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Editorial

Whilst in the last two years *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* has fallen silent, the Ted Hughes Society and, more importantly, the poetry of Ted Hughes has not. In the gap since the last issue, there has been a stream of important news, events and publications in the world of Hughes Studies: from the acquisition and opening of two very significant new archives at Pembroke College, Cambridge and the University of Huddersfield, to the publication of Carrie Smith's *The Page is Printed*, and the recent widely-reviewed publication of Mark Wormald's long-awaited book *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes*. However, whilst these events have all rightly received national and international press coverage, perhaps Hughes's most surprising, and certainly loudest, appearance in the interregnum between issues has been on the stages of theatres and festival venues across Europe.

On the 19th May 2021 – in the midst of one of the UK's irregularly-spaced and now difficult to exactly number 'lockdowns' – the musician Thom Yorke of the band Radiohead made a post on the social network Instagram which consisted of a shaky photocopy of some five stanzas of poetry. Scrawled across the top of the image, presumably in Yorke's hand, was the legend 'from The Smile by Ted Hughes Crow'. The syntax of the inscription is evocatively tangled, with a hint that Yorke might be alive to the often-overlooked subtitle to Hughes's 1970 collection *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow*, and (despite the missing apostrophe) was presenting the poem as the work of 'Ted Hughes' Crow'. Or he might have been willing to mangle his syntax to make sure that his five hundred thousand or so 'followers' (and the legions of journalists who would pick up the story later that day and broadcast it to his millions of fans around the world) could indeed follow the source of the unusual poem. For, with the kind of cavalier attitude to copyright concerns which (I assume) a rockstar can afford to take (and of which a lowly literary critic can only dream), Yorke effectively published the second-half of Hughes's poem 'The Smile' as an elliptical way to announce the formation of his new band to the world.

The Smile – formed with Radiohead's guitarist and leading contemporary composer Johnny Greenwood – took to the virtual stage of the virtual excuse for the Glastonbury Festival three days later, and have since released an album (teasingly titled, in light of their use of social media, *A Light for Attracting Attention*) and are currently embarked on a long European tour, to be followed by

a North American tour in the autumn. In doing so, they seem – in a move which for once truly deserves the often-meaningless epithet ‘metatextual’ – to have become the very embodiment of Hughes’s ‘Smile’, described earlier in the poem (in a line not posted by Yorke) as ‘circling the earth’ (*CP* 241). Whatever one makes of this latest entanglement of the work of Ted Hughes and rock music (and for my money The Smile have already cleared the low bar set by Pete Townshend’s *Iron Man* “musical”), it was undoubtedly gratifying and clarifying to see Hughes’s sudden and unexpected emergence into the forefront of contemporary culture. (Although, if you saw the Instagram post and share any of my own tendencies towards musico-poetical nerdery, you are also presumably still consumed with anxiety at your inability to immediately identify which edition of ‘Ted Hughes Crow’ Yorke had used... Which edition of *Crow* ends ‘The Smile’ on p. 63? Certainly none of the ones I’ve checked... Answers gratefully accepted via email.)

Of course, whilst Thom Yorke and The Smile might be the most prominent musicians to engage Hughes’s *Crow*, they’re far from the first (see Peter Fydler, *THSJ* 7.1) and certainly not the most insightful. That accolade, in my view, belongs to the Polish poet and songwriter Grzegorz Kwiatkowski, the lead-singer of post-punk band Trupa Trupa, who took part in March 2021 in the Ted Hughes Society’s online event ‘Ted Hughes’s *Crow* at 50: A Seminar’. Here, Kwiatkowski joined fellow poets Alice Oswald, Malcolm Guite and Terry Gifford, as well as the novelist, mythographer and Hughes Society patron Marina Warner and the naturalist Mark Cocker in discussing the legacies and lineaments of *Crow*. For any reader who didn’t attend the seminar but would like to watch the discussion, the event is archived on the Ted Hughes Society Website (<http://thetedhughessociety.org/crowat50>); sadly, Kwiatkowski’s perceptive discussion of unheeded historical legacies seems to have grown more prescient and pressing in the intervening eighteen months.

However, as this issue of the *THSJ* