*, has implicitly been called upon to heal in himself in writing that, of course, includes *Gaudete*.

⁷ Paris Review 134, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI' (1995), p. 82.

⁸ 'Unseen Sylvia Plath letters claim domestic abuse by Ted Hughes', *The Guardian*, 11 April 2017.

⁹ Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 70. See also Leonard M. Scigaj, 'The Deterministic Ghost in the Machine of Birthday Letters', in Joanny Moulin (ed.), *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-15.

¹⁰ Emory, MSS 644, Box 115, subseries 2.4: Prose, FF8.

At this point it is impossible to ignore Hughes's interest in the early arts of healing – those centuries-long traditions of alchemy and the occult arts. Ann Skea's brilliantly useful essay in the last *Ted Hughes Society Journal* draws attention to Hughes's translations in 1992 of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-92), whose fifteenth-century court in Florence was a centre of Neo-Platonism and Hermetic learning. Hughes translated eleven sonnets that were part of a verse exposition of the Neo-Platonism of Marsilio Ficino (1433-99). Here is the last stanza of one of them:

Each thing has a moment – that flits,
For Fortune's a sickness of perpetual motion.
Nothing is still. And nothing lasts. Only death. (ST 100)

These translations were made for an event at the Academia Italiana (now defunct) in London at the request of Gaia Servadio who contributed a Note to Daniel Weissbort's *Selected Translations*, writing, 'I was impressed [...] by his familiarity with the work of Ficino and Plontinus and all those philosophers around the Medician dinner-table. He knew about Lorenzo's teacher Poliziano and about Alberti' (ST 218). Gaia had sent Hughes, as he asked, word-for-word transcriptions and here is her version of this last stanza:

Everything is fleeting and last a short time
Since Fortune in the world is a constant ill;
Only is still and always lasts Death. (ST 219)

Hughes has turned the hint of 'a constant ill' into 'a sickness' and reversed the sense of Death 'only is still' to suggest that the sickness is 'of perpetual motion. / Nothing is still', so that the emphasis in Hughes's version can fall upon 'Nothing lasts. Only death'. The lower case for death, in defusing the anthropomorphic, registers this as the common experience of death, the commonly experienced wound that lasts, as Hughes well knew.

But there is also a positive aspect to these teachings. Ann Skea points out that:

For both Blake and Hughes, Ficino's teachings about the essential power of the imagination and poetry to link us to the source of creative energies, and the Lucretian and Renaissance Humanist and Neoplatonic emphasis on our ability to control our own lives, remained of utmost importance.¹¹

Ann demonstrates that Hughes first read these ancient texts in Cambridge University Library and that they were so important to him that he later accumulated his own collection:

¹¹ Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition', *THSJ* VI.1, p. 12.

Hughes owned a copy of Ficino's *Book of Life*, which deals, amongst many other things, with Nature as a "magician"; "the power of images and medicine"; "The figures of the heavens and the use of images"; the powers that draw "the favours of the heavenly bodies, that is the soul of the world, of the stars and of daemons"; and "the power of words and songs in obtaining heavenly gifts".¹²

So this is the moment to turn to Hughes's uses of "the power of words and songs in obtaining heavenly gifts'.

In his poem 'That Morning' from the collection *River* (1983) Ted Hughes presents an image of an ecology in wondrous balance as the salmon run upriver in Alaska to spawn and die just as the bears emerge from their long winter dens, with perhaps newborn young brought down by their mothers who have not fed for up to ten months. Here the bear/salmon ecology is a matter of death giving life and of life ebbing away to death in the seasonal and life cycles of this wild environment. Such cycles and their tensions have always been at the centre of Hughes's work since his earliest statement about his poetic focus: 'What excites my imagination is the war between vitality and death, and my poems may be said to celebrate the exploits of the warriors of either side'.¹³ Of course, the poet is also present in this poem and, at the end, so is his son. So, to the balances (or wars of 'perpetual motion') in this poem of bear/salmon and death/life, are added nature/humans and father/son.

The human need to feel embedded in nature, or at least in contact with it, has been called 'biophilia' by the ecologist E. O. Wilson in his book of that name which is subtitled, 'The human bond with other species' (1984). Wilson argued that humans have an 'innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes'.¹⁴ In the early 1980s I began to collect evidence of different social constructions of nature for the first chapter of my study of notions of nature in contemporary poetry, *Green Voices* (2011 [1995]). That Wilson's biophilia has healing properties has been known for some time, but may be hard to apply in institutionalised contexts. In that opening chapter I wrote:

There is much evidence to show that those of us living in large industrial cities – and that is most of us – need to have unmediated contact with nature. A study of the therapeutic value of trees for hospital patients found that, compared with patients whose windows looked out on to brick walls, those whose windows gave them a view of trees required fewer painkillers and were discharged earlier. The frame here is a healing one. We not only need this sort

¹² Ibid., p. 13.

¹³ Ted Hughes, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 15, 1957.

¹⁴ E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The human bond with other species* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 1.

of contact, we need to communicate it, examine it and share its meaning through our symbolic sign-systems. Our semiology of nature keeps us sane by reminding us that we are animals.¹⁵

At that time I was unaware of biosemiotics, which is what I was describing here – one species making meaning out of the sign-systems of others in a dynamic relationship – or that Wendy Wheeler would title her first book on the subject *The Whole Creature* (2006).¹⁶ Ted Hughes believed that the meaning-making sign-systems of poetry survived precisely because of their potential to heal our alienation from the organic environment upon which we depend. This is the cultural wound that Hughes famously identifies in his review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution*: 'The story of the mind exiled from nature is the story of Western Man' (WP 129). Ecofeminists will notice that that capitalisation indicates a reification.

The shamanic notion of art as a cultural healing that is also a personal healing requires examining in more detail, and indeed the archives reveal that Hughes did elaborate on his conception of this two-way healing process in what appears to be a draft of an unpublished brief essay. But two more things should be said about 'That Morning'. The last lines of the poem have become iconic in the memory of Hughes, partly, I suspect, because Seamus Heaney read this poem at the memorial service in Westminster Abbey. When Heaney unveiled the memorial stone in the Abbey's Poet's Corner these lines were revealed to be inscribed on it:

So we found the end of our journey.

So we stood, alive in the river of light
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light. (CP 664)

Standing among the golden bears and silver salmon the human beings are unified with wild nature. They could not feel more alive as fellow creatures as they stand in the flowing, pulsing, lit river. And this is the climax of a journey, not just a fishing trip to Alaska, but a journey towards this kind of embedded lived experience.

But the first thing to say is that, for Hughes, salmon were more than symbolic 'creatures of light'. Hughes wrote to me: 'these fish are simply indicators of what is happening to us',¹⁷ and the collection *River* (1983) gives celebratory attention to that indicator. In his interview with Blake Morrison Hughes said,

Most people I talk to seem to defend or rationalise the pollution of water. They think you're defending fish or insects or flowers. But

¹⁵ Terry Gifford, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (2nd edn, Nottingham: CCC Press, p.10.

¹⁶ Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006).

¹⁷ Terry Gifford, *Green Voices*, p. 149.

the effects on otters and so on are indicators of what's happening to us. It isn't a problem of looking after the birds and bees, but of how to ferry human beings through the next century. The danger is multiplied through each generation. We don't really know what bomb has already been planted in the human system.¹⁸

For Ted Hughes, his poems about rivers and fish also have a sub-text about the links between water quality and public health. What was not known by readers and critics of *River* at the time of its publication, was the extent to which this ecstatic, re-connective poetry was informed by an awareness of river pollution that would lead to practical political action, including a speech at a public enquiry, on behalf of the rivers in the southwest of England and the importance of their water quality for all creatures and organic life there, for river health and for public health.

Second, there are two wounded people in that 'we', which includes Nicholas, son of Ted Hughes, and of Sylvia Plath who had committed suicide in 1963. Mental health issues lie deep under the surface of this journey of father and son. Actually, Nicholas Hughes was a fish biologist at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks where he had gained his PhD in salmonid ecology, specialising in the study of Arctic grayling. Sadly, Hughes's sister Olwyn told me just before he died that Nick was 'suffering from the same black depressions as his mother' and, ten years after his father's death in 1998, Nicholas Hughes committed suicide on 16 March 2009. Of course, it was not until the year of his own death that Hughes published his own version of his relationship with Plath in *Birthday Letters* (1998). As we know, he believed that it would have been better for his own health if he had confronted this issue earlier and directly, as he revealed in that long final letter to Keith Sagar three months before his death:

Though I see now that any traumatic event – if writing is your method – has to be dealt with deliberately. An image has to be looked for – consciously – and then mined to the limit: but not in autobiographical terms. My high-minded principal [sic] was simply wrong – for my own psychological and physical health. It was stupid. (*LTH* 720)

The personal feeling of release following the publication of *Birthday Letters* amazed the writer: 'It has worked for me – better than I thought possible [...] I suddenly had free energy I hadn't known since *Crow*' (*LTH* 720). Obviously this release also enabled Hughes to confess to Sagar that his previous 'high-mindedness' about apparently being aloof from the personal resources of autobiography was psychologically unhealthy. Is this what Hughes had in mind when he expressed concern to Anne Stevenson in 1986 that Nick had rejected his gifts as a 'natural very

¹⁸ Blake Morrison, 'Man of Mettle', *The Independent on Sunday*, 5 Sept 1993, p. 34.

original' thirteen year old poet for life 'on a lonely stream in the Alaska wilderness [...] and evading any attempt I might make to bring up Sylvia' (*LTH* 516)? Is there a suspicion of unhealthiness in Hughes's strange statement: 'I wonder if he hasn't searched out too perfect a removal from what the literary documentary dramatists have made of his mother' (*Ibid.*)? But there is no evidence that Hughes was aware of Nick's tendency towards depression.

Many critics use the word 'redemption' about the poems in *River*, knowing, as they do, the poetic journey of Hughes from the trauma of the suicides of Sylvia Plath and then, six years later, of his partner Assia Wevill, which was closely followed by the death of Edith Hughes. After such dark experiences, to be able to celebrate standing alive in a river of light, a more-than-comfortable part of the creative-destructive cycles in process all around, is a remarkable human achievement, just as it is a poetic achievement. (For example, the repetition of the final phrase in the poem is not just a religious incantation: the first 'creatures of light' refers to bears and salmon, but the second deftly includes father and son without it seeming to be an addition.) So how might one summarise the poetic journey of Hughes's life when it is considered in the light of these issues of personal woundedness and cultural health?

I would suggest that four phases could be identified in one version of the development of Hughes's poetry. The earliest phase would include the first three collections and might be described as satires against self-deceptive protections from nature – culture resisting nature, unsuccessfully, counterbalanced by some overwhelming encounters with 'the war between vitality and death'. Representative of this work is the poem 'Egghead' from the first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). The second phase includes *Crow* (1970) and *Gaudete* (1977), but is most comprehensively represented by *Cave Birds* (1978). These mythic narratives put hubris on trial and require the loss of the ego, sometimes represented by dismemberment, and an eventual marriage of a humbled self with nature, symbolised by a female creator who would later come to be characterised as 'the Goddess of complete being' in Hughes's study of *Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). This symbolic marriage is always incomplete, or in constant need of renewal, because, as the final words of *Cave Birds* remind us, 'At the end of the ritual / up pops a goblin'. (*CP* 440) Hubris is hard to stop. The third phase includes *Remains of Elmet* (1979) and *River* (1983). These books are celebrations of culture embedded in nature – in both its growth and its decay – and of nature including culture. Mill chimneys rise and fall back to earth like flowers. The hills of the ancient kingdom of Elmet around the Calder Valley, Hughes's birthplace, go on 'shaking their sieve' (*CP* 470) in which industry, religion, farms and houses are

‘sieved’ by the ebbs and flows of weather and land. A late final phase of release might be represented by the translation of the play *Alcestis* (1999) and by *Birthday Letters* (1998). Love, responsibility and their traumas are directly confronted in these last works – the mature, personal, complex explorations of ‘the war between vitality and death’.

To slightly reframe these four phases as stages of healing the wounded shaman himself, one might suggest that the first phase is concerned with identifying the nature of the wounds and the wounds in our relationship with nature, inner and outer. Totemic shamanic helpers could be traced from fox to pike to otter. I have, in the past, thought of these creatures as speakers from the animal world who teach, through these poems, examples of self-deceptions, whose instinctive strengths are also their weaknesses. A shamanic approach would ask not, ‘What is Hughes saying about these creatures?’, but, ‘What are these creatures saying to the listening Hughes?’ Of course, it is impossible to vocalise them except in anthropomorphic terms as in ‘Hawk Roosting’ and ‘Wodwo’. In the second phase the mythic journeys of descent, trial, and dismemberment lead to reintegration and a repeated image of symbolic marriage. The helper in *Cave Birds* shifts from an arrogant cockerel to Horus, the risen hawk. The third phase enacts cultural healing, imaged in its partiality, with frequent setbacks. Here the white bull of *Gaudete* might be a version of the real helper on Moortown Farm, Sexton Hyades XXXIII. The final phase would be seen as one of personal healing and partial redemption. Here the salmon reigns, embedded with all its inspiring cyclic story of creative life and death.

So if this poetry ‘works on others, too, as a medicine’ what are the aspects of cultural healing in Hughes’s art? How does Hughes believe that poetry can work on others too? Does Hughes address the issue of illness in his poetry? What do we know about Hughes’s concerns about pollution and public health? In exploring these questions we need to understand that we are dealing with a poet who is much influenced by his reading of Jung and who transferred from the English course (where his supervisor was an expert on the ballads) for his final year as an undergraduate at Cambridge to the social anthropology course that looked at the social function of songs, narratives, myths and rituals. Throughout his work Hughes sought to reconnect the Cartesian dualisms that had riven Western Christian culture and alienated humans from nature, as from their inner selves and their animal life. The quest for the elusive goddess of complete being demands some sense of what complete being might be in its lived form. In the Mytholmroyd journal *Northern Earth* there is an excellent essay by Brian Taylor titled ‘Ted Hughes: Shaman of the Tribe?’ which concludes by suggesting Hughes’s relevance for ‘current debates about neo-shamanism’ in the Calder Valley, including ‘Hughes’

sense of the necessity of honouring a Gravesian Goddess by rekindling a long-lost animal-spiritual sensibility'.¹⁹ However in a footnote Taylor expresses the reservation that '[Hughes's] portrayal of the Goddess seems to preclude her involvement in the rational affairs of public office, or science'.²⁰ Actually, in reconnecting the whole work of Hughes's life it is apparent that a range of discourses are deployed in both poetry and prose, and that art is underpinned by activism, just as science informs the art. Such collapsing of conventional culturally endorsed damaging dualisms is enacted by Hughes's life and work, as will be glimpsed in the brief examples that there is space for here.

In all of the references to the healing role of the poet that are to be found in Hughes's interviews, essays, letters and notebooks, he uses the model of the social function of the shaman, about which he must have first learned in his anthropological studies at Cambridge. But he believed that he was prepared for this role in his boyhood identification with the animal world and his teenage infatuation with folklore. 'It occurred to me – fairly recently – that my preoccupation with animal life, which was obsessively there waiting for me when I came to consciousness, was a gravitation towards whatever life had escaped the cultural imprint' (*LTH* 724). The clear implication is that conventionally culture separates the inner self from nature, except, of course, in folklore and mythology which Hughes had been reading since the age of twelve. In a letter rejecting an invitation to discuss with Bishop Ross Hook the common ground of the Church and Poetry, Hughes explains his belief that poetry flourishes where formal religion fails. 'Poetry is forever trying to do the work of religion – as local "healers" are perpetually setting up as an alternative to orthodox Medecine [sic] [...] It's the shamanic streak in the poetic temperament' (*LTH* 460).

Much has been written about Hughes's animals, but to see them as guides or helpers in the poetic process of, as Brian Taylor puts it, 'honouring a Gravesian Goddess by rekindling a long-lost animal-spiritual sensibility' is to read them slightly differently. By way of a footnote I'd like to offer an example of the danger that might be involved in assuming that any reference to an animal successfully expresses an 'animal-spiritual sensibility' by considering a draft of the *Cave Birds* poem 'The Knight', the title of which is followed by 'Has conquered. He has surrendered everything'. So the conquest here is that of the ego which has been surrendered, just as his body has been. An earlier title for this poem was based upon the skeletal Baskin drawing: 'Death Stone Bird'. When John Ruskin first saw Mont Blanc his sense of self was so diminished that he said it left him 'associating

¹⁹ Brian Taylor, 'Ted Hughes: Shaman of the Tribe?', *Northern Earth*, 123 (Autumn 2010), p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

fraternally with some ants'.²¹ Such a surrender is what Hughes is seeking to suggest here. An earlier version in manuscript has the line, 'Now my instructions come from beetles, from ants'.²² Learning from ants, taking instruction from ants and beetles is a powerful shamanic notion in the alchemical journey of *Cave Birds*. But in revision Hughes sacrificed this idea for the sake of the ritual itself by changing this to 'Beetles and ants officiate' (CP 426). Whilst 'Blueflies lift off his beauty' is brilliantly literal in its symbolism of surrender, 'lift off' enacting flying, 'officiate' emphasises the insects' power rather than the hero's humility, which is the whole point of this stage of the ritual journey. Even a shaman can falsify his dream in the telling of it.

In a notebook containing drafts of the *Crow* poems in the Hughes archive at Emory University in Atlanta there is a draft holograph short essay of several pages that has never been published. Curiously, it is signed with a pseudonym, using his mother's family name, David Farrar (the actual name of Hughes's cousin), suggesting that, if this piece were to be published, it would be too personally exposing to risk his own work being held to public account against the essay's statements. At this time Hughes was at the beginning of what I have characterised as his second phase, finding the new and radically different voice of the *Crow* poems. In this draft essay Hughes develops his notion of poetry as performing a healing function in two directions: the personal, for the poet, and the social, for the reader. This draft represents Hughes's most succinct expression of poetry's psychological and cultural function.

Hughes's first striking statement is that the compulsion to write poetry might itself be regarded as a kind of illness which poets need to heal in themselves by the writing of poetry. All poets know that they are different from other people in that they are always alert in a specially attentive way for the next poem. Inspiration has to be sought from a continual discipline of inner attention, or readiness. Hughes regarded this calling as a permanent one that requires a responsibility to the gift, once the calling has been accepted. It may well be painful as it brings deeply hidden matters to the surface, but poets recognise that a successful poem provides a sense of healing from the anxiety that produced it. There is, however, a second anxiety about whether and when it becomes a successful poetic communication in the social context of readers, which is addressed by the second discipline of revision and crafting. It is interesting that Hughes's technique for finding a distance from these deeply personal anxieties at this stage of final publication is to be able to retreat

²¹ *The Works of John Ruskin*, E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds) (London: Allen, 1903-12), Vol 5, p. 184.

²² Exeter University Library, EUL MS 58/A/14, 1975.

behind the persona that is the voice of the poet – what one might call ‘the persona in his work’. Actually, when poets take part in workshops of work-in-progress it is a commonly adopted etiquette that the ‘I’ in the poem is referred to in discussion as ‘the speaker’ of the poem who is not necessarily the writer of the poem. For Hughes, this ‘persona’ coping strategy allows for the lonely and personal need for the poet to bring an inner world to the verbal surface to be reconciled with the poet’s necessary isolation in a culture which regards the poet as rather odd at best and embarrassingly self-indulgent at worst.

The implication that Hughes is speaking for all artists here is revealed in his assumption that the poet/artist is ‘working’ on behalf of the rest of society. Interestingly, Hughes’s Jungian approach is explained in biological terms. For Hughes the most successful poet is a person who is able to draw upon his whole being as a creature to provide insights to readers that reconnect them to their wholeness. In this they provide a wider healing function in a fractured society. Art, Hughes believed, is nature’s cure for the inward repressions of the writer and of the reader. In this role the artist acts as a psychic healer whose function is recognisably that which anthropologists identify as the shaman:

The only natural cure that has ever appeared is art – and particularly poetry, and particularly the poetic world which opens to the psychic healers which have come to be known as shamans. Shamanism appears in one form or other wherever man has appeared, and his world is always the same and his operations are always the same. [‘Or similar’ added later.] On his home-made magical flights the myths and superstitions of the permanent religions have accreted and by including [sic] in a piecemeal way, his care of [critic?] psychoanalysis has come into respectability. Poetry can be of many kinds, but the only sort we need derives from the shamanic experience, which is still a more advanced and effective psychic healing technique, for whole communities, than anything devised since our division from the under life of a primitive hunter.²³

It is easy to understand how Hughes, the poet and former anthropology student, can say that in the narratives of shamanic flights recorded worldwide the myths and superstitions of world religions can be seen to be present, but it is less easy to understand what he means, in the rather scrambled shorthand of these notes, by the suggestion that through these different shamanic narratives a caring psychoanalysis has gained public appreciation. One presumes that the poet’s own form of psychoanalysis, appearing in a piecemeal way in his/her poems, appears to be a respectable form of psychological healing for his/her culture.

²³ Emory, MSS 644, subseries 2.1: Notebooks, Box 57, FF 9 (ca. 1967-68), *Crow* notebook, p. 81.

The fierceness with which Hughes expresses, in these notes, the consequences of repression and the violence with which it needs to be rejected, echoes his justification of fishing to me, in a letter written over twenty-five years later, as a form of contact with ‘the primitive human animal’. Hughes wrote:

Think of the many extreme ways in which “civilised” individuals do keep something of that contact? Or in which they remake contact. Having a child, hectic bout of adultery, immersion in pop-music and raves, physically violent sport, high-power predatory behaviour in business, farming stock animals, immersing consciousness in the sexual and killing freedoms of Video and TV etc etc, petty terrorism of some kind, crime generally etc etc. (*LTH* 658)

Much of culture, it seemed to Hughes, including the literary criticism of poetry, represents the mind disconnected from ‘the primitive human animal’. Thus the function of true poetry, of the mind that is healing itself, is to reconnect the over-civilised, fractured self to visions reaching for a paradisaal order in which, in the final lines of these notes, physical, biological being is at one with spirit life. What Hughes has been speaking of is the possibility of poetry as a cultural healing that is ultimately also an ecological reconciliation between the human animal and the abused, alienated, mysterious, force-field of its home environment.

Here I’d like briefly to consider the children’s play ‘Orpheus’. In that long letter to Keith Sagar in July 1998 Hughes wrote:

Orpheus was the first story that occurred to me after S.P.s death. I rejected it: I thought it would be too obvious an attempt to exploit my situation – I was too conscious of that obviousness. I saw my little note about it, the other day. The shock twist was that Pluto answered: No, of course you can’t have her back. She’s dead, you idiot. Too close to it, you see.

I wrote the musical play in 1971, same time as the Max Nicholson essay, in a farmhouse in North Devon that I’d escaped to after A’s & my mother’s death, trying to sort out marriage dilemmas etc. (*LTH* 723)

Hughes has the year wrong: the play was broadcast on 29 January 1970 and the Nicholson review appeared six months later. But Lorraine Kerslake argues in her forthcoming book on Hughes’s writing for children that Hughes was sometimes able more easily to heal his own wounds in writing for children, ‘under the radar’ for a schools’ broadcast, as it were, than in his high profile Faber publications. It is significant that Hughes associates the writing of the play with a healing retreat at a time of deep wounding and turmoil. And he thinks of it as a musical play:

And the stones did not dance. But the stones listened.
The music was not the music of happiness

But of everlasting, and the wearing away of the hills,
 The music of the stillness of stones,
 Of stones under frost, and stones under rain, and stones in the sun,
 The music of the seabed drinking at the stones of the hills.
 The music of the floating weight of the earth.
 And the deer on the high hills heard the crying of wolves.
 And the salmon in the deep pools heard the whisper of the snows,
 And the traveller on the road
 Heard the music of love coming and love going
 And love lost forever,
 The music of birth and of death. (*THCPC* 105)

Kerslake also argues that this play, in which this final music is the music of Orpheus's unseen wife, exemplifies the two-way shamanic healing of wounds for the writer and the audience. She writes:

By rewriting the myth in the form of a children's play it allowed Hughes to explore the emotions and feelings of Orpheus by focusing on his own emotional journey without the restraints of writing for an adult audience. Hughes's children's writing is, after all, one that pursues healing truths. Hughes himself recognized that 'Children are most sensitive to the inner world, because they are the least conditioned by scientific objectivity to life' (*WP* 149).²⁴

To turn briefly to poems in which Hughes responds to individual cases of ill-health is to also see in practice what he had sketched out in theory in the *Crow* notebook above. Consider, first, how Hughes responds to the news that his old undergraduate friend and co-founder of the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Daniel Weissbort, is suffering from cancer of the jaw:

My one or two fleeting glimpses of what it's like, to know you've somehow got yourself so ill, gave me a good idea of the rage against yourself, & the fright. Ted Cornish [a Devon healer] always says – the worst (he thinks, the most dangerous) thing about such illnesses is the fear. He thinks if you can control the fright – the imagining of the worst & the resignation, you can get the upper hand, & come out of it. [...] (*LTH* 471)

The crucial idea that the agency of the sufferer is the best tool for self-healing is also present in the poems about illness, even, ironically, when the cause of the illness itself might be in the hands of the sufferer. The poem 'Hands', for example, is about the death of the poet's father-in-law, Jack Orchard, who worked at Moortown Farm when it was bought by the poet and his wife and had hands

suave as warm oil inside the wombs of ewes,
 And monkey delicate

²⁴ Lorraine Kerslake, *Correcting Culture's Error: The Voice of Nature in Ted Hughes's Children's Writing*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Alicante, 2016, p. 184.

Something of the interrelationship between Hughes's art and activism can be determined from the following list of campaigns supported by Hughes and his publications concerned with water quality:

1981 - Torridge Action Group formed

1983 - *River*

1992 - River Creedy Campaign

1992 - *Rain-Charm for the Duchy* (see title poem)

1992 - Southwest Water gives £5,000 to research detergents in the River Exe

1993 - *The Iron Woman*

1995 - West Country Rivers Trust formed

What becomes clear from a 'reconnected' overview of Hughes's whole work is that for him a concern for nature was inevitably also a concern for human health and that his pursuit of cultural healing was multidimensional and reintegrating in so many ways. The case of Ted Hughes, the wounded shamanic healer, seems only to increase in significance for our current debates about the ways in which the humanities can address matters of personal, public and environmental health.

Hughes and Lawrence

Neil Roberts

If the three great modernist poets in the English language are mentioned, it will be generally assumed that the poets in question are Eliot, Yeats and Pound. Hughes would have concurred in the cases of Eliot and Yeats, but Lawrence was far more important to him than Pound.

This seems to me self-evident, yet remarkably little has been written about the connection between Hughes and Lawrence. Even Keith Sagar, who wrote many books about both Hughes and Lawrence, never compared them at length. There are a few pages in *The Art of Ted Hughes*, and by Heather Clark in *The Grief of Influence*.¹ Hughes and Lawrence are our two greatest poets of the animal world. Both were formidably intelligent yet shared a suspicion of the rational intellect and secular culture, leading them in differing degrees to an interest in the occult. Both had Non-Conformist upbringings against which they rebelled. Yet each developed his own idiosyncratic religious world-view in ways that show the influence of the Protestant emphasis on the individual's direct communication with the deity – as Eliot considered it, the mark of the heretic. Both grew up in mining towns; in different ways both were in but not entirely of the working-class milieu that surrounded them.

Yet, when one comes to examine the matter more closely, the connection between Hughes and Lawrence is difficult to grasp. Hughes openly proclaimed the importance to him of Yeats and Eliot. The influence of Yeats on early poems such as 'Song' and 'The Recluse' would be obvious even if Hughes hadn't explicitly acknowledged 'the kind of metre I could respond to' in 'The Wanderings of Oisín' as an advance on 'the lockstep rhythm' of his first poetic influence Kipling (*WP* 5-6). Yeats the mythographer, Yeats the visionary, the constructor of alternative religious systems amid the collapse of the Christian tradition, is a figure Hughes would inevitably respond to. He is the first example for Hughes of the poet as

¹ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, second edition 1978), pp. 38-45; Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 20-29.

shaman, and one of the four poets he names in his Eliade review as qualifying for 'the magic drum' (*WP* 58).

Another of those poets of course is Eliot. The self-confessed Anglican and classicist, given to severe ascetic practices, the castigator of 'heretics' such as Lawrence, who would have liked to exclude 'casters [of] horoscopes, and other practitioners of magic' from the Eliot Collection at Harvard, is a less obvious soul-mate for Hughes.² Yet, as we know, Eliot came increasingly over the years to epitomise the shaman poet, and to supplant Yeats as Hughes's most significant precursor. In Ron Schuchard's words Eliot became 'Hughes's model for his own indeflectible movement through the spirit world'.³

There is much more to be said about Hughes's relation to both Yeats and Eliot. I am citing them to emphasise the contrast in the case of Lawrence. There are indeed a couple of places in the *Letters* where Hughes pays tribute to Lawrence. In 1982 he wrote to Daniel Weissbort:

The poverty of 20th century English writing has been masked by the presence of Eliot, Joyce and Yeats. Lawrence is really the only representative, and what an oddball he is. But at least he has psychological depth on a major scale. Graves, Auden, Thomas etc whatever they have, seem to me small beer in comparison—and I suppose it's because they are not psychologically self-explored in a serious way, they seem internally rudimentary, by comparison. (*LTH* 453)

And a couple of years later he wrote to Keith Sagar:

I've just been reading the big Phoenix Collection of Lawrence's pieces [a collection mainly of essays]—straight oxygen. What is the great plastic megaphone mask of English, that gets jammed over the head of all English writers, & that he avoided? He is the only one quite free of it. Maybe what helped him—apart from the talent, the nerve etc—was marrying a German, & staying out of England. (*LTH* 486-7)

This 'great plastic megaphone mask' is perhaps the same as the 'stereotype English voice' that in a letter to Lucas Myers in 1959 he claimed had descended on the language after the Restoration, with the resulting 'tabu on dialect as a language proper for literate men'. He lists 'Proverbs, ballads, songs, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Skelton and Webster' as instances of writing made out of 'the thick rope of human nature' and Wordsworth, Keats and Blake as the 'only poets speaking dialect since

² Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 479. For a particularly incongruous example of Hughes casting horoscopes see his letter to Philip Larkin (*LTH* 456-7).

³ Ron Schuchard, 'Hughes and Eliot: Possession', Ron Schuchard, ed., *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Transforming Poetics and Memory with Emory's Ted Hughes Archive*, Atlanta, The Academic Exchange, 2006, pp11-24, p17

1688 up to this century' (*LTH* 146). Jonathan Bate notes the absence of Lawrence's name in this letter and posits 'a certain "anxiety of influence"'. Ted is suppressing the name of the writer who came immediately before him as a northern, working-class voice with a sensitivity to the raw forces of nature, an interest in myth and archetype.⁴ There may be something in this – Eliot and Yeats were comparatively distanced by class and nationality, and Hughes would understandably have been reluctant to expose himself as a latter-day (and inevitably minor) version of a writer who was so much closer to him. However, Hughes writes that Wordsworth, Keats and Blake 'were the only poets speaking dialect since 1688 *up to this century*'. It is clear that by dialect he means non-standard English, and he was fully aware that this was true of Lawrence.

It may be relevant that during the period of Hughes's literary formation Lawrence was celebrated primarily as a novelist, at least in Britain (he had a more marked poetic influence in America, on the Black Mountain poets for instance). What Hughes called his 'sacred canon' consisted entirely of poets and poetic dramatists.⁵ Conversely, there are more poems by Lawrence in *The Rattle-Bag* than by any other poet except Blake and Hardy. The significance of this however is modified by the fact that the anthology was co-edited with Heaney, and that it was directed at children – Eliot for example is represented only by minor poems, which clearly don't reflect his importance for Hughes.

A clue to the comparative paucity of comment on Lawrence by Hughes might be in another of his lists of precursors, the poets who, as he wrote in his review of Eliade, might in a shamanizing society have qualified for 'the magic drum': Shakespeare, Keats, Yeats and Eliot. It is clear that these poets qualify by having written works – such as the revised 'Hyperion', 'The Wanderings of Oisín', 'Ash Wednesday' and in Hughes's rather eccentric opinion 'Venus and Adonis' – that could not only be described as visionary but that testify – at least to a temperament such as Hughes's – to shamanic experience undergone by the poet. These are poets who, in Hughes's opinion, have received the 'call', and it may be no accident that Hughes wrote this review not long after the 'call from behind' that he wrote of in explanation of the 'single adventure' of *Wodwo*.

There are works by Lawrence, particularly late in his life, such as his story of the risen Christ, 'The Escaped Cock', or his alarming tale about encountering Mexican Indians, 'The Woman Who Rode Away', that might be described as visionary but, for all Hughes's genuine admiration of Lawrence, I suspect that he didn't think of him as sharing the shamanic temperament. A key element here is

⁴ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), p. 148.

⁵ Drue Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', *Paris Review* 134, Spring 1995, p. 85.

the importance to Hughes of dreams. I don't need to remind the reader how often he said that poems originate in dreams. Lawrence by contrast wrote, 'Most dreams are purely insignificant, and it is the sign of a weak and paltry nature to pay any attention to them whatever'.⁶ Not for Lawrence the 'Poesy alone can tell her dreams' of Keats, the 'Tread softly because you tread on my dreams' of Yeats or the 'death's dream kingdom' of Eliot.⁷

This may tell us something about Hughes's attitude to Lawrence. More importantly it tells us something about his attitude to shamanism. It is a religious phenomenon, of course, but it has a social function. Specifically the shaman is concerned with healing: the 'principal' function of shamans in central and northern Asia according to Eliade.⁸ Lawrence's reputation, and in particular his cultural influence, is still highly controversial, and I would not in any straightforward way claim that his writing had or has a healing function. But at the height of his reputation, in the 1960s, Lawrence's vision influenced cultural norms in a way almost unparalleled by any other writer, and this influence was regarded by his admirers as a matter of emotional and spiritual health. In the words of his greatest advocate, F.R. Leavis, 'the insight, the wisdom, the revived and re-educated feeling for health, that Lawrence brings are what, as our civilization goes, we desperately need'.⁹

As I have said, my point is not to validate this view, but to emphasise that, for good or ill, Lawrence's work after his death performed elements of the shamanic function in a way that one could not possibly claim for Keats, Eliot or Hughes himself (Yeats's influence in Ireland is perhaps a special case). What this illustrates about Hughes is that his main interest in shamanism was (as his review shows) overwhelmingly in the process of initiation and the nature of the shamanic temperament. He undoubtedly did believe that his work and that of his chosen precursors was socially important, and he specifically believed that poetry has a healing function; as Terry Gifford demonstrates in this issue, he was practically concerned with healing the environment. But his *work* had nothing like the social influence that Lawrence's had. The profound importance of shamanism to him had more to do with his own psychological experience of becoming and continuing to be a poet.

⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis of the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1921/1922), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 178.

⁷ John Keats, 'The Fall of Hyperion, A Dream', l.8, John Middleton Murry, ed., *The Poems and Verses of John Keats* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1949), p. 392; W.B. Yeats, 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven', l.8, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 81; T.S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', l.20, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 89.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964; London: Arkana, 1989), p. 215.

⁹ F.R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955; Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1964), p. 15.

Nevertheless Hughes felt a strong kinship with Lawrence. C. B. Cox wrote, ‘Ted Hughes once said that when he first read D. H. Lawrence he felt as if he was reading his own autobiography.’¹⁰ He does not say when or in what context Hughes said this. Cox was a Cambridge contemporary, and it would be especially interesting if Hughes had made this declaration when he was a student. Cox declares that he doesn’t understand it, especially in the context of *Wodwo*, which he was reviewing at the time, and which (with the exception of ‘The Rain Horse’ and ‘Her Husband’) is more radically unlike Lawrence than his previous two books. I agree that it is difficult to know what Hughes means – whether, for example, he is referring to the circumstances of their early lives or, perhaps more characteristically of Hughes, some aspect of the inner life.

Lawrence was more decisively formed by the mining community than Hughes was. He was born there and lived there until he was twenty-three years old. His own father was a miner, and though he himself never went down a pit he was deeply familiar with aspects of the coal-mining culture, above all its domestic aspects. His relationship to that world was however conflicted by the fact that his mother was an outsider, not exactly middle-class but certainly with social pretensions, and this social rift in the family was intensified by the emotional estrangement between the parents. Thus, though Lawrence increasingly through his life identified himself *as* working class, he was never fully identified *with* the miners among whom he grew up. Steve Ely has written persuasively about the Hughes family’s social position within the mining town: the fact that his father, who in Mytholmroyd had been a proletarian carpenter, was in Mexborough a small businessman, and that his mother had more genteel antecedents, though in this case it doesn’t seem to have caused any conflict in the family.¹¹

It would be interesting if Hughes had made his comment about reading his autobiography in Lawrence when he was at Cambridge because it was then, encountering for the first time large numbers of people from a decisively higher social class, that he first appears to have become class-conscious. Nevertheless, Hughes like Lawrence never identified *with* the class among whom he grew up. But this did not stop either of them from sounding occasionally like class-warriors, especially later in life. Lawrence wrote in his late poem ‘Red Herring’,

My father was a working man
and a collier was he,
at six in the morning they turned him down
and they turned him up for tea.

¹⁰ C.B. Cox, ‘New Beasts for Old’, *Spectator*, 28 July 1967.

¹¹ Steve Ely, *Ted Hughes’s South Yorkshire: Made in Mexborough* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 182 ff.

My mother was a superior soul
 a superior soul was she,
 cut out to play a superior role
 in the goddam bourgeoisie.¹²

While Hughes, also late in life, in the more surprising context of an essay on English metre, erupts with:

On the one hand, the class which inherited and constantly reasserted the Military Occupation's governing role, and with it that speech code of superior status, also constantly re-enforced the rule of strict metrical forms, which went on evolving as a poetic tradition rooted in the court-centred 'high' culture. On the other hand, though the Old English poetic tradition degenerated to stunted popular rhymes, the innate music of its 'sprung rhythm' survived and multiplied, underground, like a nationalist army of guerrillas, in the regional dialects of common speech. (*WP* 368)

This remarkable outburst, in which Hughes sounds incongruously like Tony Harrison, has its origins in a review by Roy Fuller of *The Hawk in the Rain* which pronounced the final line of 'The Horses', 'Hearing the horizons endure', 'unsayable'. Fuller who, though middle-class, grew up in the Lancashire mill-town of Failsworth and went to school in Blackpool, is not an obvious candidate as the establishment enemy, and Hughes doesn't accuse him personally of class-based prejudice. But it is clear that being told his verse could not be spoken was, to use one of his own favourite metaphors, a piece of shrapnel that lodged in him, so that, when he wrote the essay forty years later as Poet Laureate, he still felt something of the discomfort of an outsider. Lawrence embraced his outsider status more enthusiastically than Hughes, yet he too, late in life, showed signs of what Hughes called 'social rancour' (*LTH* 423), recalling that 'In the early days they were always telling me I had got genius, as if to console me for not having their own incomparable advantages'.¹³

Conversely there are in both writers manifestations of recoil from and contempt for the class in which they were brought up. Steve Ely has drawn attention to the letters in which Hughes describes the 'proletariat' as 'a great senile toothless hairless white ape' and the working-class children he taught in Cambridge as 'dull, cloddish, stupid as brutes' (*LTH* 116, 89). In *Women in Love* the mining town is populated by 'ugly, meaningless people' who stare at the Brangwen sisters with 'that long unwearying stare of aborigines'.¹⁴

¹² D.H. Lawrence, *Poems* Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 424.

¹³ D.H. Lawrence, *Late Essays and Articles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 179.

¹⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (1920; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 11-12.

But the closest parallel, and perhaps what Hughes meant about reading his autobiography in Lawrence, is in the ‘second families’ they acquired at Hags Farm and Crookhill just outside Eastwood and Mexborough respectively. Jessie Chambers’s statement that Lawrence ‘became almost one of the family’ at Hags Farm is echoed by Edna Wholey: ‘he became part of the family’, and by Hughes himself to the same effect.¹⁵ Jessie reports Lawrence’s mother saying ‘he might as well pack his things and come and live with [the Chambers]’. Hughes actually did so, at weekends and in the summer holidays. In both writers this resource nurtured a powerful orientation to the natural world and encouraged a correspondingly baleful perspective on industrial life. Lawrence’s first novel, *The White Peacock*, is set almost wholly in the rural hinterland of Eastwood, but in *Sons and Lovers* he did full justice to both aspects of his early life. In Hughes’s case, of course, Crookhill was a further episode, following the moors above Mytholmroyd and Old Denaby, in an overwhelming preoccupation that effectively excluded urban industrial life from his imaginative scope.

I am going to quote what I think are the most memorable pieces of writing about the natural world that derive, respectively, from Lawrence’s life at Hags Farm and Hughes’s at Crookhill. I will begin by acknowledging that these pieces of writing are so different that there would be no point in comparing them but for this biographical parallel. The first is a passage from *Sons and Lovers* in which Miriam, the character based on Jessie Chambers, takes Paul, the autobiographical hero, into the wood to see a wild rose bush that is deeply important to her.

It was very still. The tree was tall and straggling. It had thrown its briars over a hawthorn bush, and its long streamers trailed thick, right down to the grass, splashing the darkness everywhere with great spilt stars, pure white. In bosses of ivory and in large splashed stars the roses gleamed on the darkness of foliage and stems and grass. Paul and Miriam stood close together, silent, and watched. Point after point, the steady roses shone out to them, seeming to kindle something in their souls. The dusk came like smoke around, and still did not put out the roses.

Paul looked into Miriam’s eyes. She was pale and expectant with wonder, her lips were parted, and her dark eyes lay open to him. His look seemed to travel down into her. Her soul quivered. It was the communion she wanted. He turned aside, as if pained. He turned to the bush.

‘They seem as if they walk like butterflies, and shake themselves,’ he said.

¹⁵ ‘E.T.’ (Jessie Chambers), *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 28; Edna Wholey, ‘Ted and Crookhill’, Emory Mss 870, 1.1; Keith Sagar, *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar* (London: British Library, 2012)

She looked at her roses. They were white, some incurved and holy, others expanded in an ecstasy. The tree was dark as a shadow. She lifted her hand impulsively to the flowers, she went forward and touched them in worship.

‘Let us go,’ he said.

There was a cool scent of ivory roses, a white, virgin scent. Something made him feel anxious and imprisoned. The two walked in silence.¹⁶

This description is obviously steeped in Romanticism. The sense of correspondence, so that the roses almost seem to become stars as ‘point after point [they] shone out to them’ is highly Romantic, as is the insistent transference of language associated with Christianity – ‘communion, holy, worship, virgin’ – to the natural world (compare the ‘correspondent breeze’ in the opening of *The Prelude* and ‘The holy time is quiet as a nun’ in Wordsworth’s ‘It is a beauteous evening’ sonnet). The natural scene is portrayed as benign and nurturing – it ‘kindled something in their souls’ – yet there is a tension in the scene, whose meaning is not entirely explicit. The characters respond intensely to each other. For neither of them would the experience be the same if he or she was alone. Although the roses kindle something in the souls of both of them, Paul is troubled, and in the end he feels ‘anxious and imprisoned.’ In other words the Romantic vision is given to us in perspective, it is not offered as the overarching and authoritative meaning of the scene. The characters are deeply affected by their experience of the natural world but it does not carry ultimate authority. The vision that is presented to us is subject to interrogation. Hughes would probably have said of Lawrence what he said about Eliot, Joyce and Beckett that he was ‘portraying the state of belonging spiritually to the last phase of Christian civilization’.¹⁷ It could be argued, as David Troupes has persuasively done, that Hughes himself belongs to a still later stage rather than being, as he put it, one who does not ‘belong spiritually to the Christian civilization at all’.¹⁸ However, if we compare the Lawrence passage to what Steve Ely has called ‘the quintessential Crookhill poem’, the distance from Christianity is evident.¹⁹

It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast

¹⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (1913; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 195-96.

¹⁷ Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 205.

¹⁸ David Troupes, ‘Knowing the Bible Right Down to the Bone: Ted Hughes and Christianity’ in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford, eds., *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 64-80.

¹⁹ Ely, Ted Hughes’s South Yorkshire, p. 105.

But silently cast and fished
 With the hair frozen on my head
 For what might move, for what eye might move.
 The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods
 Frail on my ear against the dream
 Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed
 That rose slowly towards me, watching. (CP 85-6)

Whereas Paul and Miriam were 'kindled' by their imaginative response to the wild rose tree, Hughes's speaker is 'frozen'. Despite the mention of the monastery just before the lines I have quoted, language reminiscent of Christian sensibility and tradition is completely absent. In the Lawrence the distress is generated by the inter-subjectivity of the two people, the scene is merely its catalyst, whereas Hughes's pond is overtly menacing. This would be comic – 'Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old' has a hint of comic exaggeration – were it not for a spell which is cast entirely by Hughes's deployment of language: the pattern of repetition, alliteration, half-rhyme and assonance draws the reader into the atmosphere of tense quiet and stillness. And ultimately into the 'dream' – for, of course, what is really menacing, what really 'rose slowly towards me, watching' is something within the speaker, something akin to the demonic doppelgänger of 'The Gulkana' or even to Nicholas Lumb's double.

This undermining of consciousness by an encounter with an animal or other representative of the natural world is a signature of Hughes's poetry and something that marks it off not only from the Lawrence of *Sons and Lovers* but from the more obviously comparable poetry in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*.

A convenient starting-point is Lawrence's own poem about a pike, 'Fish':

A slim young pike, with smart fins
 And grey-striped suit, a young cub of a pike
 Slouching along away below, half out of sight,
 Like a lout on an obscure pavement...

Aha, there's somebody in the know!

But watching closer
 That motionless deadly motion,
 That unnatural barrel body, that long ghoul nose....
 I left off hailing him.

I had made a mistake, I didn't know him,
 This grey, monotonous soul in the water,
 This intense individual in shadow,
 Fish-alive.

I didn't know his God,
I didn't know his God.²⁰

The description of the fish, 'That motionless deadly motion,/ That unnatural barrel body, that long ghoul nose', could almost be Hughes, but the perspective from which it is viewed is very un-Hughesian. A key term in Lawrence's ethical and phenomenological vocabulary is 'otherness'. This is a principle that governs his writing about the relations between people:

But the triumph of love, which is the triumph of life and creation, does not lie in merging, mingling, in absolute identification of the lover with the beloved. It lies in the communion of beings, who, in the very perfection of communion, recognise and allow the mutual otherness. There is no desire to transgress the bounds of being. Each self remains utterly itself—becomes, indeed, most burningly and transcendently itself in the uttermost embrace or communion with the other.²¹

It is also an important principle in his writing about animal life, as in his comment on the early American writer de Crèvecoeur's account of putting chaff on the ground to prevent quails' feet from freezing to the earth:

The pure beauty of the sentiment here lies... in the deep, tender recognition of the life-reality of the *other*, the other creature which exists not in union with the immediate self, but in dark juxtaposition. It is the tenderness of blood-knowledge, knowledge in separation.²²

If this sounds a little sentimental, there is a remarkable example in the poem 'Man and Bat' of Lawrence acknowledging the otherness of a creature he finds loathsome:

He squatted there like something unclean.

No, he must not squat, nor hang, obscene, in my room!

Yet nothing on earth will give him courage to pass the sweet fire of day.

What then?

Hit him and kill him and throw him away?

Nay,

I didn't create him.

Let the God that created him be responsible for his death....

²⁰ Lawrence, *Poems* Vol.1, p. 292.

²¹ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 240.

²² Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, p. 199.

Only, in the bright day, I will not have this clot in my room.²³

The poem has at length evoked the movement and being of the bat, as well as the speaker's revulsion from it. He can neither kill the bat nor tolerate its presence in his room. So he picks it up, protecting his hand with a jacket, and shakes it out of the window, with the comment, 'the human soul is fated to wide-eyed responsibility/ In life.' When Hughes encounters a struggling American bat in '9 Willow Street', he acts on the same principle in a much more striking way: unable to pick the bat up by its shoulders he 'had to give it my finger./ Let the bite lock.' But this bat, though again vividly realised – 'A raving hyena, the size of a sparrow, Its whole face peeled in a snarl' – is an incidental actor in the poem: the encounter with the animal is secondary to and symbolically illustrative of 'The myth we had sleepwalked into: death' (CP 1089-90). One can't imagine Hughes, even after illustrating the principle so remarkably, writing, 'the human soul is fated to wide-eyed responsibility' in relation to a wild animal. It could also be argued, of course, that Hughes illustrates this principle in *Moortown Diary* poems such as 'February 17th' and 'Orf'. However, domesticated animals in Hughes's poetry rarely possess the same imaginative charge as wild creatures. By the very fact of being domesticated they do not carry the unsettling challenge from the natural world that is the hallmark of wild animals in his writing.

Admirers of Hughes would certainly claim that poems such as 'The Jaguar', 'The Hawk in the Rain' and 'An Otter' recognise 'the life-reality of the other' but the emphasis on separation, and ultimate unknowableness, that Lawrence's use of the term 'otherness' carries seems to me quite alien to Hughes. When he writes of the jaguar, 'there's no cage to him// More than to the visionary his cell:/ His stride is wildernesses of freedom' (CP 20), of the otter "Seeking/ Some world lost when first he dived, that he cannot come at since' (CP 79), not to mention the whole of 'Hawk Roosting', there is a sense of profound, at times envious identification. In some cases, such as 'The Jaguar', the life of the animal imaginatively fills a lack in human consciousness. In others, such as 'Pike', the goat in 'Meeting' that 'watched his blood's gleam with a ray/ Slow and cold and ferocious as a star', or the 'Ghost Crabs' that 'Press through our nothingness where we sprawl on our beds', the animal is a threat to the human subject (CP 36, 150). Its otherness is not 'separate' but in 'The Thought-Fox' 'something more near', in 'Pike' a 'darkness beneath night's darkness', within the self (CP 21, 86).

Lawrence's best-known poem, 'Snake', sets up a situation that perhaps most closely resembles that of Hughes's poems of confrontation with the animal other. 'A snake came to my water-trough': in its first line the poem establishes the invasion

²³ Lawrence, *Poems* Vol.1, p. 299.

of the speaker's domestic space by the animal, and implicitly the problematic of ownership and the rights of the domestic in relation to the wild: 'Someone was before me at my water-trough,/ And I, like a second-comer, waiting.' From the perspective of this poised acceptance Lawrence gives an entranced and entrancing mimetic account of the snake:

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the
edge of the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.²⁴

This poise is threatened by what Lawrence calls '[t]he voice of my education', telling him that the snake 'must be killed,/ For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous' and 'If you were a man/ You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.' The speaker stands irresolute between feeling honoured and afraid, allowing the snake to continue drinking from the trough, giving rise to more superbly mimetic description. It is not until it displays the less appealing aspect of its otherness by withdrawing into a 'horrid black hole' that he throws a log at it, an act that he immediately regrets:

I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education...
And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.

He is chastened and rebuked by the episode, but he is not fundamentally diminished by it: it is he himself who draws the moral, he who has given us the description of the snake that underpins the phrase, 'one of the lords/ Of life.' Above all his subjectivity is not threatened. He and the snake exist together in, as he put it, 'dark juxtaposition', 'knowledge in separation'.

Lawrence's act of throwing a log at the snake is echoed in 'The Rain Horse', when Hughes's nameless protagonist throws not just a log but several heavy stones at the menacing horse, and succeeds in injuring it. This story is the instance of closest correspondence with Lawrence – not so much with 'Snake' as with the episode from the last chapter of *The Rainbow* which it is hard to believe Hughes was not directly inspired by. Both episodes take place in fields familiar to the protagonists, close to their childhood homes; in both it is raining; in both the horses seem menacing and to be trying to cut Lawrence's Ursula and Hughes's young man

²⁴ Lawrence, *Poems* Vol.1, p. 303.

from escape; after the ordeal, both of them lie down in the rain, physically and emotionally exhausted.

Since the Lawrence episode occurs at the end of a long novel we naturally know far more about Ursula Brangwen than about Hughes's young man. In particular, we know that she has ended a long relationship, subsequently feared that she was pregnant and in panic written to her rejected lover, an army officer now serving in India, asking him to take her back. She is clearly in a state of false consciousness, sacrificing the free development of her soul for a secure social position. Her dream-like encounter with the horses (but not, being Lawrence, an actual dream!) clearly represents a rebuke or revolt against this state of false consciousness. After it she is ill, and on recovering from the illness feels once again free from her ex-lover. Conveniently it turns out that she is not pregnant after all – or perhaps, more likely, she has lost the baby as a result of her ordeal.²⁵

Hughes's young man is revisiting the place of his upbringing after an absence of twelve years which, we are told, 'had changed him'. He had hoped for 'some meaningful sensation' but feels only 'the dullness of feeling nothing' (*W* 45-6). His own false consciousness is more indirectly represented by his preoccupation with the state of his shoes and suit – presumably not the kind of clothing he would have worn on this walk in his youth. Whereas Ursula is threatened by a group of horses, and the menace seems quite real, the connection between the young man and the single black horse seems more uncanny. A notable difference between the two episodes is that, despite the obviously monitory nature of Ursula's experience, the narrative perspective is wholly committed to her consciousness, whereas there is in 'The Rain Horse' a hint of narrative distance from the protagonist, especially in the references to his preoccupation with the state of his clothes. At the end of 'The Rain Horse' the young man 'just sat staring at the ground, as if some important part had been cut out of his brain' (*W* 55). This contrasts strikingly with the regenerative effect of the ordeal on Ursula. His condition is such that his encounter with whatever powers the horse represents can only be destructive.

When in letters to Janos Csokits and Ben Sonnenberg Hughes explained the 'single adventure' of *Wodwo* as the refusal of a shamanic call, he described 'The Rain Horse' as 'the record of the importuning, & the refusal' (*LTH* 274). I'm sceptical about this attribution, which is clearly retrospective, since the story was written before the period (1961-2) to which the 'single adventure' refers. Even if we allow, as Hughes requires, for the 'prophetic' nature of the poems and stories in *Wodwo*, the protagonist's deadness to experience and alienation from nature don't suggest the 'shamanic temperament', as Hughes put it in the Eliade review, of those

²⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (1915; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 450-57.

who receive the 'call'. I said earlier that domestic animals do not carry the unsettling challenge from the natural world that wild creatures present in Hughes's writing. The fact that the young man is so spooked by a domesticated horse suggests how remote he is from any possibility of responding to that challenge.

'The Rain Horse' is a unique case of Hughes apparently being directly inspired by Lawrence. It is perhaps significant that both the texts in question are prose, a medium with which Hughes had a conflicted relationship. 'Her Husband' has a superficially Lawrentian appearance, but its portrayal of a boorish coal miner and his long-suffering wife is one-dimensional in comparison with the Morel family in *Sons and Lovers*, and besides is based, according to Steve Ely, on Hughes's observation of his Mexborough neighbours.²⁶ Lawrence was not, except incidentally, a serious influence on Hughes's poetry because his artistic temperament, and especially his approach to the otherness of the natural world, were very different from Hughes's.

Lawrence was however a highly respected *example* to Hughes. To return to the laudatory references I quoted at the beginning of my lecture, Lawrence had 'psychological depth on a major scale' and was free from 'the great plastic megaphone mask of English'. In both these respects Hughes considered him unique among English writers of the twentieth century. Lawrence's influence on what we normally think of as the counter-culture of the 1960s meant nothing to Hughes, but Hughes felt himself to be counter-cultural in a deeper sense. What he meant by 'the great plastic megaphone mask of English' is not entirely clear, but one thing he certainly felt about English was that, since the Restoration, it was infected by a class-based set of norms, masquerading as politeness and reasonableness, which are actually coercive and suppressive of true feeling. As a broad-brush example of what he might have meant, compare the following. The first is from a letter by Lawrence which might be interpreted as a comment on Eliot's embrace of 'classicism':

One has to be an absolute individual, separate as a seed fallen out of the pod.—Then a *volte face*, and a new start. Takes some risking—this classiosity is bunkum, but still more, *cowardice*.²⁷

The second is Eliot himself, responding to E.M. Forster who, on Lawrence's death, pronounced him 'the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation':

I am the last person to wish to disparage the genius of Lawrence, or to disapprove when a writer of the eminence of Mr Forster

²⁶ Ely, Ted Hughes's South Yorkshire, pp. 46-7.

²⁷ D.H. Lawrence, *Letters* Vol.4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 500.

speaks ‘straight out’. But the virtue of speaking straight out is somewhat diminished if what one speaks is not sense. And unless we know exactly what Mr Forster means by *greatest*, *imaginative*, and *novelist*, I submit that this judgement is meaningless.²⁸

This isn’t a question of whether one agrees with Lawrence or Eliot. One might agree with Eliot and disagree with Lawrence and still find the Lawrence refreshingly direct while the Eliot stinks of snide superiority. ‘I am the last person’, ‘somewhat diminished’ and ‘I submit’ are all examples of the veiled coerciveness I referred to, and of course class-based: it is impossible to imagine a working-class person writing like this. Eliot was American but in naturalising himself he learned some bad habits from the English.

Hughes’s admiration of Eliot was selective—rightly so. He gravitated, like all writers, to those aspects of his great predecessor that were of use to him. But late in life he might have felt that one aspect of Eliot’s influence was regrettable. After the publication of *Birthday Letters* he famously wrote to Keith Sagar that when poets such as Snodgrass, Lowell and Sexton dealt directly with autobiographical material ‘I despised it. In poetry, I believed, if the experience was to be dealt with creatively, it would have to emerge obliquely, through a symbol, inadvertently’ (*LTH* 719), but that now he felt ‘My high-minded principal [sic] was simply wrong’ (*LTH* 720).

I have argued elsewhere that Hughes’s account of his literary education should be approached with scepticism and that his early work, in particular, is strongly influenced by the norms of Cambridge English.²⁹ One of the key texts in this formation was Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, with its austere dicta, ‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality’ and ‘the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates’.³⁰ One could of course devote a whole essay to these statements, to the question what Eliot might have meant by ‘personality’, or whether his whole argument was a distraction, enabling him to deal with very personal material in *The Waste Land*. But I think there can be no doubt that ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ played a part in Hughes’s rejection of Confessional poetry and in his belief that experience should emerge ‘obliquely’. Imagine if the chief canonical text at the time of Hughes’s formation had been not *The Waste Land* but *Look! We Have Come Through!*, the book in which Lawrence wrote directly about the struggles of himself and Frieda to form a lasting

²⁸ T.S. Eliot, *Letters* Vol.5 (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), p. 130.

²⁹ Neil Roberts, ‘Ted Hughes and Cambridge’, *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, pp. 17-32.

³⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp. 21, 18.

relationship, or if the master-text of poetry criticism had been not ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ but Lawrence’s Preface to *New Poems* in which he wrote,

Much has been written about free verse. But all that can be said, first and last, is that free verse is, or should be direct utterance from the instant, whole man. It is the soul and the mind and body surging at once, nothing left out.³¹

One consequence, of course, might have been that Hughes would have been a less good poet. Lawrence represented a road not taken for Hughes. Lawrence was, for any writer of Hughes’s generation, a dangerous influence. As Larkin said of Yeats, his style is ‘pervasive as garlic’.³² But also, as I hope to have shown, there were significant differences between Hughes’s vision of nature and Lawrence’s. Lawrence’s importance for Hughes was on the level of cultural politics: as a predecessor in his constant though rarely explicit ‘guerrilla’ campaign against ‘the stereotype English voice’ and the attitudes that went with it.

³¹ Lawrence, *Poems* Vol.1, p. 647.

³² Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p.29.

Like Fury: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath at Cambridge

Heather Clark

On February 25, 1956, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes met at a raucous launch party for a new Cambridge literary magazine, *Saint Botolph's Review*. Plath's famous journal entry about the meeting gives a sense of the evening's atmospherics and posturings; sixty years later, its startling immediacy still resists paraphrase. Hughes was "big, dark, hunky," "the only one there huge enough for me." She quotes his poems; he poured her brandy—

and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off . . . and my favorite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face. His poem "I did it, I." Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunks of words; his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders. And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you.¹

The sensational nature of Plath and Hughes's first meeting, and the mythology it inspired, has obscured the broader literary context that brought them together. Plath and Hughes shared the same poetic heroes and possessed similar poetic instincts; as Plath's journal entry makes, their relationship was, from its first theatrical moments, soldered upon the work of D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats, and Dylan Thomas.² On the night they met, they were searching for a new idiom, eager to smash false poetic idols. For all their outward differences, they were, as a BBC commentator later suggested, "two of a kind."³ Their best poetry would be incantatory and unflinching; original, yet rooted in tradition; composed as much for the ear as the eye. In October 1962 the Irish painter Barrie Cooke wrote to Jack

¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 211-13.

² See Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) for a comprehensive overview of Plath and Hughes's literary partnership.

³ Owen Leeming, "Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership." Interview with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, BBC Third Programme, London, 18 January 1961; broadcast January 31 1961. (National Sound Archives, British Library.)

Sweeney about Ted Hughes's poems, "Such unbelievable making of words do physical things—the words seem to *be* the things."⁴ Cooke could have been speaking about Plath's *Ariel*. Plath and Hughes's shared poetic vision crystallized at Cambridge, and became the foundation of a literary partnership that helped shape the sound and sense of postwar poetry.

Before Sylvia Plath knew Ted Hughes, she knew his poems. She had read them in the November 1954 issue of *Chequer*, and in the short-lived *Saint Botolph's Review*—created by a group of Cambridge men tired of the pretentious coterie surrounding *Granta*, the university's oldest literary magazine.⁵ Plath was struck by Hughes's brazen voice, radically different from the well-wrought verse then fashionable in England and America. This poet wrote of seething jaguars and dark figures who obeyed the laws of nature, not man:

Then a flash of violent incredible action,
Then one man letting his brains gently to the gutter,
And one man bursting into the police station
Crying 'Let Justice be done. I did it, I.'⁶

By the time Plath read Hughes's "Law in the Country of Cats" in the 1956 *Saint Botolph's Review*, Hughes had graduated from Cambridge but was still a regular presence there. He famously camped out in a tent in the garden of the St Botolph's Rectory, where his American friend Lucas Myers bedded down in a former chicken coop. Most of Hughes's friends were outsiders who, like him, felt themselves apart from the British upper class. "The whole of Cambridge was regarded as a big joke," Hughes's close friend Daniel Huws recalled.⁷

These young men were tired of Cambridge's Victorian prohibitions, and tired, too, of the reigning literary sensibilities. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, an American student who became part of the St Botolph's group, recalled many conversations with Ted Hughes, Daniel Huws, and Lucas Myers about the "crabbed and moribund" Movement poetry, this "crop of lyrical pretenders," as Hughes and his

⁴ Barrie Cooke to Jack Sweeney, received 20 October 1962. Jack Sweeney Collection, LA52/69, University College Dublin Archives.

⁵ Hughes published "The Jaguar" and "The Casualty" in *Chequer*, November 1954, and "Fallgrief's Girl-Friends," "Whenever I am Got under my Gravestone" (later retitled "Soliloquy of a Misanthrope"), "If I Should Touch Her She Would Shriek and Weeping" (later retitled "Secretary"), and "When Two Men Meet for the First Time in All" (later retitled "Law in the Country of Cats") in *Saint Botolph's Review*. Christopher Levenson remembered that "*Granta* was at that time a glossy magazine of long standing that certainly published stories and poems but was mainly social and fashionable and catered to the 'smart' set at Kings and Trinity." E-mail to Heather Clark, 18 September 2017.

⁶ *Saint Botolph's Review*, 1956, p. 17.

⁷ Daniel Huws, "Conversation with Hughes's Contemporaries." Transcript of a recording made at the International Ted Hughes Conference, Pembroke College, Cambridge University, 17 September 2010. <http://ann.skea.com/CambridgeRecording.htm>.

friends thought them.⁸ They wanted their verse to encompass the exuberance of Dylan Thomas, the apocalyptic intensity of late Yeats, the passion of D. H. Lawrence, the ritualistic wisdom of Robert Graves. They felt English poetry had become too genteel – that it had been sanitized of the elemental, the primitive, the violent. As Hughes explained in early 1956 to his sister Olwyn, he wanted to write poems “quite different from the meanness and deadness of almost all modern English verse – with which I feel not the slightest affinity.” (*LTH* 34) Plath’s American friend at Cambridge, Jane Baltzell Kopp, was dating Bert at the time. The aspiring poets she knew in this group wanted to write “muscular, dynamic, explosive” verse; “Yeats came up a lot,” she said.⁹ The “Botolphians,” as Bert called them, felt slighted by *Granta* and *Chequer*, and solidified their plans for a new literary magazine on a trip to the East Anglian coast in January 1956.¹⁰ “In a freezing cottage belonging to David Ross’s parents,” Bert later wrote, “we ate fish and chips wrapped in newspaper, drank the local brew, and planned a new chapter in the history of English literature.”¹¹

Bert sold Sylvia Plath her copy of *Saint Botolph’s Review* on February 25, 1956, as he stood at the corner of King’s Parade and Silver Street. He had been selling the magazine all day while the other Botolph poets, “despisers of all such crass hustling,” retreated to the Anchor pub.¹² (He could hardly believe he had passed off 75 copies, “some to clergymen misled by the title.”¹³) Plath bought a copy for one shilling and six pence, and dashed back to Whitstead on her bicycle.

She was deeply struck by what she read that afternoon. Ted Hughes, Lucas Myers, Daniel Huws, Daniel Weissbort, and David Ross had written poems that resonated more deeply with her ideal creative vision than the neat, well-mannered verse she was then writing. *This* poetry was unadorned, consonantal, slightly savage. Compared to their “magnificent” verse, Plath wrote in her journal that afternoon, her own poems suddenly seemed full of “superficiality . . . glib, smug littleness.”¹⁴ Bert was “still shivering” in the cold February dusk outside the Anchor when she returned, flushed and pedaling “furiously” on her bicycle.¹⁵ She was full

⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Ted, Sylvia, and St. Botolph’s: A Cambridge Recollection,” *The Southern Review* 40: 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 352-368; p. 360.

⁹ Telephone interview with Heather Clark, 4 November 2015.

¹⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Neither Priest nor Poet: A Search for Vocation,” *Shapers of Southern History: Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. John B. Boles (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), pp. 62-90; p. 78.

¹¹ Wyatt-Brown, “Ted, Sylvia, and St. Botolph’s,” p. 361. David Ross’s father agreed to bankroll the project.

¹² Wyatt-Brown, “Neither Priest nor Poet,” p. 80.

¹³ Wyatt-Brown, “Ted, Sylvia, and St. Botolph’s,” p. 361.

¹⁴ *Journals*, p. 207.

¹⁵ Wyatt-Brown, “Neither Priest nor Poet,” p. 81.

of enthusiasm and curiosity about the St Botolph poets. Did he know Ted Hughes, author of “Fallgrief’s Girlfriends,” and E. Lucas Myers, who had written “Sestina of the Norse Seaman”?¹⁶ He did, and invited her to meet them herself at the magazine’s launch party that night.

The poems in *Saint Botolph’s Review* resonated so strongly with Plath partly because her own poetic instincts, as a girl and adolescent, had run in a similar direction. Her young mind seized upon the symbolic possibilities of raging storms, turbulent seas, craggy summits, Gothic moonscapes, and even war – forces that brought her closer to an unveiling, an edge. When, at 13, she heard Sibelius’s “Finlandia” in Boston’s Symphony Hall, she reveled in its stormy rhythms: “marvelous!” she wrote in her diary. “It sounded like waves pounding on the wet beach, tossing up mists of spray with the theme of lightning and thunder rising through the powerful melody.”¹⁷ “Finlandia” inspired her to write a poem, “Sea Symphony,” in which she described “The boom of the breakers on sharp, black rocks, / The scream of the gulls as they dip and soar” and the “pale green light / Of stormy, blustering afternoons.”¹⁸ Her juvenilia is full of such poems, as her 1946 poem titles suggest: “Rain,” “The Spring Parade,” “March,” “The Lake,” “The Wind,” “Mornings of Mist,” “A Winter Sunset,” “April,” “Dreams,” “Steely-Blue Craggs,” “May,” “October.” Landscapes appealed to the young Plath because they conveyed strong emotion within safe, impersonal parameters. In 1945, she wrote that the Gothic romance and moorland setting of *Jane Eyre* made her “estatically happy” [sic].¹⁹ Brontë’s novel moved her more than the drawing room dramas of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. “I enjoy it greatly,” she wrote in her 1946 diary. “Of course the artificial speeches they made in those days are rather boring.”²⁰

This subversive spirit manifested itself in other ways as Plath grew older. In high school, she began questioning national pieties. Although friends from the Cambridge years described Plath as exceedingly American, her relationship with America, as *The Bell Jar* suggests, was complicated. Plath’s high school English teacher, Wilbury Crockett, disdained consumer culture, and encouraged his students to excoriate middlebrow American values. “He believed,” recalled a former student,

¹⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Reuben Davis, Sylvia Plath, and Other American Writers,” *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis (New York: NYU Press, 1998), p. 458. Wyatt-Brown said “she was particularly struck” by these two poems when they spoke for the second time that day.

¹⁷ Sylvia Plath, Diary, 11 May 1946. Plath MSS II Box 7, f 2, Lilly Library, Indiana University (hereafter referred to as “Lilly”).

¹⁸ Sylvia Plath, 1940s poetry scrapbook. Plath MSS II Box 8, f 6, Lilly.

¹⁹ Sylvia Plath, Diary, 26 Jan. 1945. Plath MSS II Box 7, f 1, Lilly.

²⁰ Sylvia Plath, Diary, 13 June 1946. Plath MSS II Box 7, f 2, Lilly.

that American society, in its tail-finned post-war boom of success, was in danger of getting it all wrong. His strictures—on materialism, television, spectator sports, celebrities, conspicuous consumption, Miss America contests, fraternities and sororities, political platitudes, journalistic distortion, and deceptive advertising—were brought home intact by youngsters eager to twit to their parents and caused many an uproar around Wellesley dinner tables.²¹

Crockett was a Democrat, and his liberal sympathies made him a target in conservative, Republican Wellesley. During the McCarthy era, rumors swirled that he was a communist, and in 1952 he was asked to go before the Wellesley Town Board to discuss his political beliefs. (Crockett stated that he was not a communist but a pacifist, which satisfied the board.)

Crockett taught Plath for three years, and was a formative influence upon her creative writing and her politics. When she published her first poetry collection, *The Colossus*, in 1960, she sent him an inscribed copy that read, “To Mr. Crockett, in whose classroom and wisdom these poems have root.” Her skepticism toward the stifling norms of the Eisenhower years also took root in his class. In a 1949 English assignment for him, Plath wrote:

In our era of cellophane-wrapped food, of deep freezes and television sets, we may not only buy things, but we may also purchase ideas and ideals, neatly packaged and labeled according to their contents. . . . We are ready to slip into comfortable “conventional respectability” and accept the fashionable opinions. . . . We are skeptical about the value of our own thought.²²

Crockett’s voice was behind Plath’s when she complained to her German pen pal in 1950 about how “the inner world of our minds and souls is being invaded” by “crude” programs on radio and television that “hypnotize” and “numb our creative intelligence.” “I believe everyone must think for himself – and imagine for himself. Why live if we are just an echo and a reflection?”²³ A year later, Plath satirized American materialism in her uncollected 1951 poem, “I Am an American.” Channeling the voice of Esther Greenwood, she wrote of how all Americans were “created equal”:

All spewed like bright green dollar bills
From the same government press;
All baptized with Chanel Number Five

²¹ Harold Kolb, “Mr. Crockett,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 78. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 312-323; p. 321.

²² Sylvia Plath, 1949 untitled assignment for English 21 (10th grade). Plath MSS II, Box 10, f 1, Lilly.

²³ Sylvia Plath to Hans Neupert, 2 January 1950. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1: 1940-1956*, eds. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), pp. 159-60. Hereafter referred to as “LSP1”; references will appear in the text.

In the name of the Bendix, the Buick, and the Batting Average.²⁴

Here and elsewhere, Plath uncannily anticipates Ted Hughes's contempt for American midcentury culture, which he would describe in his letters from Massachusetts as similarly "cellophane-wrapped."

Plath's poetry veered in a different direction by her sophomore year at Smith College, where she encountered more pressure to conform to mainstream American values and white, upper-middle-class codes of femininity. Most of the poems Plath wrote for her Smith professor Alfred Fisher in 1955 would comprise her first poetry manuscript, "Circus in Three Rings." Many of these poems, as Plath later admitted in a 1962 interview, were "desperately Audenesque."²⁵ Consider her poem "Advice for an Artificer," full of New Critical wordplay and aural effects:

Shall we spell summer with tricks of rhetoric
till thoughts like purpling plums grow grandly rich
and glut the feigning brain, that tinkering quack
who bungling squats under skyblue skull to patch
kettles of conjecture, poetic pots . . .?²⁶

Such poems revealed few hints of her late period's spare grandeur. As Plath's benefactress Olive Prouty wrote in a 1955 letter to Plath's mother Aurelia, "I am often puzzled by her underlying meaning. Many of her poems are to me like abstract paintings – bright, vivid, colorful." But Prouty did not know "what the lovely words and rhythmic sounds are saying."²⁷

Plath sensed that her work had an artificial, almost stilted quality; she wrote in her journal of trying to break out of her "glass caul."²⁸ In her 1950-51 Smith College art class notes, she wrote, "To hell with description – to hell with long adjectival phrases, elaborate metaphors and ornate similes – life, dirt, grime, love, sun, mud, leaves, rain – get them brightly, sharply, in short dynamic phrases."²⁹ She took aim at gentility in her unpublished 1953 short story "Dialogue." There, the main character, based on Plath, scorns the "distractions" that people use to numb themselves from the "agony of free will" – religion, movies, television, dreams.³⁰ She refuses to "numb" her pain or use "euphemisms." She says, "Why not use the good vile words. Damn. Dung. Hell. God, they sound great. Scrawl them on the sidewalks and fences and shock the ladies and the gentlemen." Plath's poem, "A

²⁴ Plath MSS II, Box 7a, f 12.

²⁵ Sylvia Plath, interview with Peter Orr, 1962, in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1966).

²⁶ Box 7a, f 7, Plath MSS II, Lilly.

²⁷ Olive Higgins Prouty to Aurelia Plath, 28 Dec. 1955. Plath MSS II, Box 5, Lilly.

²⁸ *Journals*, p. 470.

²⁹ Sylvia Plath, Art 13 "Manzi notebook." Plath MSS II, Box 11, Lilly.

³⁰ Plath MSS II, Box 9, f 11.

Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem,” written at Smith, shows her longing to free herself from elaborate artifice and structure:

I’m through with this grand looking-glass hotel
where adjectives play croquet with flamingo nouns;³¹

but it would be some time before Plath was able to “vanish” “alone to that authentic island where / cabbages are cabbages; kings: kings.”

By the time Plath arrived at Cambridge, then, in 1955, she had moved away from the nature poems of her youth and mastered the New Critical tricks on full display in “Circus in Three Rings.” Yet she still had the instincts of a Romantic poet. She felt something was missing from her own verse, and that the St Botolph poets had found it. Even if her poems now seemed, in comparison to theirs, full of “glib, smug littleness,” she reminded herself in her journal that this diminutive tendency was “not me. Not wholly.”³² She singled out Lucas Myers’s poems for praise, calling them “tight and packed and supple and blazing.”³³ (She would later say the same of Hughes.) This was how she wanted to write: “until I make something tight and riding over the limits of sweet sestinas and sonnets . . . they can ignore me.” Sweet sestinas were the provenance of lady poets, a label Plath wanted to avoid at all costs. Reading Hughes’s and Myers’s poems in *Saint Botolph’s Review* was a moment of reawakening, a return to the swaggering poetic instincts of her adolescence. She knew that if she wanted to be taken seriously at Cambridge, she would have to abandon her poetry’s well-wrought decorum and “ride over the limits.”

She was right. While Plath greeted the Botolphians’ poems with excitement and astonishment, they responded derisively to hers. Plath’s poem “Three Caryatids Without a Portico,” full of phrases like “regal grace” and “Greek serenity,” embodied the precious, chaste aesthetic they disdained.³⁴ They laughed when they read it in the Winter 1956 issue of *Chequer*. “Being males typical of that day,” Bert Wyatt-Brown later wrote, “we deplored her efforts as trivial and immature. After all, what women could ever write lasting poetry? How hopelessly misguided and wrong we were.”³⁵ Lucas Myers remembered that Hughes stayed silent during the discussion, though Hughes later recreated the scene in his poem “Caryatids (2)”:

We had heard
Of the dance of your blond veils, your flaring gestures,
Your misfit self-display. More to reach you
Than to reproach you [. . .]

³¹ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 324.

³² *Journals*, p. 207.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³⁴ *Chequer* 9 (Winter 1956), 3.

³⁵ Wyatt-Brown, “Neither Priest nor Poet,” p. 79.

we concocted
An attack, a dismemberment, laughing. (CP 1047)

Daniel Huws famously singled out Plath's work in a review of *Chequer* No. 9 in *Broadsheet*, published on February 1, 1956. "Of the quaint and eclectic artfulness of Sylvia Plath's two poems," Huws wrote, "my better half tells me 'Fraud, fraud'; but I will not say so; who am I to know how beautiful she may be."³⁶

Plath was used to literary sexism, but not public humiliation. She had been celebrated for her writing at Smith, where she was famous for publishing in national magazines. But her American accolades held little currency with the Botolphians who, Bert remembered, "grumbled ceaselessly how she was demeaning the poetic profession by publishing in the *New Yorker*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Mademoiselle*, and other middle-brow and popular outlets."³⁷ Christopher Levenson, who Plath dated before she met Hughes, remembered, "She *appeared* very self-assured and glamorous . . . but almost too clever, too sophisticated in our eyes."³⁸ Plath wrote to her mother on February 2, the day after Daniel Huws's review appeared, "they abhor polished wit and neat forms, which of course is exactly what I purpose to write, and when they criticize something for being 'quaintly artful' or 'merely amusing' it is all I can do not to shout: 'that's all I meant it to be!'" (LSP1 1096) Yet Plath came to believe Daniel Huws was right. In her journal she wrote, "The clever reviewer and writer who is an ally of the generous creative opposing forces, cries with deadly precision: 'Fraud, fraud.'"³⁹ On February 25, a few hours before the *Saint Botolph's Review* launch party, she disavowed her earlier poems to her mother: "what I have done so far seems so small, smug and little." (LSP1 196) Rattled by the *Saint Botolph* poems and suddenly full of self-doubt, Plath was a disciple in search of a master the night she met Ted Hughes.

The Botolphians were in a similar state of confusion. They felt "rejected" by *Granta* and, despite their bombast, they doubted their ability to open up a "new era" in literature. Bert remembered, "Our desperation was acute – each of us with a different source of anguish." A spirit of "intense disillusion," even "near violence," haunted them, he said, a postwar "fear that we were not up to the mark of our older, veteran brothers." The launch party, he thought, was a manifestation of this anxiety. "The birth of the *Review* should have inspired a bright festival of song and dance,"

³⁶ *Broadsheet*, 1 February, 1956. I am grateful to Daniel Huws for sending me a copy of the original. The issue was edited by David Ross and Daniel Weissbort. Huws pointed out that Ted Hughes had excoriated the previous issue of *Chequer* in the 8 June 1955 issue of *Broadsheet* under the pseudonym "Jonathan Dyce."

³⁷ Wyatt-Brown, "Neither Priest nor Poet," p. 79.

³⁸ E-mail to Heather Clark, 18 Sept. 2017.

³⁹ *Journals*, p. 196.

he wrote. “Instead, it became a sinister affair, far out of control.”⁴⁰ By night’s end several Victorian-era stained-glass windows were smashed and at least one argument about poetry came to fisticuffs. Later that year one of the Botolphians tried to smash a wine bottle over Philip Hobsbaum’s head during a *delta* party. Luckily Hughes intervened and stopped the attack before anyone was hurt.⁴¹

The *Saint Botolph’s* party was the wildest Plath had ever attended, and, as Bert recalled, her “fervor immeasurably intensified the Dionysian air.”⁴² Ted Hughes was a welcome distraction from Plath’s heartbreak over Richard Sassoon, her deepening depression – she had been to see a psychiatrist that morning – and her creative crisis. She became “obsessed” with him almost immediately.⁴³ “Ted Hughes – mad passionate abandon,” she wrote in her calendar on February 25, 1956. Hughes was similarly struck by the tall, vivacious American whose eyes he later called “a crush of diamonds.” (*CP* 1052) Critics have argued that Plath’s first poetic breakthrough occurred at Yaddo in 1959 when she wrote the Roethkean “Poem for a Birthday” sequence. Yet the swerve away from gentility first occurred at Cambridge with “Pursuit,” a love poem for Ted Hughes full of strong rhythms and blood lust. Plath wrote it the day after she met Hughes; he thought the poem “rather bad.” (*LTH* 78)

Plath and Hughes would marry less than four months later on Bloomsday, June 16, 1956. Although Plath would bear most of the domestic burden, the marriage was progressive in other ways. Hughes wrote to his brother Gerald in September 1956, “As a result of her influence I have written continually and every day better since I met her. She is a very fine critic of my work, and abuses just those parts of it that I daren’t confess to myself are unworthy.” (*LTH*, 46-7) Hughes believed in Plath’s genius at a time when most male writers and editors did not take women poets – especially married mothers – seriously. When Elizabeth Compton Sigmund, a Devon neighbor, came round for tea in 1962 and asked, “Does Sylvia write poetry, too?” Hughes responded, “No, she is a poet.”⁴⁴ Plath knew she was breaking new ground in her own creative marriage as a writer rather than a muse. In her journal she wrote, “there are no rules for this kind of wifeliness – I must make them up as I go along and will do so.”⁴⁵

Plath and Hughes decided to keep their marriage secret and live apart – he in Yorkshire, she in Cambridge – until she finished her degree. She feared the

⁴⁰ Wyatt-Brown, “Neither Priest nor Poet,” p. 81.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴³ Sylvia Plath, 1955-56 Calendar. Plath MSS II, Box 7, f 6, Lilly.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Sigmund, “Sylvia in Devon: 1962,” *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, ed. Edward Butscher (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1977), p. 102.

⁴⁵ *Journals*, p. 412.

Fulbright Committee would rescind her fellowship if the truth came out. The decision was agonizing for the couple, but a boon for literary history. For between October 1 and 22, 1956, Plath and Hughes wrote each other daily love letters full of encouragement, literary criticism, philosophical reflections, loneliness, sexual innuendo, and optimism. These are the letters of young revolutionaries plotting to overthrow the established order. Plath felt the *London Magazine* and *The New Yorker* were within their sights. “They’ll be begging for us yet,” she wrote Hughes on 1 October 1956 (*LSP1*, 1256). Four days later she ridiculed the typical *New Yorker* poem – “no blood and guts, just goldenrod and wistful crayfish” (*LSP1* 1276) – but she longed for publication in the magazine. Hughes had not yet published in a British magazine, but Plath felt sure he was on the brink of fame. On 6 October she told him not to tear up his television plays or “go black” if his poems didn’t find a home. “THEY WILL.” (*LSP1* 1279) She advised taking advantage of any opportunity, even if unpaid: “we are new, green yet, in their tremulous eyes . . . forget about the money, for god’s sake.” With her “incorrigible american [sic] weather-eye cocked for windfalls,” she sniffed out contests in the *Observer* and *The Atlantic* and on 20 October nagged Hughes to enter: “I have a project for you to work on this year, for the next 5 or 6 months, and I want you to give it all you’ve got.” (*LSP1* 1316) She fantasized about fans and TV producers “flocking to the dock in hundreds” when they sailed into New York harbor. She was only half-joking. She suggested they find New York agents that summer, for they would soon need “movie rights, TV rights.” (*LSP1* 1279)

Plath had reason to be optimistic, for on 1 October she learned that *Poetry* had bought six of her poems. Christopher Levenson, editor of *delta*, had told her that she wouldn’t “sell much of such poetry,” and she was thrilled to prove him wrong. “So there is a god afterall [sic]; and it isn’t, praise be, Stephen Spender,” she wrote Hughes that day. She told him the *Poetry* acceptance was “the consecration of my new writing, which, properly, began with you and ‘Pursuit’.” (*LSP1* 1257) Hughes congratulated her without jealousy:

Joy, Joy as the hyena cried. Now you are set. I never read six poems of anyone all together in Poetry. It means the wonderful thing. It will spellbind every Editor in America. It will also be a standing bottomless battery to charge that you write from now on, because you are almost certain to sell nearly everything you write now. Joy, Joy. (*LTH* 56)

He predicted she would win the Borestone Prize and become famous, but worried that her success would make her “open to every knave’s nice manners and charming conversation while I sit here and stare at the skyline like an old stone.” (*LTH* 67) Plath told her mother that she had only scorn “for those that are drinking and

calling themselves ‘writers’ at parties,” when they “should be home writing and writing; everyday, one has to earn the name of ‘writer’ over again, with much wrestling.” (*LSP1* 1261)

Alone in Cambridge, Plath tried her best to settle into what on 3 October she called “this queer ascetic way of life.” (*LSP1* 1267) She spent much of her time walking in Grantchester Meadows, drawing birds and cows. She wrote Hughes,

It gives me such a sense of peace to draw; more than prayer, walks, anything. . . . It is as if, by concentrating on the ‘inscape’, as Hopkins says, of leaf and plant and animal, I can know the world in a new and special way; and make up my own version of it. (*LSP1* 1286)

She avoided her Newnham peers, especially the other Americans, of whom she had seen enough by 18 October to think “extrovert, surface, blithering.” (*LSP1* 1308) She told Hughes she felt sick without him; she wept; she couldn’t eat; she had terrifying nightmares about tribal ceremonies and purifying rituals. “I think if anything ever happened to you, I would really kill myself,” she wrote him on October 9. “I shall never leave your side a day in my life after the exams.” (*LSP1* 1291) Before bed each night, she told him on October 10, she knelt by the window and threw all her “force and love” toward Hughes’s “bed in Yorkshire. . . . I can’t believe anybody ever loved like this; nobody will again.” (*LSP1* 1298)

Plath lived chastely, but it was during this time that she committed herself to a poetry of the body. On 3 October she called herself:

a female lyricist who sings the glory of love and joins herself with the green sprouted world instead of going pseudo-male intellectual Platonist . . . We shall be living proof that great writing comes from a pure, faithful, joyous creative bed. . . . I love you like fury. (*LSP1* 1268)

She found Augustine and St. Paul’s stance against the body – “flesh means sin” – “intolerable.” “The blind leap” of Christianity appalled her, and she called God “hideously conceited . . . a rat.” (*LSP1* 1273) But she was enjoying herself. “God how these writings stimulate my thinking,” (*LSP1* 1274) she wrote Hughes on 5 October. She quoted “blessed Yeats” in defense of her new “strong blood-faith” and invoked Chaucer’s Wife of Bath as her model: “Bless the strong loving body.” (*LSP1* 1280) Hughes exhorted her to maintain her skepticism about academia in general and Christian authors in particular, and advised her to read Blake as “antidote” to Augustine – “all your Christian philosopher trash, and it is trash, all completely crooked... They make me foolishly angry, so righteous and vicious and at bottom selfish, at bottom stupid and timid. The whole pack are contemptible.” (*LTH* 64)

The entire church, he felt, was “the perch of avarice, greed, cruelty, and tyranny.” They were forging an aesthetic philosophy in the crucible of love.

Hughes spent his days in listless tedium, lying in bed for hours, distracted with longing for Plath. “The way I miss you is stupid,” he wrote on 3 October. “I have wandered about today like somebody with a half-completed brain-operation.” Without her, he felt “amputated,” like he had lost a “vital interior organ.” “I sit around in a daze of shock.” (*LTH* 1956). He walked the moors, reading Yeats aloud and watching the tumultuous weather that would mark some of his best poems. One evening, he was stopped by a policeman as he walked toward Hebden Bridge. “They checked me over as if I were some wild man,” Hughes wrote Plath. They had been searching for a criminal, and Hughes looked the type. “The fact is, I’m unrecognizable and look like a strange beast unless you’re with me.” (*LTH* 58) Two young girls had run away screaming when they saw him approach. Plath wrote back on 6 October: “Darling, you’re the wildest loveliest piece of flesh walking. If little girls scream, it is only in a kind of Bacchic ecstasy; the police are just jealous and want to convict such exceptional Samsonian excellence.” (*LSP1* 1280)

After a week alone at Cambridge, Plath too felt the same sense of “abnormality”: “I feel, in my singular passions and furies, that I become a gargoyle, and that people will point.” (*LSP1* 1285) But the separation was good for their writing, and they sent each other their new work. Plath sensed the benefits, if not the drawbacks, of her creative marriage:

someday, I will be a rather damn good woman writer. . . . If I live ‘in-myself’ this way, all the quirks and queer musings in my head can bear fruit, without being blurred and blunted by constant prosaic contacts with exterior people; this year will set me deeper than ever in the dark secret well of my own fancies, dreams and visions; living with you will save me from being suffocated with no outlet (*LSP1* 1298)

She criticized Hughes’s poems insightfully and confidently. “How about another word for ‘hideous’? I’d like better something that showed the eyes hideous, as in the fine ‘Snake’s twisted eye.’” (*LSP1* 1280) “I don’t think ‘horrible void’ is the best you can do; I’m eternally suspicious of editorializing with horribles, terribles, awfuls and hideouses; make the void horrible; let your reader have the sweet joy of exclaiming” ‘ah! Horrible!’” (*LSP1* 1281) She praised his lines that were “athletic,” musical, and psychologically arresting, and encouraged him to attack her own poems “brutally.” (*LSP1* 1282)

He liked her lines that were “firm, discreet, passionate . . . not tortoiséd in imagery.” (*LTH* 65) He was wooing her away from the elaborate rhyme and syntax she had mastered at Smith, and asking her to join him in a less genteel aesthetic

endeavor. He knew she was capable of less imitative verse, and he wanted her to find her own voice:

If you write whatever attracts you, and you write it as hard as you can, and as rich, then you can't miss, and a pox on your imitators who will be the new breed of outnumbering gnats. Just write it off, in your own way, and make it stand up off the page and jump about the room. (*LTH* 66)

He advised her to dispense with unnecessary adjectives (“fierce flaring,” he wrote, should be changed to “flaring”), and he encouraged her to move beyond “smooth manners”: “Everything goes perfectly here until ‘Pierced side’ . . . Something like ‘Open’ would give a much rawer more vulnerable terrible sense.” (*LTH* 69-70) He questioned phrases like “watery radiance” and “verdant” as too “vague” and “18th century.”⁴⁶ Her lines should be, above all, “vivid.” (*LTH* 69) Hughes exhorted her to read poetry aloud while walking back and forth in her room timed to “the metre” of her steps, if she did not think such advice “too ridiculous.” (*LTH* 51) He promised to keep working on television plots, and told her to get three solid hours of thinking in a day – one hour for “remembering,” another hour for “discovering plots and themes,” and a last hour thinking about something that interested her, “some part of a theme.” She should “think straight to the thing” without any “mental intervention” while she was composing, and keep her mind open to “the demon, the poem dictator.” (*LTH* 52-3) On October 22 he assured her that her poems were “masterly,” but his praise underscored his generation’s biases: “Your verse never goes soft like other women’s.” (*LTH* 82) Christopher Levenson recalled that Plath and Hughes indeed kept their distance from the more established literary cliques: “as far as I could tell both Sylvia and Ted were sui generis, not part of the scene except for the one Ted created for himself with the single issue of *St Botolph’s Review*.”⁴⁷

Plath worried about the “death of an inner life” – “that obsesses you,” Hughes wrote.⁴⁸ She was reading about schizophrenia and “manic-depressive geniuses” like Beethoven, Dickens, and Tolstoy in her *Abnormal Psychology* book (*LSP1* 1288) and told him she was “sure insanity is the most necessary state for a fine artist.” (*LSP1* 1314) Hughes responded that Keats, Chaucer and Shakespeare were all “delicately mad,” and that “going nuts” meant “your thoughts have autonomous life.”⁴⁹ Plath never mentioned her own history with suicide in her love letters to Hughes, though she was writing about suicide in her stories. In “The Wishing

⁴⁶ Ted Hughes to Sylvia Plath, 23 October 1956. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

⁴⁷ E-mail to Heather Clark, 18 Sept. 2017.

⁴⁸ Ted Hughes to Sylvia Plath, 22 Oct. 1956. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

⁴⁹ Ted Hughes to Sylvia Plath, 22 Oct. 1956. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

Box," a woman loses her power to dream in the face of her husband's superior imagination and eventually kills herself. Plath began "The Wishing Box" during their summer honeymoon in Benidorm and finished it on October 7 in Cambridge. Like her poem "The Other Two," also written in Benidorm, it was a strange honeymoon piece. Plath told Hughes she thought the story "rather good." (*LSP1* 1288) Hughes too thought it excellent material: "This is the kind of poetic theme you could make exclusively your own ground."⁵⁰ Yet the story contained hidden anxieties about the emerging rivalry within the marriage.⁵¹ Plath apologized to Hughes for "plagiarizing" his "magnificent" dreams. "Are you angry? It's actually a very humorous terrible little story." (*LSP1* 1292) She admitted that Agnes, "poor thing, is certainly an aspect of one of my selves now," and vowed to drink only one glass of sherry a day so as not to become like her "dreamless woman." (*LSP1* 1294) Plath was at this time also writing "The Invisible Man," since lost, about a young man named Oswald McQuail who becomes invisible at the height of his college career. That story, too, featured a suicide. She sent it to Hughes, who offered his own tentative advice about how her character should commit suicide.

By late October, 1956, Plath could no longer stand the separation. She told her mother she had gotten up her courage to reveal the marriage when she read through the Fulbright roster and seen three married women. But Jane Baltzell Kopp remembered that the Whitstead House Mother, Isabel Abbott, saw a letter addressed to "Mrs. Sylvia Hughes" and "ratted her out."⁵² Indeed, Plath wrote to Hughes that something had come to her "Née Plath" from the passport office, and she worried Miss Abbott had seen it.

On October 23, Plath sent Hughes a "desperate telegram" asking him to come to Cambridge.⁵³ When he did not answer, she sent another. Hughes finally responded by telegram: "Dangerous to ring letter following."⁵⁴ He thought the Newnham porters would eavesdrop. Finally, he called and told her not to worry – he would come up to Cambridge to "work it all out." (*LTH* 85) He too had decided that their separation "seems mad." (*LTH* 83) He hesitated – her Fulbright money would be confiscated or at least halved, he worried – but he was hopeful. They decided to face the consequences of a public announcement. "DAY OF TRAUMA, DECISION & JOY," Plath wrote in her calendar on October 23: "release . . . Ted's coming like a miracle—inarticulate—decision to make marriage public & live

⁵⁰ Ted Hughes to Sylvia Plath, 10 Oct. 1956. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

⁵¹ Tracy Brain has pointed out that the story is indebted to Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" in *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Essex: Pearson, 2001), p. 145.

⁵² Telephone interview with Heather Clark, 4 November 2015.

⁵³ Sylvia Plath, October 1956 calendar. Plath MSS II, Box 7, f 6, Lilly.

⁵⁴ Ted Hughes to Sylvia Plath, 23 October 1956. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

together.”⁵⁵ She revealed the secret to her supervisor Dr. Krook, who told her not to worry about giving up her scholarship. She was correct: the Fulbright officials chided her for worrying, and joked that the marriage was a boon for Anglo-American relations. The Newnham dons were more irritated, but they eventually invited Plath and Hughes out for a celebratory sherry. Plath realized she should not have been so worried, yet “the ingrained English maxim that a woman cannot cook and think at the same time had me dubious enough.”⁵⁶ She told Aurelia to make an announcement about their engagement in the *Wellesley Townsman*, and instructed her to send out engraved invitations to a “gala party” in June (*LSP1* 1328). Hughes moved, unofficially, into Plath’s Whitstead room, where he hung his Beethoven death mask above her map of Boston. By December 1956, the couple had decamped to the ground floor flat at 55 Eltisley Avenue, a short walk from Newnham and Grantchester Meadows.

In late February 1957, Hughes and Plath learned *The Hawk in the Rain* had won the Harper’s/YMHA First Book contest, thanks in part to Plath’s efforts as Hughes’s agent. That spring, Plath and Hughes’s poems began appearing together in the Oxford-Cambridge magazine *Gemini*. In March, an editor from *Granta*, which Plath described as the “Cambridge ‘New Yorker’, ” stopped by 55 Eltisley Avenue and “humbly” asked both for poems over Plath’s orange chiffon pie. Plath told Aurelia, “our fame has spread around Cambridge . . . we do love to appear together.” She rightly noted that influential editors in London read the Oxbridge literary magazines and that Hughes, whom she described as “modest,” “should publish everywhere he can.”⁵⁷ Plath knew Hughes was on the brink of fame.

Looking back, Hughes acknowledged the marriage’s crucial collaboration: “If SP and I managed to get through it all, it was because for crucial years we defended each other, we were a sufficient world to each other: our poetic folie à deux saved us from being isolated, surrounded and eliminated.” (*LTH* 627) Hughes picked up on aesthetic instincts Plath already possessed, and encouraged her to “ride over the limits.”⁵⁸ Plath would not be mocked again for neatness and grace; encouraged by Hughes, she cultivated a harder, more direct style in her poems. “Our main programme was her writing,” Hughes wrote to Aurelia Plath in 1975. “That was absolutely the dominant theme – it was our big invalid. She thought as I did that mine could look after itself.”⁵⁹ Plath soon absorbed Hughes’s contempt for

⁵⁵ Sylvia Plath, October 1956 calendar. Plath MSS II, Box 7, f 6, Lilly.

⁵⁶ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, 13 November 1956. *Letters Home* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976; 1999), 285.

⁵⁷ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, 7 Mar. 1957. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

⁵⁸ Journals, p.208.

⁵⁹ Ted Hughes to Aurelia Plath, 12 Jan. 1975. Box 5, f 18, MS 644, Stuart Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

“modern English verse” and left behind, as Al Alvarez wrote, “the Parnassian high style of Wallace Stevens, polished, marmoreal, referring only to itself.”⁶⁰ By 1957 Plath would write to her mother about the

cheap, flat ‘new movement poetry,’ which never commits itself, but talks about and about: the meanings are dull, often superficial ‘top-of-the-head’ philosophizing, and there is no music, no sense picturing. It is hogwash; not even that good.⁶¹

In a sense, Hughes gave Plath permission to abandon poetic gentility, just as Robert Lowell would in 1959, and Al Alvarez would in 1962.

While Plath and Hughes admired poets from the Movement and the New Criticism such as Philip Larkin and John Crowe Ransom, they sought bracing intensity. Plath bristled when Marianne Moore, on the of the Harper’s contest judges, suggested Hughes cut “Bawdry Embraced” and “The Drowned Woman” (which both contained the word “whore”) from his book. Plath used the occasion to portray herself and Hughes as a united front against literary gentility:

We feel, strongly, that to cut these two out would be to silence a large part of Ted’s voice: which is raised against the snide, sneaking, coy weekend-review poets whose sex is in their head, & the prissy abstract poets who don’t dare to talk about love in anything but mile-distant abstractions. It is Dylan Thomas, but with a faith & deep religious morality which is also Lawrence (both misunderstood by many blind people).⁶²

Both felt that *The Hawk in the Rain* would change the direction of British poetry. “We want logic, but not without blood feeling; music without vague emotion. . . . They think they can ignore us in their magazines, because we are too disturbing. In a year, the whole picture will be changed,” Plath wrote Aurelia in March 1957. “Ted’s book will put their eyes out.”⁶³ Indeed, when Plath and Hughes stepped off the *Queen Elizabeth* in New York City in June 1957, they found a telegram on the ship’s message board from T. S. Eliot with the news that *The Hawk in the Rain* had been chosen as a quarterly selection by the Poetry Book Society.⁶⁴ A friend who met the couple at the pier, Robert Bagg, remembered Plath telling him in the taxi uptown that Eliot’s telegram confirmed what she had known all along – that Hughes was the greatest poet of his generation.⁶⁵ (Robert, for his part, was struck that day by

⁶⁰ Al Alvarez, *Risky Business: People, Pastimes, Poker and Books* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 216.

⁶¹ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, 18 March 1957. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

⁶² Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, 15 March 1957. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

⁶³ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, 18 March 1957. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly.

⁶⁴ E-mail, Robert Bagg to Heather Clark, 28 April 2017.

⁶⁵ E-mail to Heather Clark, 28 April 2017. Robert Bagg was a friend of Russ Moro’s, an American Amherst graduate who had known Hughes at Cambridge. Moro, Bagg, Ellie Friedman Klein and

Hughes’s “spondaic detonation” of “charged verbs.”⁶⁶) Eliot’s news thrilled Hughes too. He wrote to his parents, “It means my book will ... challenge everything being written in England.”⁶⁷ When Plath published her own first collection, *The Colossus*, in 1960, Hughes bought her champagne and the *Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence* – a reaffirmation of the bold, shared aesthetic that underlay their marriage vows.

In 1962, Al Alvarez published *The New Poetry*, an anthology that would become, as Edward Lucie-Smith wrote, “the bible of a new generation of poetry-readers.”⁶⁸ In the anthology’s introduction, “Against Gentility,” Alvarez argued that poetry must bear witness to the Bomb, the Holocaust, mental illness, and other horrors. *The New Poetry*, which contained more poems by Hughes than any other poet, secured Hughes’s reputation and deeply influenced Plath, who appeared in later editions.⁶⁹ To Philip Hobsbaum, founder of the London Group and Hughes’s Cambridge contemporary, it seemed “that the future of poetry in Britain was dependent on Hughes’s work being established as the true model for the age.”⁷⁰ The new era in English poetry the Botolphians had imagined in 1956 seemed, improbably, to have arrived.

But by autumn 1962, Plath and Hughes’s marriage was over. Still, even after the union dissolved, neither poet would abandon the aesthetic vision that had first brought them together at Cambridge. On the day Plath wrote “Daddy,” October 12, 1962, she wrote to her brother of Hughes, “The one thing I retain is love for & admiration of his writing. I know he is a genius, and for a genius there are no bonds & no bounds.”⁷¹ Though Hughes sometimes dismissed Plath’s fiction, he never doubted that she had the talent and drive to become one of the greatest poets of her generation. As he later told Drue Heinz:

Once I got to know her and read her poems, I saw straight off that she was a genius of some kind. Quite suddenly we were completely committed to each other and to each other’s writing . . . I see now

Lynne Lawner met Plath and Hughes at the pier and then headed to the Upper East Side for dinner at Moro’s family home.

⁶⁶ E-mail to Heather Clark, 28 Apr. 2017.

⁶⁷ Ted Hughes to Edith and William Hughes, 29 June 1957. Box 1, f 16, MSS 980, Stuart Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁶⁸ Edward Lucie-Smith. *The Burnt Child* (Southampton: Camelot Press, 1975), p. 175. Seamus Heaney has spoken of his admiration for the anthology in *Stepping Stones*.

⁶⁹ In autumn 1962 Plath mentioned the anthology to Peter Orr during her “The Poet Speaks” interview, and praised it to Alvarez. In 1964, Linda Gates, Al Alvarez’s American girlfriend, asked him why he had left Plath out of the first edition. “He grumbled . . . he couldn’t answer me. Women weren’t taken seriously,” she said. Telephone interview with Heather Clark, 13 December 2016.

⁷⁰ Peter Porter, “Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: A Bystander’s Recollections,” *Best Australian Essays 2001*, ed. Peter Craven (Melbourne: Black, Inc. 2001), pp. 396-412; pp. 398-99.

⁷¹ Sylvia Plath to Warren Plath and Maggie Plath, 12 October 1962. Plath MSS II, Box 6a, Lilly.

that when we met, my writing, like hers, left its old path and started to circle and search.”⁷²

Though the marriage did not last, its legacy still reverberates in the cadences of postwar fiction and poetry. *The Colossus*, *The Bell Jar*, *Ariel*, *The Hawk in the Rain*, and *Lupercal*—five of the most important works of the postwar period—were all written, more or less, during the years of Plath and Hughes’s marriage. Plath’s confidence in their future had been prescient, after all. As she told Hughes on 6 October 1956, “Darling, be scrupulous and date your letters. When we are old and spent, they will come asking for our letters; and we will have them dove-tailable.” (*LSP1* 1281)

⁷² “Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry, LXXI” (interview with Drue Heinz), *The Paris Review* 134 (1995): pp. 54-94; p. 77.

Irishwards: Ted Hughes, Freedom and Flow

Mark Wormald

The span of Ted Hughes's extraordinary relationship with Ireland informs three letters he wrote in 1992. On 19 October he told Oona and Terence McCaughey, his friend since Cambridge, of a recent journey he and Nick had made, their first for several years, into the West. The trip had brought relief from 'suffocating England', and 'freedom from the English psycho-social control system': 'Ireland has inner space – which England almost wholly lacks' (*LTH* 615). He was 'mightily relieved to see how little things had changed – in some ways, things are better. At least around Lough Arrow, in Sligo they are' -- since his previous visits, fishing for pike and trout in 1979, 1982 and 1984. Here, with their old friend Barrie Cooke, they found inner space, literally, by crawling, as Cooke made sure I did when I visited him in 2012, into a megalithic passage tomb at Carrowkeel, older than the pyramids. Hughes described this as 'Very good.' (*LTH* 615) Two days later he told Seamus Heaney he 'sat inside for about an hour, completely happy'.¹ And 'Barrie's place's is an absolute joy. Maybe that house is founded on a stray chunk of the Dagda's cauldron, right there up on the battlefield.'

The house to which Barrie Cooke had recently moved lies below a ridge to the North-East of Arrow where, according to early medieval Irish texts, the second battle of Moytura had taken place centuries before, between the Tuatha De Danann, the race of gods and heroes who prevailed in Ireland until their own displacement by the Gaels a hundred years before Christ, and the Formorians, who most scholars think are versions of the Vikings, northern raiders with their own gods and monsters.² And it was this recognition of this place's great propitious history, and its coincidence with his own, that had felt like an improvement. As he told the McCaugheys: 'I'd never realized before that the apocalyptic congress of the Dagda',

¹ Ted Hughes to Seamus Heaney, 21 October 1992, Seamus Heaney papers, Emory University, MSS 960 Box 40 folder 16.

² For an excellent recent re-telling of selected tales, see Philip Freeman, *Celtic Mythology: Tales of Gods, Goddesses and Heroes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For a more comprehensive discussion of the texts and their assimilation into Irish literary and popular culture, see Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

the great god of fertility and farming, whose inexhaustible cauldron is one of the four objects the Tuatha brought with them to Ireland, and who also sired Yeats's wandering Aengus' – 'and the Morrighu', shapeshifting goddess of war, 'took place astride the Unshin – a little river (flows out of Lough Arrow) I dearly love' (*LTH* 615). All this ensured, he told Heaney, that 'my old longing to live out there came back up like a lump in the throat that had all the makings – for a wild two or three days – of a new life crawling up out of my old husk'.³

In June 2017 I walked the Moytura ridge, across the Lough from Carrowkeel. And since that walk I have discovered what Hughes meant by this 'apocalyptic congress', and it isn't battle, and it took place not on the ridge but on the river. I'll be returning to this conjunction later; it's both foundation and bridgehead for what I want to argue later.

Two months after Hughes's journey to County Sligo, and all its sense of new possibilities, a series of inquiries from the French student Anne-Lorraine Bujon prompted him to describe a much earlier 'apocalyptic congress' in his personal history. This was the 'jolt' that his encounter with Yeats via the *The Wanderings of Oisín* in Mexborough Grammar School's library delivered to a teenager whose discovery, at thirteen, of 'a small group of folktales in a Children's Encyclopaedia that I was borrowing from my parents' shop (*LTH* 624) had left uniquely receptive to Yeats' verse. The encyclopaedia in question was likely to have been the latest of many editions of Arthur Mee's *The Children's Encyclopedia*; like its predecessors, this published in parts (and distributed through newsagents like Hughes's father's in Mexborough) and then in volumes throughout the 1940s. And amongst its collection of the 'The Great Stories of the World that Will be Told Forever,' which formed the third section of each of the Encyclopedia's sixty-two 'chapters', and thus always immediately preceded 'Animal Life', were nine from old Ireland. A version of 'Oisín's Return from Fairyland', looks across the page, in chapter 43, at 'Fishes of the Deep Sea'.⁴

Such juxtapositions are fortuitously fertile. Almost half a century later, Hughes told Bujon: 'It so happened, my particular craze, in folklore and mythology, was the Irish (very rich, as you know)' (*LTH* 625). Most teen crazes don't make their way into the British library. But reading the A4 lined exercise book which, in his teenage years, Hughes began filling with rich gouts of narrative and folk wisdom, reveals the fecundity, intensity and range of his enthusiasm. Yvonne Reddick has noted that this exercise book includes a reference to a gruagach, which was one of

³ Seamus Heaney papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library (MARBL) Emory University MSS 960 Box 40 folder 16.

⁴ Arthur Mee, ed., *The Children's Encyclopedia* (edition n.d., but dated to 1940s by the Librarian of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge) vol viii. pp.5526-7.

the creatures, a shapeshifting faery visitant, the salmon he hooked and lost in ‘A Milesian encounter on the Sligachan’ in August 1981 might just have been.⁵ But much more striking is how early in this notebook, after two pages of Scottish material, the young Hughes’ focus shifts West, and this Scots Gaelic material is exchanged for its source. It becomes ‘IRISH’, as a headline puts it, and remains Irish for twenty more pages.

First he sets his bearings, with the four talismans of night: the Lia Fail, or the roaring stone now on the Hill of Tara in County Meath – Lugh’s spear, Lugh being the God of light; the sword, and the Dagda’s cauldron. No wonder the Dagda’s presence beside the Arrow reassured him.

When the Gruagach strikes again, it’s not as Scots fairy but in a place – the land of the loughs – associated with Viking raids on Ireland in the ninth and tenth century: ‘At Lachlan live the Fomors – Griuagachs’ blood spurts fire’.⁶

And there are many more of these facts: wonderful short fables, noted in compressed urgency; and instructions for a strange kind of living: what would John Wholey and Ted’s other teenage friends at Mexborough Grammar have made of this?

Cut, not with metal, an oval strip of skin from a sheep’s breast killed on Xmas or New Year, set it a-smoulder and pass it round sun-wise.
Woe betide the holder when it goes out.
Spit in the yawn of a child to save it.
If a warrior drinks the milk of a fairy woman he is invulnerable.⁷

Once the **exerc**ise book becomes an **exorc**ise book, with a chant to save him “from every brownie and banshee, from every evil wish and sorry, every nymph and water wraith’. But if all else fails, ‘Stale urine kept out fairies’.⁸ It was, of course, too late. Fairies were already at home in Hughes’s young head.

Yeats, and his version of *The Wanderings of Oisín*, transformed things. These notes and versions of myth are all in prose; *Oisín* contributed metre. As Hughes told Bujon, it combined ‘an Irish myth and my very special verse metre all in one.’ (*LTH* 625) As he searched for more ‘folklore made into poems’, his intoxication became consuming: ‘I was swallowed alive by Yeats’. Already convinced that ‘the animal kingdom, the undisrupted paradise of the natural world and the worlds of mythology and folklore all hung together in a wonderful single thing’, as they had in Mee’s *Children’s Encyclopedia*, Yeats became ‘my model for

⁵ Yvonne Reddick, ‘Throttle College? Ted Hughes’s Cambridge Poetry’, *Cambridge Quarterly* 44.3 (2015), pp.213-232.

⁶ Ted Hughes papers British Library Add MS 88918.9.12.

⁷ Loc.cit.

⁸ Loc.cit.

how the whole thing could be given poetic expression'. He learned Yeats by heart, and more than heart; *Oisín* itself 'gave me some of the most brilliant dreams I've ever had' and also immediately made his own writing jump 'a whole notch in sophistication'.

That taste for the richness of Irish myth and folklore, as well as with Yeats, survived his teens. At Cambridge, Terence McCaughey inspired a lifelong love of Irish ballads. The fables continued to fill that notebook. And in America, he met Jack Sweeney, the Irish lecturer in English literature who ran the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard, where Hughes read from *The Hawk in the Rain*. In 1962 he would thank Jack Sweeney for his gift of Dunn's translation of the epic 'The Cattle-raid of Cualgne', describing it as 'the prize item of my small library of essential literature – mainly mythology' (*LTH* 195).

So there was always more to Ireland than Yeats. He told Lucas Myers in 1959 that he had come to know Yeats 'too well. Something inflexible about him that disagrees with me at present' (*LTH* 145). As Robert Jocelyn makes clear, he had begun to explore his own Irish ancestry, in and beyond 'Crag Jack's Apostasy'.⁹ And he had first visited in 1951, driving his Uncle Walt on a tour that included County Limerick.¹⁰

But of all these early influences, Jack Sweeney was to prove the most pivotal in Hughes's developing relationship with Ireland. He didn't just add to his library. Sweeney also engineered the single most important if the least celebrated of Hughes' Irish friendships. Sweeney recorded Hughes and Plath reading their verse in June 1958, then he sent the Hughes recording to someone who he knew would appreciate it – someone who Sweeney knew had with strikingly similar passions, including fishing, the creaturely, and an interest in violence.

Barrie Cooke had come to Harvard to read zoology but switched to art history, graduating in 1953. A year later, failing to find his English roots, he had ridden a motorbike across Ireland in search of the country's best fishing. At Kilnaboy on the southeast of the Burren, in County Clare, and on the banks of the river Fergus, he met Michael Kelleher, village schoolteacher and a passionate fisherman and wildfowler. He's one of the subjects of Cooke's earliest portrait: 'Two Fowlers' (1954).¹¹

Kelleher found Cooke a cottage overlooking the river Fergus at Kilnaboy, across a field from the ruined 11th century church. Now the cottage is itself an ivy-shrouded ruin, the abode, truly, of the Green Man, and was always primitive, but

⁹ Robert Jocelyn, 'Tracing Ted Hughes', *THSJ* VI.1. pp. 28-34.

¹⁰ BL Add MS 88918.122.2

¹¹ Barrie Cooke, *Portraits* (Kilkenny: Butler Gallery, 2009), n.p.

Cooke continued to live in Kilnaboy for the next four years, in very basic conditions, often fishing and shooting for the pot, and immersing himself in the world of water and bogs and stone.

After Sweeney's introduction in 1958, Cooke, who had by then committed himself to a career as an artist, and who was to become one of Ireland's leading expressionists, wrote to Hughes; they first met in 1960 on Hughes's return to London from America. In his very brief memoir for *The Epic Poise*, 'With Ted Hughes', Cooke recalled a conversation at Bill and Dido Merwin's flat, where Ted and Sylvia were staying, but also a memorable visit to London zoo, the latter confirming Sweeney's sense that the two men shared a fascination with violence as well as with nature.¹² Thereafter they kept, slightly competitively, in touch: Barrie Cooke's account of his visits to Dublin Zoo, where he saw tigers mating, makes it into the piece he wrote for *The Epic Poise*, 'With Ted Hughes'. But he doesn't mention there what he tells Jack Sweeney, that after mating the female always turns on the male.¹³ Later letters to Sweeney reveal, first, that Hughes trumped him by watching lions mate at London zoo, and then provides an update. 'Ted writes by the way that he got urinated upon by a lion in the London zoo last month which I think is in nice character – let's see how Faber and Faber can write that up in their next blurb.'¹⁴

But it was Hughes's first return visit to Cooke, in September 1962, that was to convert their deep affinity, their shared empathy, as hunters and artists, for the natural world, into the possibilities that visual and literary art, image and text, might launch a joint raid on particular deep patterns of water and stone, spirit and flesh. In *The Epic Poise* Cooke describes how the two friends went up onto the Burren, and 'lay on our backs hidden in slots of rock watching the wild geese fly off Slieve na Maun for their watering ground'.¹⁵ 'Hidden in slots of rock': that physical immersion in the landscape would open a circuit the passage tomb at Carrowkeel would complete thirty years later. And when I visited Cooke at his home above Lough Arrow in 2012, half a century after that evening, he told me that story. It still moved him, and he moved me: I'll never forget the strange urgent voice with which he made the *wah wah wah* of the geese as they came into land from their watering ground. Ever since I've been determined to find it, and until May 2017 was baffled: the mountain Cooke mentions in his account as their geese's watering ground, Slieve na Maun, is a mountain in Co Tipperary, a long way South of the Burren, in

¹² Barrie Cooke, 'With Ted Hughes', in Nick Gammage, ed., *The Epic Poise* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp.214-5.

¹³ Cooke to Sweeney, n.d. Jack and Maire Sweeney papers UCD archive LA 52 / 69.

¹⁴ Cooke to Sweeney, 9.12.1960, Jack and Maire Sweeney papers UCD archive LA 52 / 69.

¹⁵ Cooke, 'With Ted Hughes', p. 214.

County Clare. So it made me wonder whether Barrie's memory of these geese was his flight of fancy. Did this place exist?

Now, if the significance of that visit to Kilnaboy and the Burren has been overlooked, one reason why is the drama it overlapped with. Hughes and Sylvia Plath's trip to Ireland in September 1962 contained their last days as a cohabiting couple. They stayed in Cleggan, Connemara, with the Irish poet Richard Murphy, whom they had first met in London the year before. Murphy's brief memoir of their visit, written at the request of Olywn Hughes and revised at Ted's, appeared as an appendix in Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* (1986). A separation was imminent, and Plath was looking for space to write. She clearly fell in love with Connemara's wild Atlantic coastline, agreeing to rent a local cottage after Murphy had declined Plath's offer to rent his own house, with him in it.

I can understand why he said no. It was after an evening in which Plath had provocatively rubbed her leg against Murphy's under the table. Hughes's sudden departure, which Plath reported the next day, apparently to go fishing for salmon and trout with Barrie Cooke, compounded Murphy's disquiet. When he asked Plath to leave, she exploded in fury.

The biographers of Assia Wevill, Koren and Negev, have assumed that 'going fishing' was a fig leaf to cover an unfaithful husband's flight, an adulterous tryst. Murphy himself was more startled by an episode earlier in the week, which indicates how far Hughes had travelled in the years since being 'swallowed alive' by Yeats. Murphy took his guests to two sites of pilgrimage for admirers of Yeats. Hughes attempted to leave his mark on both. A fence surrounding a tree at Coole Park stopped him adding his initials to Yeats', but he and Plath did scrimp a hundredweight of apples from a tree in Yeats' overgrown orchard at Thoor Ballylee. Hughes justified this by saying, 'When you come to a place like this you have to violate it'.¹⁶ When Murphy subsequently recorded this in the memoir he sent Anne Stevenson in August 1987, Olwyn read it to Hughes, who persuaded him to modify a statement that they both knew feminist defenders of Plath would seize on.¹⁷ In the version published in *Bitter Fame*, Murphy duly registered Hughes's suggestion, in the phone call Hughes made to persuade him to think again, that these stolen apples 'were not mere cookers but

The golden apples of the sun,
The silver apples of the moon.¹⁸

¹⁶ Richard Murphy to Anne Stevenson, 4.8.1987, Anne Stevenson papers, Cambridge University Library MS Add 9451 box 10.

¹⁷ Richard Murphy, *The Kick: A Life Among Writers* (London: Granta Books, 2002), pp. 223, 230.

¹⁸ Richard Murphy, 'A Memoir of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on a Visit to the West of Ireland in 1962', in Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 349-50.

Only someone who knew Yeats backwards, or was used to finding inner space within him, could have used those lines to gild that theft, that violation. They come from the end ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’, Yeats’s poem about a young hero who had gone fishing ‘Because a fire was in my head’, and caught a ‘silver trout’, only for the fish to change shape in characteristic mythic fashion and become a ‘glimmering girl’ who at once fled into the West.¹⁹ A lifetime later, Wandering Aengus has yet to find her or ‘pluck’ those imagined fruit. You might think of this as an act of self-reclamation by Hughes, in the mid-1980s – that he was evoking days when, as I’ve said, some have wondered whether the fish he was going to bring to net and bed was Assia. Is this the song of wandering Ted?

As it happens, though, it isn’t, and Korev and Negev are wrong. That September in Clare he had a very different, and much much older, woman in mind. We will meet her shortly.

*

Given the aftermath of that week in September 1962, it is remarkable that Ireland ever became more than the country of romanticized loss for Hughes. But it did, and Richard Murphy’s own role in this was clear, and practically enabling. Hughes had early admired the pattern of his life in Connemara – summers spent taking tourists sea fishing in his 30 foot Galway hooker, winters writing. Murphy’s kindness after Plath’s death deepened the two men’s friendship. In November 1965 Murphy found Hughes Doonreagan Lodge to rent, at Cashel, Connemara, where Hughes hoped he, Assia Wevill and the three children, would find freedom from what Hughes described as ‘this rotten English civilisation’ (*LTH* 250); they spent six weeks at Doonreagan, which he called ‘sumptuous’ (*LTH* 256). At the end of April 1966 they moved much closer to Murphy at Cleggan, where they spent most of May. There he found time and space for himself, continuing the habits of good work he had set going at Doonreagan – ‘I’m able to work all day long, and at last I am getting something done’, he wrote in March 1966; Cleggan Farm was ‘a mild paradise for me’, with ‘a great ramshackle roomful of silence to work in’ (*LTH* 256). He took Frieda and Nicholas fishing at Lough Aughrisburg, three miles beyond Cleggan, and through its glassy surface let them feel the trout he hooked, ‘to stir the dormant passion for the art’ (*LTH* 257). He caught a three and a half pounder, the largest trout he’d seen alive.

¹⁹ Edward Larrissy, ed., *W.B.Yeats: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 29-30.

Hughes's writing prospered too. He began work on 'Skylarks', and turned his series of radio broadcasts 'Listening and Writing' into *Poetry in the Making*, adding a local reference in his 'Writing about Landscape', where he compared the landscapes people hang on their livingroom walls to 'an extra window into some desolate stretch of Connemara' (*PM* 75) and including Murphy's 'Sailing to an Island' by way of rather more fulsome tribute to his friend (*PM* 83-6). This access of energy and inspiration blended old material and new: and the same is true for another creature working in him, out of the past, into the present. In January 1967 he told Murphy that he had 'got writing some new things – very plain ballad fables' which are 'the various Songs, bed-time stories, parables + visions of The Crow' (*LTH* 267); as Hughes knew, in *The White Goddess* Graves had in the figure of Bran established a distinctively Celtic, and originally Irish, root for this figure.²⁰

In 1968 Hughes was one of the cast in a recorded reading of Murphy's long historical poem *The Battle of Aughrim (1691)*, first broadcast then released by Claddagh records. He read 'Rapparees', one of the poems about the mercenaries, recruited from Britain and France, who helped lead to Irish defeat. It is, I think, Murphy's tribute to his reader's own work, to a fascination with the margins of water and land that Hughes had explored most vividly in 'Wodwo'.

Out of the earth, out of the air, out of the water
 And slinking nearer the fire, in groups they gather:
 Once he looked like a bird, but now a beggar.
 [.....]
 The water is still. A rock or the nose of an otter
 Jars the surface. Whistle of rushes of bird?
 It steers to the bank, it lands as a pikeman armed.²¹

For his part, Hughes's praise for Murphy's 'gift of epic objectivity' featured prominently on Claddagh's record sleeve; privately, he told Murphy in October 1969, "'The Battle' was a great thing to have done, for your relationship with modern Ireland' (*LTH* 295).

That remark, of course, acknowledges the start of the civil rights movement and mounting sectarian violence in the North. And it demonstrates Hughes's sympathy for a writer who would find it hard to remain true to his craft and renegotiate his relationship to place as the politics of his literary and cultural landscape shifted around him. Murphy had just bought High Island, just off the coast, and Hughes's enthusiasm for his friend's cultivation of this wild and ancient miniature kingdom, which he regarded as the apotheosis of Murphy's imagination,

²⁰ Robert Graves, ed. Grevel Lindop, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011) pp. 44-5.

²¹ Richard Murphy, *The Pleasure Ground: Poems 1952-2012* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), p. 83.

helped Murphy produce the poems in *High Island* (1974), not least in the exercises Hughes set him to write about the place (*LTH* 314) in 1971. But the wild mountains and waters of Connemara left their marks on Hughes's own poetry too.

'A Violet at Lough Aughrisburg' (1986) is the easiest to spot. The poem sets the flower's 'rinsed globe of light' against a backdrop of fierce mineral and spiritual as well as elemental struggle, the product of 'the opened furnace of the West' (*CP* 708-9). But this place went much deeper into Hughes's imagination, and by the time 'A Violet' appeared in *Flowers and Insects* in 1986 it was really only a postscript to the much more striking appearance that Lough Aughrisburg had made, unnamed, in his work. A return trip in 1971 to camp beside and fish at Aughrisburg also inspired a dream in which, Hughes told Ekbert Faas, he met himself fishing;²² that becomes, with unnerving directness, one of the most unsettling episodes in *Gaudete* (1977), as changeling Lumb is suddenly miles from the Southern English village of most of the book's action, and instead

sees a fish rise
Off the point of the long broken finger of boulders
Which pokes out into the lake, from the island. [...]

The tops of the blue pyramid mountains, in the afterlight
Tangle with ragged ragged, stilled, pink-lit clouds
That hang above themselves in the lake's stillness. (*G* 77-8)

It's where neither otter nor mercenary, but Lumb's terrifying naked double emerges. Not even the obsessed fisherman can ignore the figure as it menaces Felicity.

Looking for that island, that finger of rock, and that island on Lough Aughrisbeg, in June 2017, I encountered a local woman called Annie Corcoran who told me about the cottage overlooking the lough that Sylvia was going to rent. She'd met her, she said. Rather more certainly, I think, *Gaudete's* epilogue is itself set on that stretch of coastline – 'a straggly sparse village on the West Coast of Ireland, on a morning in May – a morning of gust and dazzle' (*G* 173). But for all this vivid and glorious scenery, Murphy's influence on Hughes was still comparatively incidental, enabling and confirming rather than formative.

The same goes for Hughes's friendship with Seamus Heaney, though for different reasons, and however important it was in its own right.²³ Heaney's discovery of *Lupercal* in November 1962, five years before he first met its author,

²² Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), p.124.

²³ For a stimulating account of their relationship, see Henry Hart, 'Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney: a complex friendship', in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford, eds, *Ted Hughes: from Cambridge to Collected* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 145-159.

had proved such a powerful influence on his own early writing that Anthony Thwaite had, in reviewing *Door into the Dark* in 1969, called him one of ‘the Tribe of Ted’.²⁴ That smarted. As eldest son of a Catholic farmer, Heaney had his own reasons to look deep, from the late 1960s, into the ‘Bogland’ of his own upbringing and find richness in the history its peat offered to his present; even if, for instance in the Great Irish Elk, it had surfaced in Hughes first, in ‘The Great Migration’ (1966). In later years, admiring Heaney’s own gift for oblique political and personal reflection in his continued poetic recourse to Irish and Danish bogs, Hughes carefully avoided treading on his friend’s patch. Take his comments on ‘the Oxford opportunity’ in October 1989, on Heaney’s election to the Oxford Professorship of Poetry: ‘Has there ever been a successful advocate, in England, for Ireland’s side of all the cases?... The thought of what you might be able to do, as the voice of Irishness, gives me a shock of real excitement.’ (*LTH* 565) Hughes took real pleasure, too, in Heaney’s use of the shape-shifting mix of nature and culture in a range of old Irish texts, from his own appropriation of the mad Irish king turned bird-man in *Sweeney Astray* (1983), to *The Midnight Verdict* (1994), Heaney’s version of the eighteenth century Clare poet Brian Merriman’s ribald dream vision of a man exposed in all his inadequacy before a court of frank women. Merriman’s book had, Hughes told Heaney, been ‘a cult object for a few friends and me at University’ (*LTH* 660).

But for all this friendship’s common ground, it could never supplant the insights and experiences Hughes had begun to access five years before he met Seamus Heaney. Here we need to return to that first visit to their mutual friend Barrie Cooke in County Clare in September 1962. Hughes never wrote publicly about this visit, but he certainly wrote out of it. It lent a very different and creaturely, sensual and predatory dimension to the historical and religious dimensions of his response to Ireland.

Since their meeting in London, Cooke had been painting pictures of salmon. They had been singled out for praise by critics, and I saw why in June 2017, when his youngest daughter Aoine showed me one of them, ‘Salmon in a Weir’, their flanks rushing upwards against, but also a part of, the brushstrokes of the falling water. That March and April, 1962, Cooke had also had his first solo gallery exhibition in Dublin. At its heart were his ‘Sheela-na-gigs’, contemporary responses to the early medieval fertility symbol of a woman with splayed legs and fingering her own genitalia found as disturbingly graphic stone carvings in a number of medieval Irish and Welsh churches.

²⁴ Quoted in Hart, *op.cit.*, p.154.

One early and rough-faced example looks south from Kilnaboy's ruined eleventh century church towards a bend on the upper reaches of the River Fergus. Cooke came to call this the Kilnaboy Venus. Another sits in a wall inside Bunratty Castle, close to the house outside Quin, fifteen miles from Kilnaboy, where Barrie had moved in 1958 with his American wife Harriet Leviter. Unpublished letters written by Cooke and Hughes which I read in Ireland in June 2017 confirm Hughes spent a single night with Cooke's family at Quin on his own solitary flight from Cleggan in September 1962, after he met Cooke on the Burren and before fishing on the Mulkear River to the south in County Limerick.

The catalogue of Cooke's breakthrough solo exhibition in March-April 1962 confirms that he exhibited four of his own Sheela-na-Gigs -- two oil paintings and two hybrids, three-dimensional works in plaster and terra cotta and paint. This was conservative Catholic Dublin. And it was a year before the *Lady Chatterley* trial. Cooke's Sheela-na-Gigs were hugely provocative, but they meant a great deal to him. Only one of them sold at the time.²⁵ Another, advertised in 1962 at £18, it in fact only sold in 2017, at an exhibition at the Oliver Sears Gallery in Dublin – for almost a hundred times as much.

But Cooke's letters to Jack Sweeney also reveal very frankly how they energized him, at a time when the birth of his two daughters had threatened to distract him. He researched them thoroughly, aided by photographs of plaster casts made and kept in the cellars of the National Museum of Ireland, 'away from the umbrellas of irate clergymen'. He sensed their power to disturb.

'They are extraordinary things. Deadly, cruel, leering but terribly potent little ladies. They'd scratch the skin off your back (if I may be so crude.)'²⁶

Hughes responded to them at once. He had long been convinced by Graves's account of the cultural and spiritual power of the white Goddess, and so understood the power of the juxtaposition of the Kilnaboy Sheela, the limestone of the Burren, the river Fergus and Cooke's contemporary versions 'without need for explanation', as Cooke wrote to Jack Sweeney the month after his visit.²⁷ It's the most extraordinary account of Hughes' work and personality that I have ever read, and I will return to it shortly.

Once you know where to look, there is evidence of Hughes's recognition of and susceptibility to Cooke's complete dedication to fishing, fertility, and the art it spawned, in the published selections of his letters we have in Christopher Reid's

²⁵ *Barrie Cooke*, Ritchie Hendriks Gallery, 3 St Stephen's Green, March - April 1962, in the Jack and Maire McNeill Sweeney papers UCD LA52/59.

²⁶ Cooke to Sweeney, 9.12.1960, in UCD archive LA52/59.

²⁷ Cooke to Sweeney: Sweeney indicates receipt on 20 October 1962. UCD Sweeney papers LA 52/59.

tantalizing edition. And this sign predates his return to Connemara. In November 1965 Hughes told Gerald that Ireland met his aim ‘to live where the life flows unself-consciously in people and with lots of freedom’, and where ‘fishing & shooting is in the dead centre of the visual field’ (*LTH* 250): both these comments fit Cooke’s life and art much more than Richard Murphy’s.

Fertility and flow fed Hughes’ dreamlife too. The night before they travelled to Ireland, he was showered with salmon eggs and milt high up the River Taw; as he told Nicholas in 1998, Hughes retained a total confidence in this self-confirming, self-fulfilling circuit of dream and its consequence:

What it meant – as turned out to be true – was that going to Ireland broke me out of that arid sterile alienation from myself [...], and with a single stride plunged me right into the productive, fruitful thick of my best chances. (*LTH* 710)

And Ireland was to remain a prospect, a resort, a refuge, for him. In that October 1969 letter to Murphy about his relationship with ‘modern Ireland’ Hughes volunteered: ‘I’m still thinking of another place in Ireland. I need another pole – not Devon, or London, out of England.’ (*LTH* 295) At the time he meant County Mayo or County Galway, between the two great limestone trout loughs Corrib and Mask. But that ‘still’ is worth noting. It invokes a visit he’d paid earlier that year. He’d told Aurelia Plath he was going to explore the possibility of sending the children to ‘a famous Quaker school in the south, recommended to me by friends who are professors at Trinity College Dublin’ (*LTH* 291) – Oona and Terence McGaughey.

But proof of exactly where he went comes in another moving letter from Barrie Cooke to his mentor Jack Sweeney. This is in April 1969. Cooke was by then living in County Kilkenny, a huge Georgian house called The Island on, and much prone to flooding by, the river Nore at Thomastown. Hughes arrived unannounced, while Cooke was packing a consignment of paintings. For hours they worked together, quietly, again no need for or seeking explanation. Only then did Hughes tell him that Assia and Shura had died the month before. And then the two men, Hughes ‘trying to grow a skin over it’, as Cooke said, did what they did, and what Hughes did with Nick when they needed to be truly together, in loss and beyond loss. Barrie wrote, an hour after Ted had left, to go and see the headmaster of that same Newtown School in Waterford, ‘We fished all day’.²⁸

Hughes never moved to Ireland permanently, though it remained a possibility that came closest to realization in the early 1970s, when Cooke made strenuous efforts to find Hughes and Heaney homes near Thomastown. Murphy

²⁸ Cooke to Sweeney 25.4.1969, UCD Sweeney papers LA 52/59.

advised on Ireland's advantageous tax regime.²⁹ By then Cooke had himself moved two miles upstream to Jerpoint, where he and his partner the Dutch potter Sonja Landweer would help launch the Kilkenny Arts Week.³⁰ This smaller community would have been an extraordinary thing, of course -- but I suspect that the wives of the poets may each have had a role in checking their husbands. Barrie Cooke was a man whose dedication to his art and his fishing was sometimes at the expense of his family. Nevertheless, there is much more to be said and written about the triangular friendship between three great artists, before and after the early 1970s, and I hope to take forward this research in due course.

But for now I want to emphasise this. The elemental, ancient but flowing Ireland of freedom to which Barrie Cooke introduced him and in which he immersed him, retained its seminal influence in Hughes' work. One way of measuring this is in the reappearance, fifteen years after he first saw those specimens, of that figure of the Sheela-na-Gig. *Gaudete*, first conceived in 1962, but published in 1977, remains strikingly faithful to that early source of disturbingly sexualized energy: changeling Lumb has 'an archaic stone carving' (G 110) above his bedroom mantelpiece, as Cooke did in his house above Lough Arrow, and 'the simply hacked-out face of a woman / Gazes back at Lumb', as at the startled reader, with a power as primitive as her

Her square-cut, primitive fingers, beneath her buttocks
Are pulling herself wide open –

An entrance, an exit.
An arched target centre.
A mystery offering
Into which Lumb is lowering his drowse (G 110).

It's central to Lumb's 'magical apparatus' (G 135) and his 'new religion'. But it is also as portable as Cooke's versions: preparing for the escape his own murder prevents, Lumb packs it in a suitcase.

Hughes himself was to unpack this 'mystery offering' in 1981, as Cooke prepared for a second exhibition of Sheela-na-gigs. Hughes told Ben Sonnenberg that his own poem 'Salmon Eggs', set on his local Devon river Torridge and a hymn to the endless cycle of death and renewal these spawning fish represent, 'was originally a poem about Sheila-na-gig' [sic], not just the sculpture 'much older than the church, and always very crudely cut', but 'our oldest goddess (a death/battle/love goddess) who copulated with her consort standing astride rivers'

²⁹ Richard Murphy to Ted Hughes, 22 September 1971, Ted Hughes papers, MARBL Emory MS 644, Box 5 folder 7.

³⁰ I am most grateful to Sonja Landweer and to Julia Cooke and Aoine Landweer-Cooke for conversations in April 2016 and in June 2017.

(*LTH* 448). Now, that's a very particular reading of it, even an appropriation of it, an incorporation into his own reading of myth. It depends on a knowledge of a particular early Irish source, *Cath Maige Tuired*, or *The Battle of Moytura*, which tells the story of how, before the battle, the Dagda, Tuatha god of good and fertility and farming, encounters the Morrigan as she is cleaning herself, astride the river Unshin.³¹ That's where they come together, and where after sex the Morrigan summons the magicians of Ireland to cast spells on behalf of the Tuatha.

But in 'Salmon Eggs' Hughes has another source in mind: it's in the wall of that ruined church and the Kilnaboy Venus. It's as 'I make out the sunk foundations / Of dislocated crypts' in the river that the poem restores the power of 'the swollen vent', releasing a transcendent natural truth from the currents that have overlaid, and respelled, the church's walls: 'Only birth matters / Say the river's whorls' (*CP* 681).

Of course, fishing remained essential, whether it was what Cooke called 'pike attacks' or vain attempts to catch trout on imitations of the spent mayfly on Loughs Arrow, Key and Ree.³² Cooke orchestrated all these outings. And when Jack Sweeney wrote to Hughes to congratulate him on his Laureateship, Hughes wrote back, confirming he'd never been back to the Burren – Cooke's leading him to new ponds and rivers and resorts and refuges had prevented it.³³ That makes for a very different map of Ireland, one which doesn't violate Yeats and Joyce territory so much as ignore it, for the most part simply trundling past their holy sites, boat and trailer in tow, in favour of more sacred waters and hotspots within them, where an echo sounder exposed depths that would hold fish. This phase had begun in 1977. Cooke introduced Hughes and Nicholas, then fifteen, to the delights of Irish pike fishing, and launched a series of memorable fishing trips West and North from Jerpoint. Hughes's poem 'Some Pike for Nicholas' condenses his vivid diaries of trips to the loughs of Counties Clare, Limerick and Roscommon, between 1977 and 1982, with 'Lough Na Cashel's great Queen' the largest pike he caught. 'River Barrow' captures three hot days camping and fishing beside the river in County Kilkenny, which Barrie Cooke organized in July 1978 on the third of these trips, and which Hughes recorded in his fishing diary. It's a beautiful but not much read poem, and its celebration of the

Heavy belly
Of river, solid mystery
With a living vein (*CP* 657)

³¹ Elizabeth Gray, ed. *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Maige Tuired* (Naas, Co. Kildare: Irish Texts Society, 1982); and see also Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*.

³² Cooke to Hughes, 8.2.1978 and 16.3.1978, Ted Hughes papers, Emory, Box 2 Folder 14.

³³ Hughes to Sweeney, 18.1.1985, UCD Sweeney papers LA 52/59.

moves as deeply as its subject. ‘The Great Irish Pike’ (1982) is the most significant of Hughes and Cooke’s collaborations, and both poem and lithographs are devoted to a defence of the predator that lurked in Lough Gur, one of their favourite pike loughs, surrounded by rich Neolithic and medieval remains and legends. The work blends spirited identification with their prey and a bleak warning of the new threat from intensive farming methods and dredging of his waters.

The watercolourist of human progress
Is painting the ponds afresh,
The rivers and the Loughs, without him. (*CP* 627)

As in these lines, a focus on fishing also always allowed a larger and deeper vision of water and what it gave onto, and not just the state of our environment, however much these two artists of the floating world shared a passionate belief in what Hughes called ‘real water’ – that is, water pure enough to hold wild fish – and a horror of pollution.³⁴

That shared aesthetic went much deeper than has been recognized. Back in the autumn of 1962, in a letter recently discovered in his papers by his family, Hughes wrote to Cooke and Harriet Leviter for their hospitality during the trip south he really did make from Cleggan that September. Hughes acknowledged the deeply impressive power of the big paintings Cooke was doing of water. But he loved the nudes for their power and energy, and noted the way both painter and art were transformed by vital objects like women or fish. They brought another painter out of him, he said. And there was a clear sign that Cooke’s art was also eliciting something new and old in him. Hughes declared that he had a mind to call his next book, in which poems he had sent Cooke would appear, not *Wodwo* but *Sheila na Gig*; its cover would feature a large reproduction.³⁵

That wasn’t idle talk. From 1961 to 1963, as Cooke’s letters to Jack Sweeney reveal, detailed and advance planning took place between poet and artist for a book of fifteen of Hughes’s poems and Cooke’s drawings; to be published by subscription. But the money didn’t materialise, in part because of the terrible news of Sylvia Plath’s death that broke just as Cooke asked Sweeney to write a blurb explaining ‘why Hughes and Cooke are the one Great Combination’.³⁶

In a 1992 essay ‘An Angler’s Crouch’, Seamus Heaney had his own praise for that ‘one great combination’. Convinced that, for both his friends, the rod was a

³⁴ Ted Hughes, Emory 644, Box 56 folder 10.

³⁵ I am most grateful to the Cooke family for allowing me to read this letter in June 2017.

³⁶ Cooke to Sweeney, n.d. but est. February/March 1963, Sweeney papers UCD LA52/59 UCD.

‘straw in the cosmic wind’, he observed of Barrie Cooke’s paintings: ‘there is always an insistent pressure of spirit behind the lushness and the sensuality’.³⁷

Now, Heaney’s sensitivity, and his awareness of what Hughes had had to endure by way of savage personal criticism in the years since Plath’s death, would, of course, have made it impossible for him to say more at the time; but the same is true both of the poems Hughes drew from Ireland, and of those that can and should be read ‘Irishwards’. One of these latter poems is ‘Sugarloaf’, the first in a batch of poems in typescript Hughes sent to Cooke along with that letter. Now, ‘Sugarloaf’ wasn’t Irish in origin. As Ruth Crossley has made clear, it describes a peak above the Calder valley after a fall of snow. Hughes had described the poem, in a letter to Lucas Myers of 1961, as one of a number of thin and unsatisfactory exercises; for his part, more generously, Neil Roberts uses a line from the poem to suggest that, even when straining to be portentous, Hughes retains a wonderful sense of humour.³⁸ The line in question is ‘This will be serious for the hill’. (CP 154)

Roberts was not the first reader of ‘Sugar Loaf’ to confess to ambivalence about the disposition of its elements. Barrie Cooke quoted it in the great love letter about Hughes, man and work, that he sent, after a few days of living with and re-reading these poems in transcript, to Jack Sweeney in Harvard; Sweeney made a particular note of the day it reached him, 22 October 1962.

The line from ‘Sugar Loaf’ Cooke quoted is also ‘This will be serious for the hill.’ And I suspect that Hughes had two reasons for sending him ‘Sugar Loaf’ in October 1962. One was that he knew by then that he had discovered an intuitively sympathetic reader. The other was that he knew that in Cooke’s company he had found the location that fitted and lent belated new power to the poem. In June 2017 I travelled the few miles from Kilnaboy to the edge of the National Park, founded to help preserve the Burren, a managed landscape, from the erosion both of its world-famous flora and, perhaps, of its limestone. I asked Michael Kelleher’s son Declan if by any chance he knew where Barrie Cooke might have taken Ted Hughes that evening in September 1962 when they slotted themselves into the limestone and heard the geese fly, *wah wahing*, in. Declan was instantly certain he knew. This was Lough na Gealoin, or the lough of the Flesh, lying under the extraordinary stratified limestone and gneiss mountain, Mullach Mór. Cooke had got to know it with Declan’s father, and it remained his favourite flighting place. To help me find it, Declan lent me his copy of Tim Robinson’s ‘Folding Landscapes’ map of the Burren, which he had helped Robinson revise in 1996.

³⁷ Seamus Heaney, ‘An Angler’s Crouch’, in *Claocló Barrie Cooke* (Den Haag: Gemeentemuseum 1992), reprinted in *Barrie Cooke* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011), pp.11-13; p.11.

³⁸ Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.145.

When I visited Lough na Gealoin the next day, I was looking for suitable candidates for those slots in the limestone. But I found myself staring at, and then inhabiting, the elements of 'Sugar Loaf'. I crossed the small stream that trickles from the slopes of the mountain, stared into its pools' small whorls, and then the thin reeds around the lough. It was like walking through 'Sugar Loaf', and then realising the additional dimension it had acquired when its author visited this place. I saw how a poem written out of West Yorkshire had found a new landscape; and its final lines in particular had found, in the Burren's geology, a precise new kind of seriousness. I saw how the pool could be a stomach, and what kind of dissolution awaits in the water over which the hill, like an unsuspecting giant, is leaning, and in which the giant's future forms, or unforms. In the Burren visitor centre at Corofin, ten minutes drive away, there is an experiment running to demonstrate how within five million years the drip drip drip of water onto and through the limestone karst of the Burren will wear it as flat as the Gort plain that lies to the East.

That brief visit to the Burren in 1962 stayed with Hughes; his letter to Cooke thanking him for his hospitality makes clear the exactness of the memory it had already become. It had found its place in his imagination. It wasn't just that Cooke and Hughes's experience of a remarkable place that September succeeded in reinvigorating a text in association with the place it deserved: I also want to suggest that in sending it to the right reader in the right place that invigoration spread. It becomes the opposite of an exercise, or even exorcism: it is the moment of inspiring – inspiration seems too flat a word for it -- when Hughes and Cooke each recognized in the other a common resource, a shared identification with, and in, that wild spirit of water of Lough na Gealoin and the stream off Mullach Mor. And it condenses, distills, inspires an approach to art: a way of reading, and writing, and painting that they continued to follow. Wild, yes, wayward, yes, but learned, intense, honest.

Here is the context of Cooke's quotation of that line from 'Sugar Loaf'. It's in the letter to Sweeney I mentioned earlier. Cooke is thanking his mentor for introducing him to Hughes, man and artist.

The enormous clarity of the poems. Several seemed obscure at first and then one evening after a few drinks I read them and image after image shot into life. That's a real visual sort of logic. (We talked about making movies when he was over. A wish we both share.) Like in 'Sugar Loaf': I thought that "This will be serious for the hill" sounded pretentious (And yet it sounded ominously). But

then the line before seared into light and it became natural and grace and terribly, oracularly important.³⁹

The line before – and I would urge you to go back to ‘Sugar Loaf’, read it in its entirety – is: ‘I see the whole hill in the small pool’s stomach’ (*CP* 154). And like other lines in the poem, comparing water to spirit, it demonstrates what Cooke recognizes as Hughes’ rare gift: ‘Such unbelievable making of words do physical things – the words seem to be the things’. And what called forth that power? Total immersion, present and future, in water, being swallowed by water and what water can do.

I need to emphasize two consequences of that recognition, that union of medium and its subject – because they both spread, throughout the work of these two great artists. First, that vision of the whole hill in the small pool’s stomach would persist, shaping much later poems, including, of course, those in *River*. Well before then, from the late 1960s indeed, it became a crucial insight of Barrie Cooke’s. Responding to news of Hughes’ collaboration with Peter Brook in 1971, Cooke wrote:

For my part, though I’ve not taken on a new language, I’ve also embarked on an absurdity. For the past 3 years I have worked upon schemes for a sort of heart/river system where blood is metaphor for water, + vice versa. Valve for dam. Pulse for flow. Gravel for kidney.⁴⁰

Both Sonja Landweer and Aoiné Landweer-Cooke have told me that this project was inspired by anthroposophy, the spiritual science of Rudolf Steiner which Sonja had grown up with in Amsterdam. The scheme itself proved unfeasibly complex, but in Cooke’s studio on the quay at Thomastown its current occupant, the artist Bernadette Kiely, still works under the line from Heraclitus Cooke had painted there. ‘Everything Flows’. And at Cooke’s funeral service in 2014, these words were included in the order of service – the one poem he published, like a motto:

Air to water
and soil to stone
As blood to flesh
And flesh to bone

And among the designs and motifs painted on Cooke’s cardboard coffin by his daughters and friends was a Sheela-na-Gig on its lid.

Second, that freighted fluid building block of a word we encountered in ‘Salmon Eggs’: ‘Whorls’. In ‘Sugar Loaf’ too, the trickle off the hill ‘whorls to a pure

³⁹ Cooke to Sweeney, letter received 22.10.1962, UCD Sweeney papers LA 52/59.

⁴⁰ Cooke to Hughes, n.d. but est. 1971, Emory Box 2 Folder 14.

pool'. Whorls. That swirl, that vortex of water responding to the pressure of rocks and currents in a particularly compelling way, marked Hughes's poems too. You come across it, and the influence of a book, and a writer, I can only name here, the German engineer and hydrodynamicist Theodor Schwenk, whose *Sensitive Chaos* described water's behaviour in the material and spiritual worlds and held Cooke's attention for years, in that great and ostensibly Scottish poem I began by mentioning, 'A Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan'.

The Sligachan river flows through a great desolate valley between the red and the black Cuillins on Skye, and it couldn't be more Scottish. But Hughes's experience there had a distinctly English genesis. He hooked and lost the small salmon that inspired his poem one hot morning on 5 August 1981, as he was driving north to catch the ferry to join a party of wealthy Devon friends at the beautiful and productive salmon fishery on the Isle of Harris, Amhuinnsuidhe.⁴¹ The poem dedicated to two of them, Simon and Hilary Day, as Hughes told Keith Sagar was first published in the school magazine of their son, whom they had told Hughes had been conceived at the Sligachan hotel (*PC* 126).

But place and poem are also Irish. As Hughes explained to Sagar, the Milesian of the title has nothing to do with Miles, whose school of pre-Socratic materialist philosophers also believed that the earth will return to water. No, said Hughes. 'The "Milesian" – in "Milesian encounter" refers not Greekwards but West – Irishwards.' (*PC* 129) The Milesians, he explained, were another name for the Goidels, who according to 'the legendary account of the Invasions of Ireland' sailed north from Spain a century or more before Christ and conquered the Tuatha, 'set up Tara', that hill whose standing stone Hughes had noted as a teenager (*PC* 129). Ever since, the stories of that strange exaggerated past have themselves become strange and exaggerated, "typical of the idiotic hyperbolic Irish" (*PC* 130).

But as the quotation marks round that characterization suggest, Hughes took it much more seriously, both in his explanation and the poem. He told Sagar that 'Skye is part of that old Irish kingdom, and because the salmon came from the Irish sea', as well as because 'all fishing tales are Milesian', he set his poem, not just in 'the actual setting of the real Milesian stories', but also 'in the court of sympathetic indulgence and understanding, as a mini mock-Saga episode'. (*PC* 130)

Which may well explain why, once Hughes had clambered sweatily upstream through two miles of bog – and his diary of this day vividly confirms that poet as well as persona knew how that felt – the water gives him a shock.⁴² It was:

So lonely drowning deep, so drowned-hair silent

⁴¹ Hughes papers BL Add MS 88918.122.2 f130.

⁴² BL Add MS 88918.122.2 f.130.

So clear
Cleansing the body cavity of the underbog. (*CP* 653)

It goes beyond, deeper than body. He becomes like the hill in ‘Sugarloaf’ looming over that prophetic crystalline water.

Such a brilliant cut-glass interior
Sliding under me

And I felt a little bit giddy
Ghostly
As I fished the long pool-tail
Peering into that super-abundance of spirit. (*CP* 653)

Hughes is searching for ‘my fellow aliens from prehistory’ (*CP* 654) launched, as they were in ‘Salmon Eggs’, on reproductive business, ‘Looking for immortality’ (*CP* 654).

Which he at least comes closest to finding, at ‘the last pool

A broad, coiling whorl, a deep ear
Of pondering amber,
Greenish and precious like a preservative (*CP* 654)

It is in this last pool where, in the poem, Hughes hooks, and loses, his ‘Gruagach of the Sligachan’, and where, having lost it, neither poem nor poet can compete with its water’s extraordinary powers: ‘I faded from the light of reality’ (*CP* 655). That pool was, like so much of Ted Hughes’ imagination and verse, compellingly clear, but ‘Greenish’, Irish.

The Parochial Courage of Ted Hughes

Steve Ely

Almost twenty years after his death, the *status* of Ted Hughes as a major English poet seems assured. However, his *place* in the context of the modern and contemporary poetry is less clear. A large and varied oeuvre incorporating poetry, prose, drama, translation, essays and critical writing – and even larger archives of unpublished material – provides the basis for competing interpretations and suggests that one reason for the uncertainty about Hughes’s place is that the full range of evidence has not yet been fully considered. Indeed, the understanding and reception of Hughes’s published work by both scholarly and more popular audiences is increasingly contested. This is most recently exemplified in Jonathan Bate’s revisionist classification of Hughes’s poetry into ‘mythic’ and ‘elegiac’ modes, in which Bate reserves his highest approbation for Hughes’s more direct and personal work about ‘love and loss’ – paradigmatically *Birthday Letters* – and effectively characterises the central thrust of Hughes’s creative effort since the publication of *Lupercal* in 1960 and the publication of *Birthday Letters* in January 1998 as obscurantist displacement activity.¹

This attitude to Hughes’s work is perhaps most marked in the contemporary poetry world – the world of workshops, readings, open mics, festivals, independent publishers and little magazines, in which the first-person lyric holds sway and where sentiments such as, ‘I don’t give a damn about mythic crows and foxes, it’s people that matter,’ are by no means uncommon.² It is generally agreed that Hughes is a ‘great poet’ (‘Wind’, ‘Pike’, ‘Hawk Roosting’, *Birthday Letters*), but otherwise a bit bewildering. Certainly, in terms of influence, the ‘Ted Who?’ tendency revealed by Keith Sagar in his 2013 paper in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal* is still very much in evidence.³ Accordingly, there is still a need to explore

¹ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015).

² Comment made by a regionally well-known Yorkshire poet at a reading hosted by the author at 1 Aspinall Street, Mytholmroyd (Hughes’s natal home) as part of the Elmet Trust’s 2013 Ted Hughes Festival.

³ Keith Sagar, ‘Ted Who?’, *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, III.1, pp. 2-7. Sagar’s paper is based on an analysis of ‘The State of Poetry’, a ‘symposium’ edited by Ian Hamilton for issue 29/30 (1972) of *The Review*. Thirty-five poets, critics and editors were asked to give their views the most encouraging and discouraging features of the poetry scene ‘in the last decade’ and the ‘developments’

the place of Hughes in the wider context of English poetry, and a short article by the Irish poet and journalist Patrick Kavanagh might provide a means of doing so. In May 1952, Kavanagh published the seventh edition of his short-lived ‘journal of literature and politics’, *Kavanagh’s Weekly*. In the editorial, ‘Mao Tse-Tung Unrolls His Mat’, Kavanagh defends his journal against accusations of being ‘parochial’ – that is, being too narrowly focused on Irish literary and political issues – and provides the basis for interpretations of the terms ‘parochial’, ‘provincial’ and ‘metropolitan’ that might be of use in informing an understanding of Ted Hughes.⁴ Kavanagh writes:

Parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say on any subject. [...] The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism – Greek, Israelite, English [...] In Ireland we are provincial and not parochial, for it requires a great deal of courage to be parochial. When we do attempt having the courage of our parish we are inclined to go false and play up to the larger parish on the other side of the Irish Sea. In recent times we have had two great Irish parishioners – James Joyce and George Moore. They explained nothing. The public had either to come to them or stay in the dark. [...] Advising people not to be ashamed of having the courage of their remote parish is not free from many dangers: there is always that element of bravado which takes pleasure in the notion that the potato patch is the ultimate. To be parochial a man needs the right kind of sensitive courage and the right kind of sensitive humility.⁵

Applied to modern and contemporary English literary culture, ‘metropolitan’ might refer to the elite culture centred on the capital, an amorphous grouping of publishers, prizes, festivals and readings, journals, salons, established and up-and-coming poets, entrepreneurs, impresarios, critics and so on that define, direct and dominate the nation’s poetic ecology. ‘Provincial’ refers to the mentality that looks at the metropolitan establishment from outside, accepts its hegemony and seeks to find a place within it by conforming its expression and interests to those apparently sanctioned or promoted by it. Kavanagh’s ennobling sense of the ‘parochial’ reserves that term for artists who eschew provincial conformity and demonstrate

they hoped to see in the next. Of those polled, only nine mentioned Hughes, six of those negatively. Philip Larkin (14), Geoffrey Hill (9) and Robert Lowell (8) were the poets securing most approbation.

⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, ‘Parochialism’, *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, Vol.1, No. 7. (Dublin, 24th May, 1952), p. 2. Partially reprinted as ‘Parochialism & Provincialism’ in *Patrick Kavanagh, A Poet’s Country: Selected Prose* (Ed. Antoinette Quinn), (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2003), p. 237.

⁵ *Ioc.cit.*.

the courage to pursue their own expression and interests without regard to metropolitan fashion – and presumably with a similar disregard for the consequences that may flow from such a decision. Kavanagh’s concept of ‘parochial courage’ is defined by the risk an artist takes of potentially excluding him or herself from critical or popular approbation – from success – for the sake of the authenticity and integrity of their expression.

There are senses in which all three of Kavanagh’s terms might apply to Ted Hughes. After all, Hughes was a provincial grammar school boy from Yorkshire, who had an ambition to become a famous poet from his mid-teens and gravitated to the capital from his mid-twenties onward, becoming a Faber poet, living in London for extended periods and moving easily as an influential figure within the metropolitan literary scene for much of his life. Despite this, my contention is that Hughes was at root a profoundly parochial poet. His parochialism is expressed in a number of ways. Hughes’s friend Lucas Myers asserted that although Hughes subsequently became, ‘a Cambridge undergraduate, an unwilling American, a Londoner [...] [a] Devonshire farmer, a European and a cosmopolitan’, at core he ‘remained a Yorkshireman’ and Hughes retained the most obvious signifier of his origins – his Yorkshire accent – throughout his life, never seeking to efface it.⁶ In an interview with Ekbert Faas, Hughes characterised his Yorkshire voice as his ‘most intimate self’ and doubted whether he would have ‘ever have written verse’ without it.⁷ Indeed, a hundred or so of his poems directly address or arise from his twin Yorkshire parishes of Mytholmroyd and Mexborough.

Writing about personal landscapes *per se* is unexceptional. Even metropolitan poets do it. Nevertheless Hughes’s Yorkshire-focused work provides insights into some distinctive elements of his parochial courage, which is not so much topographical or autobiographical as intellectual. *Remains of Elmet* wraps up personal and autobiographically-derived poems about his natal upper Calder Valley in a mythic expression arising from a quasi-Heraclitean view of the Universe as a cycle of birth, growth, death, decay and transformation, an infinite recycling of matter and spirit. In his preface to the book, Hughes writes that it seemed that ‘the end had come’ for the industrial and agricultural order that had prevailed in the upper Calder Valley since the ‘early 1800s’, with the mills and chapels ‘virtually dead’ and the population ‘changing rapidly’ (*RE* 8). ‘Hill Walls’ describes a world in which there are ‘No survivors’, merely the ‘shattered ribs’ (*RE* 30) of dry stone walls, which in the following poem, ‘Walls’ are characterised as a ‘harvest of long

⁶ Lucas Myers, *The Essential Self, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (London: Richard Hollis, 2011), p. 22.

⁷ Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 202.

cemeteries' (*RE* 33). Similarly before 'Lumb Chimneys' 'can flower again/They must fall into the only future, the earth' (*RE* 14). Although Hughes includes in the collection poems which include historical ('Heptonstall Old Church'), cultural ('Football at Slack') and even political content and themes ('Mill Ruins' seems to be informed by an atavistic protectionism), the collection is dominated by a mythic fatalism in which the whole field of human endeavour – biography, history, industry and culture – is subsumed into the inexorable cycles of nature. The economic malaise of the upper Calder Valley and the social, demographic and environmental consequences that flowed from it – all the result of human agency, and subject to remedy by that agency, politics allowing – is determinedly interpreted as a natural process. Largely absent from *Remains of Elmet* is any sense of sustained analytical engagement with history or politics, any sense of the potential of active human agency to effect change and – perhaps most importantly in the context of this argument – only a limited sense of solidarity with the community described.

Comparisons of Hughes's poetry about his childhood landscape with the work of two contemporaries of similar stature confirm that the distinctiveness of his parish arises not from a commitment to people and place, but in his singular vision and expression, in which the communal and public dimension generally has diminished importance, effectively detaching the poems from politics and perhaps history. Tony Harrison's *The Loiners* (the very title an affectionate parochial homage to the people of a place), is a work written in critical but fond solidarity with his natal community.⁸ *The School of Eloquence* imports a more overt class-consciousness into his expression, with the major battleground being Harrison's Yorkshire accent and dialect (which is also Hughes's accent and dialect) and in his famous, 'We'll occupy/your lousy leasehold poetry', he speaks on behalf of and as part of his community against both metropolitan and provincial with a sense of shoulder-to-shoulder solidarity that is largely absent in Hughes's expression.⁹ *v* – which might be seen as Harrison's *Remains of Elmet* – addresses the fragmentation of his natal community with a similarly impassioned, although essentially pessimistic solidarity.¹⁰

In his elegiac poem 'Hallaig', Sorley Maclean addresses the Highland Clearances and the ongoing plight of the Scottish gaidhealtachd in a meditation on the eponymous township, located on his native island of Raasay. Like Hughes in his *Remains of Elmet* poems, Maclean describes the dereliction of the largely

⁸ Tony Harrison, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 14-77. 'Loiner' is the colloquial name for a native of Leeds.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 119-262.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 263-279.

unpeopled landscape – ‘the window is nailed and boarded’, ‘the road is under mild moss’ – and laments the eviction of his ancestors by the estate’s factor, George Rainy:

In Screapadal of my people
Where Norman and Big Hector were,
Their daughters and their sons are a wood
Going up beside the stream.¹¹

Maclean comments disparagingly on the plantations of non-native sitka spruce ‘crowing’ on the tops of hills – ‘they are not the woods I love’. The speaker’s ‘love’ is reserved for the native birches – the ‘daughters and sons’ – that have regenerated amid the ruins and that are presented as a hopeful and organic symbol of resettlement and renewal.

I will wait for the birch wood
Until it comes up by the cairn,
Until the whole ridge from Beinn na Lice
Will be under its shade.¹²

The use of the metaphor of birch trees to represent the renewal of the people is superficially similar to Hughes’s vision of ‘Lumb Chimneys’ ‘flowering’ from the earth they will one day fall into. However, whereas Hughes’s vision is conditional, pessimistic and abstract (the chimney has not yet collapsed; Hughes’s Heraclitean fatalism simply assumes that ‘one day’ (*RE* 14) it will do so), Maclean’s birch trees are symbols of regeneration rooted in the actual landscape. Further, in the image of the ‘Proud [...] pine cocks’ that ‘crow on the top of Cnoc an Ra’, Maclean brings into focus the poem’s fundamental and ongoing political dimension with this representation of the alien landlord class that has evicted the people, suppressed their culture and language and expropriated their land.¹³ Maclean’s parochial courage, as with that of Harrison, is rooted not simply in the accidents of birth and biography that result in a personal attachment to place, but in *commitment* – a historically and politically informed consciousness that is characterised by solidarity with place and people. This dimension is rarely present in Hughes’s poetry and the fact of this absence is why his ‘parochial courage’ is not to be found in an address to his physical or literal parish. Hughes’s parish is intellectual, philosophical and visionary and his parochial courage lies in his determination to explore and expound his singular vision and worldview in the conservative context

¹¹ Sorley Maclean (Somhairle MacGill-eian), *White Leaping Flame (Caoir Gheal Leumraich): Collected Poems*, edited by Chrisopher Whyte and Emma Dymock, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011), p. 230.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹³ *Ibid.* loc.cit.

of English poetry and its bias in favour of what might be coined the ‘human-interest lyric’.

The components of Hughes’s thought and worldview are many and complex and in this paper I can do no more than tease out what I see as the key strands. Broadly, Hughes begins from the premise that humanity has fallen from an Edenic state in which people lived simply and freely, in harmony with nature, each other and in balance with their natures. Sometimes Hughes gives the impression that he believes this golden age status was last enjoyed in the ‘Palaeolithic’ (more properly Mesolithic), by the ‘Red Indians’ and similar cultures, ‘the last sane human beings’ (*LTH* 359). On other occasions he seems to imply that pre-industrial agrarian societies (for example, alleged Bronze Age goddess- worshipping societies, pre-Reformation Catholic England) were at least approximations to such an Eden. However, as a result of an unholy combination of factors – the degeneration of Renaissance humanism into the Enlightenment’s elevation of the individual, the rise of amoral and atheistic science and philosophy, the life-denying legacy of Puritanism, the industrial revolution, the rise of rapacious capitalism (although Hughes never uses that politically loaded term), nation states and conflicting ideological systems – the world is now dominated by deterministic materialism, denuded of meaning and purpose and characterised by repression and destruction (of nature, of tradition, of human beings, human nature and human potential). The ‘modern world’ is Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and its hyperbolic expression is the First World War, the horrors and shadow of which informed Hughes’s work throughout his life (*WP* 269).

For Hughes, humanity’s fall – however that is understood – has created in the current period an unprecedented ecological, spiritual, cultural, economic and social crisis – which is ultimately a crisis of how to live. Hughes’s intellectual and ideological response to this emerges through his writings in three broad areas. The first of these responses is a resort to nature that developed into an almost Pantheistic vision, much of which might reasonably be read as committed eco-poetry – a discourse in solidarity with nature against the depredations and desecrations of humanity. The second area comprises Hughes’s embracing of irrationality and the ‘spiritual’, including the occult, Neoplatonism, mythology, Shamanism, ‘the White Goddess’ – and even Monarchism – as elements of a highly singular understanding of the world. The third area lies in Hughes’s development of mythic expression to carry the complexity and obscurity of this unorthodox intellectual load without overt didacticism, although, as Paul Bentley has argued, it may be that Hughes’s adoption of the mythic mode allows him to covertly address

public and historical themes without outing himself as a ‘political’ poet in the same overt way as Harrison or Maclean, for example.¹⁴

This complex of beliefs, themes and practices constitutes Hughes’s singular parish and his ongoing resort to them, often in complex and extended forms, constitutes his parochial courage. As I’ve previously indicated, most consumers and producers of modern and contemporary poetry in England during Hughes’s lifetime and today have been conditioned to have a preference for the ‘human interest lyric’ - short, accessible, first-person poems arising from personal experience (what Bate terms the elegiac mode). One might track the elements of this narrowing trend from the Georgians through the imagist strand of Modernism, the New Critical focus on the ‘well-made poem’, the Movement’s quotidian focus and failure of nerve, confessionalism, the democratisation of poetry via creative writing courses and workshop culture and the recent rise of protagonistic poetry rooted in lifestyle and identity. This type of poetry tends to default to reactions to experience, accounts of ‘loss and love’ and assertions of self and personal history.¹⁵ The dominance of this form of the lyric leads to a prejudice against *external* content, ideas, ambition and scale in poetry. As the ‘regionally well-known Yorkshire poet’ whose views I quoted earlier might say, ‘Who gives a toss about Giordano Bruno and mythically transformed alchemical birds? What we really want to know is did he love his first wife?’ (In easily digestible gobbets and with the Cabalistic schema an optional extra for initiates only.) Sean O’ Brien, also drawing on Kavanagh to comment on this aspect of the reception of Hughes’s work, asserts, ‘Gods make their own importance’ [...] but that doesn’t mean anyone’s listening.’¹⁶

Another reason for the nature of Hughes’s parochial expression – perhaps the reason why he did not write in a more historically aware and politically-committed way about his literal parish(es) in the way that Harrison and Maclean do – may lie in his provincial petit-bourgeois origins, in which both his family and his grammar school education stressed individual effort as the means of escaping his relatively humble background in order to secure a more elevated place in an established (metropolitan) order. Family ambition for Hughes was considerable from an early age and his affair with Assia Wevill in the wake of Sylvia Plath’s suicide caused his mother to become anxious that scandal would ruin his reputation

¹⁴ Paul Bentley, *Ted Hughes, Class and Violence*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 2016.

¹⁵ In a paper of this nature the argument is inevitably generalising, but I would argue that the oeuvres of Philip Larkin, Michael Longley and John Agard (for example) are predominantly made up of poems that fit my characterisation of the ‘human interest lyric’. Of younger poets, it seems to me that Zaffar Kunial, Melissa Lee-Houghton, Fran Lock and Kim Moore are also working, in very different ways, in this mode.

¹⁶ Sean O’ Brien, ‘Ted Hughes: Time Not History’, pp. 34-40, in *The Deregulated Muse*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p.40.

and prevent him from receiving a knighthood; Hughes himself wondered if the Queen will ‘give me audience’.¹⁷ Earlier in his career, in prose works such as ‘The Rat under the Bowler’, Hughes’s political attitudes seemed to share something with those archetypal class-conscious literary provincials, the Angry Young Men.¹⁸ However, by the seventies he was expressing monarchist sentiments that seemed to endorse the ongoing political and spiritual significance of the monarchy even in the context of his developing anti-industrial, ecological world-view.¹⁹ Of course, as Laureate, Hughes went on to offer devoted personal service to the royal family, writing poems to celebrate royal births, marriages and anniversaries, and developing close relationships with the Queen Mother and Prince Charles in particular.²⁰ Hughes’s singular attitude to the Crown combines a quasi-mystical faith in the institution with more traditional middle-class deference and respect. As such his monarchism is both a manifestation of his parochial courage and a residual vestige of his provincialism.

¹⁷ Yehuda Koren & Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill*. (London: Robson Books, 2006), p.129.

¹⁸ Ted Hughes ‘The Rat Under the Bowler’, in *Saturday Night*, 78:10 (Nov 1963), pp. 21-7.

¹⁹ For example, the short poem Hughes wrote on the occasion of the Queen’s Silver Jubilee in 1977 (‘1952-77’, *CP* 381) sees the Crown as unifying the ‘soul’ of the ‘nation’, ensuring it remains ‘whole’.

²⁰ Jonathan Bate describes how Hughes was frequently invited to be a guest of both the Queen Mother and Prince Charles at Birkhall, Balmoral. Both attended his memorial service at Westminster Abbey in May, 1999. Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes, The Unauthorised Life*. (London: William Collins, 2015), pp. 483, 553.

Mayday on Holderness: Ted Hughes, National Service, and East Yorkshire

James Underwood¹

It would be easy to accept Ted Hughes's memorable description of his National Service as a time when he had 'nothing to do but read and reread Shakespeare and watch the grass grow' – and then to move on.² Though not completely neglected, this is a period of his life only glanced at by critics and biographers, worthy only of mention for the sake of the biographical record, and most often summarised briskly using Hughes's own pithy remark. Following his older brother's example by opting for the RAF, Hughes was conscripted in October 1949, and discharged in October 1951, the same month he went up to Cambridge. At first these two years appear as nothing more than an inconveniently compulsory interlude, a way of remembering National Service that was characteristic of Hughes's generation, for whom 'conscription meant a few weeks of fear, followed by around eighteen months of mild boredom', according to Richard Vinen.³ But there is, as ever, more to this story than Shakespeare and grass, and as the map of Hughes's life and work gradually gains more and more local colour, it is worth looking into Hughes's time in uniform and in East Yorkshire.⁴

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¹ I am immensely grateful to Enid Bates (*née* Wilkinson) and Peter Snaith, to whom this article is dedicated, for generously giving up a sunny August day to be interviewed and to guide Steve Ely and me around Patrington. Their memories of Ted Hughes and of this period have contributed greatly to this article. Enid's knowledge of Patrington's historical geography proved far superior to our map-reading. I am also grateful to Steve Ely for his invaluable support.

² Quoted in Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) p. 8.

³ Richard Vinen, *National Service: A Generation in Uniform 1945–1963* (London: Penguin, 2015) p. xxxi.

⁴ Steve Ely, for example, has addressed 'the lacuna in critical and biographical work about [Hughes's] South Yorkshire period', thereby adding to the well-documented story of Hughes's first eight years in West Yorkshire. See Steve Ely, *Ted Hughes and South Yorkshire: Made in Mexborough* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 2–3. Similarly, fruitful research continues to be conducted into Hughes's life in Cambridge, London, America, Devon, and Ireland.

As was the case for so many British men born between 1927 and 1939, National Service for Hughes began at RAF West Kirby on Merseyside. This was one of the biggest camps in Britain, one of three where ‘Tens – or even hundreds – of thousands of men were churned through’ for basic training, known to the servicemen as ‘square bashing’.⁵ ‘At first the discipline was savage, and one youth broke down’, Hughes reported to Edna Wholey after three weeks, ‘but it relaxes daily as we grow neater’ (*LTH* 5). At some point later, probably early in 1950, Hughes was transferred to RAF Patrington, out in the plains of Holderness in East Yorkshire. Though the exact dates of his movements are difficult to pin down, by the spring of 1950 he was writing again to Edna, this time notifying her of his new address at the ‘OPS. SECTION’, where he was ‘waiting to begin a course for Fighter Plotting’ (*LTH* 8). Michael Rines, posted to RAF Patrington two years after Hughes, describes this activity in a collection of memoirs as

the business of plotting the positions of aircraft on a map painted on a large table; most people will have seen it shown in films of the Battle of Britain. Each plotter was responsible for a particular geographical area and information from radar stations was fed to him over headphones about the position (grid reference), speed, number, identity, height and direction of travel of any aircraft entering his area. He was then expected, using a four foot long stick with a magnet on the end, to place an arrow on the precise position of the map and then place a small rack next to it.

Painted steel symbols had to be hung on the racks to show the number, speed, height etc of the aircraft. Each arrow or symbol was held on the stick by the magnet and dropped on the appropriate place on the rack by pulling a trigger that moved the magnet away from the symbol.

The slightest clumsiness in this operation would cause all the other symbols to fall off the rack. While one tried to recover the situation, the jet aircraft continued to fly at high speed so that racks and arrows had to be moved and the information on them updated. What made it worse was that each plotter might have several racks on the go at the same time.⁶

Rines describes working ‘for long periods in the windowless operations centre, with artificial light and ventilation in a job that needed high levels of concentration. It was unhealthy and boring [...]’.⁷ Hughes obviously felt the same: ‘There are so many people they have nothing to do, and the atmosphere of the place is generally inert’, he told Edna (*LTH* 8). The sudden influx of personnel that was the result of the National Service Act 1948 posed a number of practical challenges for the RAF,

⁵ Vinen, p.xxviii.

⁶ Michael Rines, in *National Service, Elvis and Me! A Miscellany of Memories*, ed. David Fowler (Scarborough: Farthings Publishing, 2010) p. 154.

⁷ Rines, p. 155.

which had not yet constructed sufficient domestic quarters at Patrington. Servicemen were, therefore, billeted with the locals: officers lived in the homes of Patrington's most affluent residents, whilst for everyone else it was a camp bed delivered by the RAF to spare bedrooms and reception rooms. Being of the RAF's lowest rank, Aircraftman Second Class Hughes shared with two other men the downstairs front room of 4 Northside, Patrington. This was the family home of Peter Snaith, then in his teenage years.⁸ Peter remembers Hughes's roommates as Don Sullivan, a 'very handsome and very blonde' Irishman, and Bert, a Londoner.⁹ As for Hughes, he was 'a big fella' who loved puzzles.¹⁰ Whilst Peter's mother was probably glad for the additional income or rations which came with housing conscripts, for her son the experience of living among so many young men in uniform was:

absolutely shocking! Because all of us lads – these lasses didn't want us then – they were all keen on these RAF lads! We used to go to Withernsea to the Dance Hall, and they wouldn't have anything to do with us, the girls in Patrington. It was terrible!¹¹

Enid Wilkinson (now Bates) lived across the road from the Snaiths at Cromwell Lodge. At one point her family had four servicemen in an upstairs bedroom and another four in one of the downstairs reception rooms at the front of the house. She remembers two names: Johnny Oliver, a Scotsman, and George Gallagher-Daggitt, an Irishman who would marry a local girl and remain lifelong friends with Enid and her husband.¹² Hughes became particularly friendly with Gallagher-Daggitt, spending many evenings in the Wilkinsons' reception room poking the log fire. It was there that Hughes found Enid copying a favourite poem, 'The White Rose', into her English exercise 'rough book'.¹³ Presumably piqued by the surprise appearance of poetry amidst his new life of drills and masculine conversation, Hughes asked Enid if she would like him to write some of his own, transcribing two poems into the book. The first, an unpublished piece beginning 'If I were to hear you sigh', he signed with the bizarre pseudonym 'By Eeple Jote

⁸ One of Hughes's letters (to Edna and her new husband, Stanley) gives the address '2 North Side', but the house pointed out by Peter Snaith – the middle one in a very slim terrace of three – is Number 4. This may be a slip of the pen, or simply a case of the numbers having altered since the early 1950s.

⁹ Peter Snaith, personal interview, 21 August 2017.

¹⁰ Snaith, interview.

¹¹ Snaith, interview.

¹² Gallagher-Daggitt, who went on to have a successful career as a nuclear scientist at the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell in Oxfordshire, also kept in touch with Hughes. He and his wife attended Hughes's memorial service at Westminster Abbey in 1999.

¹³ Probably by John Boyle O'Reilly (1844–1890), whose poem shares the same syntax and cadences as 'Song'.

Huckmarmer / Disciple of the Daimonic / Friend to George Daggitt'.¹⁴ The second, 'Song', which Hughes would later include in his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, he signed 'Also by E.J.H. / Disciple of the Daemonic / Friend to George Daggitt'.¹⁵ Enid shared the two poems with her English teacher at Malet Lambert School in Hull, who dismissed them as 'rubbish' attempts to emulate Shakespeare. She did not share the review with Hughes.¹⁶

To Enid, Hughes seemed 'moody', though 'probably just a thinker'.¹⁷ She remembers his passion for music – a passion made evident one day as they walked through the village, Hughes humming Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and insisting that she come in at specific points. As for Gallagher-Daggitt, a 'very quiet guy' with a barely perceptible Irish accent, Enid 'had the feeling that he came from a different background from Ted completely; they didn't seem alike in any way'.¹⁸ What must have brought the two together in the first place was being assigned the same role. A number of the buildings that formed the base at RAF Patrington are still in use today, albeit as part of a caravan and leisure park; but a number of smaller units further out in the landscape – 'sitting all round in the wilderness', as Hughes put it – made up a wider network (*LTH* 8). Hughes had been trained as a 'Ground Wireless Mechanic', responsible for the 'care and maintenance of transmitting and receiving gear'.¹⁹ The camp's transmitter and receiver huts were situated about a mile away from the main base, and it seems Hughes spent most of his working hours at Patrington in the 'VHF' (Very High Frequency), which was actually two small brick huts – one a Transmitter, one a Receiver – sitting apart from each other in the middle of a large field. Working in the 'VHF' was a one-man job, and Hughes and Gallagher-Daggitt would follow each other on- and off-shift. In one letter to Edna Wholey, Hughes writes vividly about a particularly hair-raising trek across the field to his hut:

When I came home from 48 last week, at 11.30 Sunday Night, I had to cross over 200 yards of field to this place. As I came out of the village I could hear these 4 bullocks conspiring just inside their gate. All the way over that field, in pitch darkness, they followed me 5 yards behind, and occasionally one would romp off into darkness, and come charging back, utterly invisible, only their hooves heard.

¹⁴ The pseudonym's initials match Hughes's own, and the name is very similar to 'Eeple Jote Hyewze', the one he adopted for a nonsense prose piece, 'Wrot's Writing on Lolps', co-authored with his friend Peter Elliot and published in the July 1948 issue of Mexborough Grammar School's magazine, *The Don & Dearne* (see Ely, p. 160).

¹⁵ School exercise book, BL Add MS 88918/129/2.

¹⁶ Enid Bates, personal interview, 21 August 2017.

¹⁷ Bates, interview.

¹⁸ Bates, interview.

¹⁹ Hughes's RAF discharge papers, quoted in Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015) p.64.

When I got in, I had three hairs that looked as if they had nearly begun to turn grey. (*LTH* 11)²⁰

Though both huts were demolished several years ago, their foundations are still visible beyond the gate described by Hughes – which, thankfully, now only contains a pair of timid ponies.

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Being on duty in the VHF meant working solitary and uneventful shifts through the night: ‘out at 18 to Pat, and return at 5 at night’ (*LTH* 8).²¹ As Jonathan Bate points out, ‘there was no immediate prospect of Russian bombers or missiles winging their way over Bridlington Bay to the Holderness marshes of the East Riding’.²² Four decades later, in *Moortown Diary*, Hughes would recount his memory of ‘roaming the space waves’ late one night whilst on shift: ‘I suddenly came into this unearthly lamentation, weaving and crackling through the galactic swells’ (*MD* 66). Terrified at first that he had stumbled across ‘the recording of the uproar on a battlefield, just after the attack’, he later discovered that he had in fact tuned in to the sound of ‘sheep-shearing’. With so little to do, and a strong sense of the situation’s absurdity and bathos, it is little wonder that Hughes characterised his National Service in the way he did. But the impact of his time in East Yorkshire went beyond memorising Shakespeare whilst the grass around him grew taller. In a letter to Leonard Scigaj, who had used that rather neat quotation in a manuscript sent for comment, Hughes writes:

I read a good deal avidly in those days. I once said, a little facetiously, that in the RAF all I did was ‘read Shakespeare and watch the grass grow’. The implication being that there was little else to do. It’s true that I did read Shakespeare constantly, but I always have done. Your wording implies that I had somehow just discovered the author and was making an excited study of him.²³

Whilst Hughes’s main concern here is to emphasise (with just a touch of irritation) a longer-standing familiarity with the Bard, he does confirm the ‘implication’ that he found himself with lots of time. Two items in the British Library archive help to show how Hughes made use of that time. In an autobiographical typescript, he remarks that ‘My two years National Service were in one way two years of reading in near solitary confinement – following up my various trails as a member of Hull

²⁰ Christopher Reid glosses Hughes’s use of RAF patter: ‘48’ means forty-eight-hour leave.

²¹ Reid again clarifies Hughes’s meaning: ‘18’ means 6pm, ‘5 at night’ 5am.

²² Bate, p.62.

²³ Letter to Leonard Scigaj, undated, BL Add MS 88918/7/1.

Library'.²⁴ A blue RAF-issue lined exercise book from this period has survived. In it Hughes has made some notes about radio parts at the top of the book's first page – a minute insight into Hughes's work for anyone with the technical knowledge to decipher such a thing – but has then abandoned this in favour of composing short stories.²⁵ The exercise book lends credibility, then, to Hughes's statement in the typescript that 'Through my two years National Service [...] I regarded everything as either a help or an obstacle on my way to becoming a writer'.²⁶

The importance of time in a writer's development can be easily underestimated: we take it for granted that writers read, and that they write, but often forget that such activities require time and mental space. At the very least, then, Patrington was important to Hughes because the undemanding, solitary, often nocturnal nature of his work there gave him time for reading, writing, and developing. But the timing is also important, because these were two formative years between school and university in which Hughes was able to swim further and further out from the landmass of English literature and culture – or, to be more precise, a version of English literature and culture as constructed by Cambridge, where he would have found himself immediately after school, were it not for the National Service Act that came into force in his eighteenth year. Although Jonathan Bate writes that Hughes was 'free to deepen his knowledge of [...] the canon of English literature', he is partly guilty of anglicising Hughes's diet, since Hughes arrived for National Service having spent his teens devouring Irish folklore and myth, and the poetry of Yeats; in Patrington he absorbed Jung with fascination; and whilst it would be difficult to find an English writer more canonical than Shakespeare, it was the *occult* Shakespeare that captivated Hughes.²⁷ 'Except for Eliot, contemporary poetry might as well have been in deep space', he also recalls, a detail that might help to explain why his literary development was so out of kilter with that of his peers.²⁸ Clearly this was a period in which Hughes gathered together the interests and instincts of his teenage years into a more coherent programme of cultural exploration, one much more idiosyncratic and non-English than Bate suggests. And this was not just a case of 'following up [...] trails' in Hull Library, as Hughes remembers, but was as much about his interactions with his fellow servicemen. In that autobiographical typescript at the British Library, which appears to be part of a draft version of 'Poetry and Violence', Hughes recalls

²⁴ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2. Patrington is located approximately fifteen miles to the east of Hull, and was connected by a regular bus and train service. Sadly the city's library service has not maintained borrowing records from this period.

²⁵ RAF exercise book, BL Add MS 88918/9/11.

²⁶ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

²⁷ Bate, p.62.

²⁸ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

something very interesting. He begins with the contention that ‘Yorkshire people, whatever their work, [...] relate to the rest of England not as members of this or that class in the national class system, but as members of a different nation – as the Irish or the Scots might’. He then adds this:

This sense of being a separate nationality somehow within Englishness was sharpened when I emerged from School into National Service in the RAF. My friends there were Irish and Scots. The fact that my father’s father, whom I never knew, was Irish, had never figured in the family mythology [...]. However, once out of Yorkshire I found myself drawn to Scots and Irish, but particularly to Irish people. I look back and see that now simply as a fact. It never struck me particularly at the time. When after National Service I moved to Cambridge University, and found myself a ‘guest’ of a people that were every bit as strange to me as they were to any Irish or Scotsman, I immediately, the first day, attached myself to an Irishman.²⁹

Thanks to the memories of Peter Snaith and Enid Bates, we can now put some names to Hughes’s recollection: Don Sullivan, Johnny Oliver, and particularly George Gallagher-Daggitt. Until 1949, Hughes’s experience of the world and his outlook were influenced by his life in West and then South Yorkshire and his family circumstances; National Service was the first time he lived away from those circumstances. Seeing the world through his own eyes, falling into a distinctly Celtic friendship group, and having the time to pursue his own course of idiosyncratic cultural exploration, it is clear that these experiences combined during his National Service to forge a strange sense of non-Englishness. As Hughes goes on to say, ‘In this way, when I got to Cambridge University to read English I was totally immune to the intellectual world of Literary Criticism, and also to the social pressures [...] of the society in which I found myself’.³⁰ The sequence of events is worth noting: Hughes was already resistant to the formal study of English literature by the time he reached Cambridge. The significance of the famous ‘burnt fox’ dream has been extensively discussed in relation to his alienation from the Cambridge English curriculum; but what the comments in the typescript show is that Hughes’s interpretation of this dream was simply *confirmation* – rather than *revelation* – of an attitude that had already hardened during his two years of National Service: an attitude that can be characterised as anti-metropolitan, anti-bourgeois, anti-canonical. We can only speculate about the contents of Hughes’s literary diet had he progressed straight from Mexborough Grammar School to Cambridge University – as would now be the norm in an age without National Service. But with

²⁹ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

³⁰ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

two intermediary years well away from curricula, away from guided reading, away from tutorials and weekly essays, and away from the canon, Hughes's unorthodox personal and poetic identity crystallised, and he arrived in Cambridge in October 1951 already resistant to what he found there, and already willing to engage in culture wars.

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What, then, of Hughes's literary output from this period? A small number of poems can be traced back to his time in East Yorkshire, though it is important to distinguish between verse written during National Service and verse written later but drawing on his experiences and memories. Only one poem written in Patrington made it into a published collection, namely 'Song' – a variant of which he scribbled into Enid Wilkinson's exercise book.³¹ This he included as a late addition to *The Hawk in the Rain* at Sylvia Plath's suggestion.³² Markedly different to the kind of poetry he would go on to write (and from the kind of poetry found elsewhere in *The Hawk in the Rain*), Hughes has, characteristically, given numerous accounts of its origins. A loose sheet of lined paper in the British Library archive which catalogues the dates and circumstances of his *Hawk* poems specifies the following:

Song – began – walking home from seeing J.F. – wrote 3 a.m. on a night-watch, Patrington, after slogging at stupidities – swiftly in 2 minutes. June 13th 59.³³

Much later, in a slightly different account, Hughes told Carol Lee:

The earliest poem in that selected was the one titled Song. When I was 19, I was a Radio Mechanic on an isolated RAF station near Spurn Point. One night, 3 am I was sitting up on a night watch writing. I was stuck on a numb little couplet which went
 A hope ran crying out of the wood
 A fear clung to it, drinking blood
 (the image was of a Hare, with a stoat clinging to its nape). As I stared at this, trying to coax something out of it I heard a distinct voice inside my head – which simply dictated to me Song. I kept it

³¹ There are variants in every stanza of the poem.

³² 'Of all that I wrote between that and *The Thought-Fox* in 1955 I kept nothing. I didn't really look at Song again until 1956, when my wife found a straggly copy of it somewhere and asked why I hadn't written more like it.' Letter to Carol Lee, 6 January 1992, BL Add MS 88918/7/1. Hughes kept the poem in print throughout his life.

³³ Loose leaf notes, BL Add MS 88918/7/2. 'J.F.' is Jean Findlay, a girl Hughes knew from Mexborough Grammar School, and whom he continued to visit during his National Service. As Bate points out, '59' is an error, since this was two years after the publication of *The Hawk in the Rain*. Bate writes that Hughes 'clearly meant either "49" or "50"', but the former can be ruled out on the basis that Hughes did not begin his National Service until October of that year (Bate, p.574).

– as a freakish sort of thing. During my next few years, at University, it seemed a bit silly and soft headed.³⁴

But just a few months later, writing to Nick Gammage in December 1992, Hughes speculated about what might have been had he followed the lead of this ‘freakish sort of thing’, characterising the poem as a kind of innocence destroyed by the coming of a damaging culture war:

Song – yes. Well – of all the verse in my books that is the one piece I got hold of before I stepped into the actual psychological space of contemporary literature, smogged as that is by the critical exhalations and toxic smokestacks and power stations of Academe. So it is the one song I sang in Arcadia – that came to me literally out of the air, utterly unaware of all that lay ahead [...]. Next thing, I stumbled into the smog – gasmasks, protective clothing, armour, weaponry, survival by the skin of the teeth, earth-quaking of ignorant armies, the general ninth circle of life among our colleagues and culture police. So – I just wonder how it would have been if this age had been, like all previous ages, without professionalised criticism elevated into an educational system. It would have been different. (*LTH* 617)

The poem is arguably not the striking false start Hughes implies: although on the one hand a fairly transparent (and therefore immature) imitation of Yeats, ‘Song’ is also a distinctly Hughesian work in that the female addressee’s anonymity elevates her to the status of Muse, or Goddess, the Gravesian concept to which his mind and writing would return again and again. Interestingly, this way of thinking about poetry pre-dates his reading of Graves’s *The White Goddess*, a copy of which Hughes received in October 1951 as a ‘going up’ present from his English teacher, John Fisher – further evidence that Hughes spent much of his National Service negotiating the occult and the arcane.

But if ‘Song’ was seen as a road not taken for Hughes’s poetry, ‘Mayday on Holderness’ represents a far more consequential turn, though this poem would not be written until 1959, a decade after Hughes commenced National Service. It was composed during his residence at the Yaddo artists’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, and published in *Lupercal*, the 1960 follow-up to *The Hawk in the Rain* which Neil Roberts describes as the ‘creative achievement’ of Hughes’s time in America, though it ‘reveals no imaginative response whatever to the new country in which its author was living’.³⁵ As Roberts argues, *Lupercal* is instead ‘saturated with English, and specifically Yorkshire, scenes, landscape and wildlife’; ‘As Hughes is removed physically from the English scenes on which he imaginatively draws’,

³⁴ Letter to Carol Lee, 6 January 1992, BL Add MS 88918/7/1.

³⁵ Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p.43.

Roberts writes, ‘so he seems to become more specific in his notation’.³⁶ Hughes’s eye for the wide, flat plains of East Yorkshire, where he found himself for the bulk of his National Service, is no less specific than his eye for the dramatic valleys and crags of the Upper Calder Valley, or the rolling landscapes of Crookhill and Old Denaby. In ‘Mayday on Holderness’, the poem’s narrator is positioned very specifically looking towards ‘Hull’s sunset smudge’, with the ‘Humber’ ‘melting eastward, my south skyline’ (CP 60) – a view of the river and the city afforded only by the fact of this region’s striking flatness and unusually wide horizons. Indeed, to stand on the site of the former VHF huts in which Hughes worked is to be afforded a clear view to the south of the Humber, which the poem describes as ‘A loaded single vein’, draining ‘The effort of the inert North – Sheffield’s ores’ out into ‘The unkillable North Sea’. The acuteness of Hughes’s vision of Holderness – the massive presence of the Humber snaking through a flat landscape which ends abruptly where it meets the sea – is remarkably similar to the way in which this region’s most notable poets have written about it; so much so, in fact, that as Antony Rowland points out, Hughes ‘almost accused’ Philip Larkin, the undisputed laureate of Holderness, of plagiarising this poem in his 1961 work, ‘Here’.³⁷ It is also true that the sense of having reached the end of the world which Larkin evokes in ‘Here’ can also be found in Hughes’s ‘The Road to Easington’, another poem from this period. But rather than adjudicate on a charge of almost-plagiarism, I wish instead to note how successfully Hughes focused his inner eye onto the peculiarities of the East Yorkshire landscape a decade later from New York State, capturing the character of this region as it has also been captured in the work of Larkin, Douglas Dunn, Stevie Smith, Sean O’Brien, and others.³⁸ This topographical precision would re-emerge on a much more ambitious scale in later collections such as *Moortown* and *Remains of Elmet*.

In other ways, too, ‘Mayday on Holderness’ represents an important turning point in Hughes’s writing. According to notes he prepared for a Sotheby’s book auction, the poem was initially planned as the ‘prefatory piece to what I hoped would be a long sequence of poems about the various animals, birds, fish etc from my young days’: Hughes names ‘View of a Pig’, ‘Pike’, ‘Hawk Roosting’, ‘An Otter’, and ‘The Bull Moses’ as some of the poems originally intended for inclusion within

³⁶ Roberts, p.44.

³⁷ Antony Rowland, ‘A Case of Plagiarism?: Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 9.2 (2003), pp.53–61: p. 56.

³⁸ See, for example, Larkin’s description of the ‘flat country’ in his Foreword to *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, as well as his evocations of the landscape in poems like ‘Here’, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, and ‘Bridge for the Living’: Philip Larkin, ‘Foreword’, *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1982) p. 9; Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).

the sequence.³⁹ Whilst a series of poems about ‘various animals, birds, fish etc’ might perhaps sound fairly commonplace, if not banal, Hughes has elsewhere outlined the significance of this sequence. In a long 1992 letter to Anne-Lorraine Bujon, Hughes recalls wanting ‘to rid my language of the penumbra of abstractions that to my way of thinking cluttered the writing of all other poetry being written by post-auden [*sic*] poets’, such abstractions being, to his mind, ‘second hand – rancid – unexamined, inauthentic in the experience to which they laid easy claim’. He continues:

So I squirmed and weaseled a way towards a language that would be wholly my own. Not my own by being exotic or eccentric in some way characteristic of me. But my own in that it would be an ABC of the simplest terms that I could feel rooted into my own life, my own feelings about quite definite things. So this conscious search for a ‘solid’ irrefutably defined basic [...] kit of words drew me inevitably towards the solid irrefutably defined basic kit of my experiences – drew me towards animals, basically: my childhood and adolescent pantheon of wild creatures, which were saturated by first hand intense feeling that went back to my infancy. (*LTH* 630)

The product of this determination – albeit unrealised in sequence form – was this series of poems, with ‘Mayday on Holderness’ as its prelude.

Without over-simplifying, the poem is indeed a kind of ‘ABC’ of Hughes’s preoccupations – actually stretching well beyond animals – and can be read as an intensely compressed version of the poetic *oeuvre* to follow.⁴⁰ Hughes’s respectful vision of the animal world makes the jump across from *The Hawk in the Rain* in the form of the ‘sanity’ of the owl (*CP* 60) and the ‘expressionless gaze of the leopard’ (*CP* 61); but there is also, in the poem’s reference to Gallipoli, the recurring notion of war as a traumatic assault, particularly on the mother-son relationship, which anticipates the tripartite poem ‘Out’ in *Wodwo*; there is the recognisably Hughesian co-existence between life and death, fertility and sterility; and the slow draining of industrial detritus from ‘Sheffield’s ores’ (*CP* 60) out into the North Sea foreshadows the later ecological concerns and campaigns in the years before and after the publication of *River* (1983). Whilst Roberts’s point that *Lupercal* ‘reveals no *imaginative* response whatever’ (emphasis mine) to America stands, it was there that Hughes first began to explore the emerging literature on ecology and

³⁹ ‘Comments About Books at Sotheby’s’, BL Add MS 88918/7/1.

⁴⁰ Hughes would make a similar observation about T. S. Eliot’s early poem, ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’: ‘Yet within the *Collected Poems* almost every poem, certainly every major poem, seems related to it in some uterine fashion. [...] Does this poem present an image of Eliot’s poetic self? I think it does exactly this’ (*WP* 280).

environmentalism.⁴¹ America, then, exists as a more subtle influence in what might be described as Hughes's first environmental poem.

In form and language, however, the poem breaks away from some of the more traditional lyrics found in *The Hawk in the Rain* and elsewhere in *Lupercal*. Within a looser structure, Hughes utilises a harder, uglier language – not quite the ‘super-simple [...] super-ugly language’ of *Crow*,⁴² but certainly something approaching this, with its uncomfortably corporeal language, and the presence of those dazzling word compounds (‘Birth-soils’, ‘eye-guarded’ (CP 60)) that would become more and more frequent in Hughes's verse. Formally, linguistically, and thematically, ‘Mayday on Holderness’ has more in common with 1979's *Remains of Elmet* than with 1957's *The Hawk in the Rain*, despite being much closer to the latter chronologically. In fact, one way to read *Remains of Elmet* might be as the logical conclusion to ‘Mayday on Holderness’, which was written at a time in 1959 when northern cities like Sheffield and Hull were still actively industrial. The signs of decline are, however, already there: the North is already ‘inert’, its effort being ‘drained’ into the sea that will ‘receive these *remains*’ (CP 60)(emphasis mine) – an early rehearsal of that all-important word. The poem's digestive metaphor is also recycled in *Remains of Elmet*, most prominently in the collection's title poem. Finally, remembering the poem's fertility/sterility dualism and Hughes's work as a wireless mechanic, we should remember that ‘Mayday’ is both a date in the calendar celebrating the coming of spring, and a radio distress signal. The poem is not just transitional, then, but also portentous.

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At some point during his National Service, Hughes may have been posted elsewhere: Enid Bates remembers him being moved to either RAF Fylingdales or RAF Staxton Wold (both in North Yorkshire).⁴³ Her recollection is that re-location was unusual for the men at Patrington, which suggests that the skills Hughes acquired there may have been particularly valuable to the RAF. However, the letter Hughes sent to Edna and Stanley Barnes following their marriage gives his Patrington address – and since their wedding took place in July 1951, just a couple

⁴¹ I am grateful to Terry Gifford for drawing my attention to this.

⁴² Hughes, quoted in Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980) p.208.

⁴³ This would help to explain Keith Sagar's assertion, repeated in a number of subsequent works by other critics, that Hughes did his National Service at Fylingdales. See Keith Sagar and Stephen Tabor, *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography 1946–1995*, 2nd ed. (London: Mansell, 1998) p.278.

of months before Hughes was discharged, he cannot have spent much time, if any, at one of the North Yorkshire bases.⁴⁴

In any case, Hughes's time in East Yorkshire was significant and is worthy of attention, not least because it kept the kaleidoscope of his poetic imagination turning before helping him settle on styles, themes, and ideas that would characterise much of the verse to be written during his next five decades. National Service at RAF Patrington sharpened his own sense of self, allowing him to more clearly perceive himself outside of the English class system. It also sharpened his poetry, his sense of what was 'wholly my own', as he put it. Far from wasting two years watching the grass grow, Hughes read, wrote, thought, positioned himself in relation to class, culture, and nation, and would later draw inspiration from the Holderness landscape in a significant transitional poem, and his first environmental one, that eventually helped induce masterpieces as diverse as *Crow*, *Moortown*, and *Remains of Elmet*.

⁴⁴ Hughes to Edna and Stanley Barnes, undated, Emory MSS 870, Box 1, Folder 1.

Reviews

The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 1, edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil, London: Faber & Faber, 2017, xxxv + 1388 pp., £35.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-571-32899-4

Before the landmark publication of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 1*, meticulously edited by Peter Steinberg and Karen Kukil, the only published collection of Plath's correspondence was *Letters Home* (1976), written to – and selected by – Aurelia Plath. Aurelia wanted to show the world that her daughter was not Esther Greenwood, but her efforts backfired when critics discovered that she had excised many of Plath's expressions of anger and complaints of illness, and merged and misdated letters.¹ Reviewers accused her of silencing Plath's mercurial voice in death as she had in life, while her editorial errors cried out for correction. When Ted Hughes published Plath's abridged journals in 1982, Aurelia was appalled: 'the entire contents of THE JOURNALS were a terrible shock to me', she wrote to Carol Hughes. 'She kept one part of her "double" experience completely private'.²

As the new *Letters* shows, Plath had good reasons to keep those experiences private. Throughout Plath's childhood and adolescence, Aurelia suffered from debilitating ulcers that required several surgeries and hospital stays. ('Aurelia Plath, ulcers of' receives its own heading with 19 entries in the Index.) Those close to Aurelia assumed the ulcers were brought on by stress. This is partly why Plath tended to give her mother, as she once wrote, only 'the gay side' of her experience.³ She had lost one parent; she was not about to lose a second. Ironically, the new *Letters* reveals details about Aurelia's own illnesses that cast a more sympathetic light on Plath's complicated relationship with her mother. Though there is more nastiness, too: 'I have a very attractive, but nervous mother, whom I see as little as possible' (*LSP1* 849), she wrote to Jon Rosenthal in 1954.

¹ Ted Hughes also made cuts.

² Aurelia Plath to Carol Hughes 5 July 1982. Ted Hughes Papers (644), Box 143, folder 1a, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³ *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p. 559.

Not surprisingly, Plath's letters to her friends and boyfriends are wittier, edgier and more humorous than those she wrote to Aurelia. But even to friends, Plath held back. Few of the letters in Volume 1 are as emotionally raw or revealing as the dramatic outpourings of her journals. But Plath's letters to Eddie Cohen, Hans Neupert, Gordon Lameyer, Ellie Friedman Klein, Marcia Brown Stern, Mel Woody, Richard Sassoon, Ted Hughes, and others – published here for the first time – offer an illuminating chronological account of her intellectual, literary, and political development throughout the 1950s. We also learn more about her breakdown, suicide attempt, and recovery (if that's what it was) at McLean Hospital. In June 1953, two months before her first suicide attempt, she wrote her brother Warren from Manhattan, 'my mind will split open' (*LSP1* 643). A searing December 1953 letter to Eddie Cohen describes her reasons for suicide:

I underwent a rather brief and traumatic experience of badly-given shock treatments on an outpatient basis. Pretty soon, the only doubt in my mind was the precise time and method of committing suicide. The only alternative I could see was an eternity of hell for the rest of my life in a mental hospital, and I was going to make use of my last ounce of free choice and choose a quick, clean ending. (*LSP1* 655-56)

In *The Bell Jar*, shock treatment seems to cure Esther Greenwood. But Plath's letters from McLean suggest her shock treatment may have done more harm than good. In the same letter to Eddie, she longs for someone to 'be with me at night when I wake up in shuddering horror and fear of the cement tunnels leading down to the shock room ...' (*LSP1* 657). That December, she wrote her mother from McLean that she was about to have a sixth shock treatment, adding 'I hope I won't have to have many more ...' (*LSP1* 651). These letters add to the growing body of evidence that Plath's psychiatric care was mismanaged, and that her 'badly-given' shock treatment's lingering 'traumatic' effects may have played a role in her 1963 suicide.

While Plath's 1956 correspondence is of particular interest to Hughes scholars, earlier letters help explain why she responded so urgently to him. By the time Plath arrived at Cambridge in October 1955, she had begun to despair of finding a husband worthy of her intellect and literary ambitions, someone who, as she put it, would not 'swallow up my desires to express myself in a smug, sensuous haze'.⁴ After her disastrous relationship with the medical student Dick Norton, Plath was careful to date literary men whose love of Thomas, Joyce, Eliot, Yeats, and Lawrence matched her own. Her letters to Gordon Lameyer, Richard Sassoon and others reveal a mind both mesmerized and emboldened by modern literature.

⁴ *Journals*, pp. 18,; 20-21.

She quotes Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and Tennessee Williams's *Camino Real* at length; makes Joycean puns in the style of *Finnegans Wake*; rhapsodizes about recordings by Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Marianne Moore; calls herself a 'bibliomaniac' and a 'high priestess of the intellect' (*LSP1* 727). She tells Gordon that reading *Sister Carrie* and *Crime and Punishment* are 'too pleasurable to be classified as assignments' (*LSP1* 678). After finishing a 'grueling' round of assignments, she tells her friend Phil McCurdy she will 'treat' herself to a lecture on 'The Dimensions of Reading Poetry' by I. A. Richards (*LSP1* 699). Before she departs for Cambridge, she asks Gordon, 'will I grow, like my favourite isabel archer, through struggle and sorrow?' (*LSP1* 956) She signs her letter 'Isabel' (*LSP1* 958). These letters also reveal that Plath's habit of assigning boyfriends literary attributes did not begin with Hughes: Gordon Lameyer was Joyce, Richard Sassoon was Baudelaire, Mallory Wober was Dmitri Karamazov. In her letters to Ellie Friedman Klein from Cambridge, Plath used terms for Wober similar to those she would choose for Hughes a few months later. 'He looks like a young Hercules, or like the "giants in the earth" in the days of the Old Testament prophets, and is as strong and peaceful as the Rock of Gibraltar ...' (*LSP1* 1049).

Yet Plath suspected that her American boyfriends expected her to abandon her literary aspirations when she married. Gordon Lameyer, after all, had told her shortly before her 1953 suicide attempt that all the great writers of history had been men, and that 'Men creat [sic] art; women create people'.⁵ Sassoon was the only one, she sensed, who fully accepted her struggles with depression and her need to write. Plath's intense letters to and about Sassoon in the weeks after she met Ted Hughes suggest that if Sassoon had not jilted her in March 1956, literary history might have turned out rather differently. Plath wrote passionately about Sassoon to Ellie Friedman Klein and Marcia Brown Stern in March 1956, and admitted she was growing tired of the chase: 'I wish to hell I would meet some other man who could break richard's image & free me' (*LSP1* 1132). She did not mention Hughes in these letters except to say that she was going to meet 'a british [sic] guy' (*LSP1* 1152) in London before traveling to Paris to find Sassoon – who was with another woman in Spain. When Plath returned to Cambridge in April 1956 after her lonesome Easter vacation, Hughes was a welcome distraction from her misery. On April 18, she wrote to Sassoon that her relationship with Hughes 'need not have happened' had Sassoon not 'deserted' her 'utterly' in Paris (*LSP1* 1164).

But it did happen, and the highlight of this volume is the series of love letters Plath wrote to Hughes in October 1956 while she was living in Cambridge and he in

⁵ Gordon Lameyer to Sylvia Plath, 22 November 1953. Lameyer MSS, Lilly Library, Indiana University.

Yorkshire. Those who have read Hughes's published side of the correspondence – full of encouragement, advice, potential plots, and critiques of Plath's poems – have waited years to hear Plath's response. Her declarations of love and loneliness do not disappoint: 'I can't believe any body ever loved like this; nobody will again. We will burn love to death all our long lives ...' (*LSP1* 1298). Nor does her confidence in their literary destiny. Plath's regarded herself and Hughes as an unstoppable force that would change the course of Anglo-American poetry. At times her tone resembles that of a young revolutionary plotting a coup. They would soon crack *The New Yorker* and *London Magazine*, she assured Hughes. 'They'll be begging for us yet' (*LSP1* 1256). She prodded Hughes to enter contests and told him not to tear up his television plays or 'go black' if his poems didn't find a home. 'THEY WILL' (*LSP1* 1279). She fantasized about fans and TV producers 'flocking to the dock in hundreds' when they sailed into New York harbour, and suggested they find literary agents to handle 'movie rights, TV rights' (*LSP1* 1279).

More surprising, perhaps, is Plath's confident, professorial tone as she criticized Hughes's work: 'I don't think "horrible void" is the best you can do; I'm eternally suspicious of editorializing with horribles, terribles, awfuls and hideouses; make the void horrible; let your reader have the sweet joy of exclaiming "ah! Horrible!"' (*LSP1* 1281). There is nothing subordinate or abject about Plath's critiques; she gave as good as she got. While Plath helped Hughes understand the literary marketplace and exhorted him not to give up, her letters show he also gave her crucial support in a male-dominated poetry scene. (Only two of the 22 poets featured in Christopher Levenson's *Poetry from Cambridge 1958* were women.) When Plath wrote Hughes that, in his current incarnation as editor of *delta*, 'Leftover Cravenson' told her she wouldn't 'sell much of such poetry' (*LSP1* 1257), Hughes gleefully joined in the mockery ('Right in Cravenson's eye, and his keeper, Spender's') and assured her that she was 'certain to sell nearly everything you write now' (*LTH* 56).

He supported her in more important ways. When Plath tentatively broached the subject of 'Schizophrenia' in 'manic-depressive geniuses' like Beethoven, Dickens and Tolstoy (*LSP1* 1288), Hughes responded that Keats, Chaucer and Shakespeare were all 'delicately mad', and that 'going nuts' meant 'your thoughts have an autonomous life'.⁶ His iconoclastic view of mental illness probably reassured Plath, who in 1954 had written to Jane Anderson (Joan Gilling in *The Bell Jar*) about the 'lasting scar' McLean would leave upon her 'future associations' (*LSP1* 696). This anxiety surfaces in *The Bell Jar* when Buddy Willard asks Esther, during a visit to McLean, who would want to marry her 'Now that you've been ...

⁶ Ted Hughes to Sylvia Plath, 22 Oct. 1956. Plath MSS II, Box 6, Lilly Library, Indiana University.

here'. Esther thinks, 'Of course I didn't know who would marry me now that I had been where I had been. I didn't know at all.'⁷ These October 1956 letters suggest that what was truly revolutionary about Plath and Hughes's early relationship was its foundation of mutual respect. If the end of the marriage was dark, its beginning was blindingly bright. As Plath wrote to Hughes on October 20, 1956, 'I walk in the thought & love of you as in a sheath of radiance ...' (*LSP1* 1317).

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These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath by Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg, Fonthill Media, 2017, 208pp., 32 colour photographs, £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78155-594-1

This book adds to the growing field of work on both Plath and Hughes that engages extensively with their archives. Both scholars have worked with Plath archives in their previous publications and are active promoters of her work; most recently Peter K. Steinberg, with Karen Kukil, has undertaken the significant archival work required for the publication of Plath's letters in two volumes. The passion of the authors of *These Ghostly Archives* for their subject is clear at all times. This is a book that can be mined by scholars for archival material for future scholarship. For instance the authors discuss the process of tracking down the newspaper articles Plath wrote while at Smith, a search that has resulted in copies of 55 articles being placed at Smith, which is an extraordinary treasure trove for researchers to explore. This discussion exemplifies the book as a whole: generous in providing access to primary archival materials, whilst often not venturing to analyse these materials itself, and helpful in its contribution to potential future research projects. The book is a mine of archival information and will give scholars and students access to material that they could not otherwise without visiting the archive. It will also be invaluable to those planning to visit the archive, providing the kind of groundwork that will enable a researcher to maximise their research.

The book has a non-traditional structure: the first five chapters are a record of discussions between the researchers and chapters six, seven and eight comprise

⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966; 1996), p.254.

a more traditional academic format. This structure can be a little dizzying (and occasionally maddening) as it moves back and forth between Crowther and Steinberg, England and America and different subjects of discussion. However, in many ways, it mimics the experience of working in various scattered archives and the process of piecing together notes and observations. As such, as a record of the process of archival research, its difficulties and joys, the book will be of use to any student embarking on archival study for the first time. The authors introduce multiple types of ‘archives’ by categorising them as ‘living’, ‘lost’ and ‘private’. The ‘living’ archive, as they define it, refers to the places Plath lived, worked and visited; the ‘lost’ archive draws together the conceptions of papers known to have existed but currently missing; the ‘private’ archive is items of Plath’s held in private collections.

The book suffers somewhat from a hagiographic stance (for example, it suggests that ‘in our opinion, she rarely gets it wrong’ [32]) occasionally lacking the critical distance to step back and move away from the sway of Plath’s own vision as interpreted through the papers. Similarly, the authors’ sense of feeling the ‘presence’ of Plath in various places that she lived and worked will be recognised by any fan of Plath, but this idea is not explored critically.

The authors’ concept of the ‘living archive’, which forms a kind of literary tourism (at points it is not clear what separates the two practices), might have been fruitfully explored in relation to the rich critical fields that engage with literary tourism and museum studies. For example, it would have been useful to draw on work that considers museum spaces in writers’ houses and the complex interaction between truth and imagination in these physical spaces. The idea of the ‘living archive’ becomes more nebulous when the authors note that this concept is ‘flexible’ (107) and begin to discuss houses which they have not seen. The book, however, does paint an evocative picture of the places they did visit, which many readers will never be able to explore. The pages dedicated to the physical location of Plath’s first suicide attempt make for difficult reading. Whilst the book acknowledges that taking a photograph of the crawl space was ‘uncomfortably voyeuristic’, it does not manage to convince that the numerous pages dedicated to discovering its exact location are, as it states, ‘necessary’, particularly as the search was inconclusive. In this kind of detail the book crosses from the scholarly to the fanatical.

In Chapter 2 Steinberg details the fascinating process of resurrecting a lost poem from its physical imprint on a page of carbon paper. This page is one of the 32 beautiful full colour images included in the book. The process of reconstruction involved shining a light at different angles at the carbon paper and taking multiple hi-res images to form a composite or, what the book calls, a ‘Franken-image’.

Although the colour images are interesting and valuable, some of the book's formatting is a little odd and affects the reader's engagement. For example, printing longer extracts from the poems in italics and centre justified alters the shape of the poem and the way the lines are read, which does violence to the form of the poems with no discernible benefit.

Chapter 6, solely authored by Gail Crowther, offers some interesting insights into the process of understanding non-textual archival items such as Plath's clothes and hair. The chapter acknowledges the undefinable charge of handling such items. It also engages briefly with the idea of fetishisation and the 'cult of Plath'. It is a shame that this was not explored further. Although the author draws on some interesting critical sources as a framework for the chapter's ideas, Crowther stops just short of really interrogating and drawing out her response to these items. The final section of the chapter quotes extensively from blogs and stories of researchers' responses to engaging with items like Plath's hair in the archive. These kinds of responses are important to acknowledge in our work on archives, but remain here at the level of anecdote. They could have been usefully contextualised by engagement with the field of Affect Theory.

Chapter 7 by Peter K. Steinberg traces the fascinating paper trail of Plath's editorship of a special edition of American poetry. The chapter provides lists of poems Plath cut out of journals, draft contents lists, her comments on certain poems from her letters and a list of echoes in her work of the contemporary American poetry that she was reading at the time. This provides an illuminating context in which to read the development of Plath's poetic voice and sits well alongside the work of scholars such as Jo Gill who discuss Plath as a 'transatlantic' writer. As with much of the book, Steinberg offers little commentary on these materials, but the chapter will no doubt be invaluable to Plath scholars considering this aspect of her work.

This book is a valuable addition to the series of books exploring Plath's archives and shining new light on her work. It provides a wealth of primary material for researchers and uncovers some new archival information. Whilst limited in its critical engagement, it is an enjoyable and engaging read that explores some of the often forgotten aspects of Plath's life and work with clear passion for its subject.

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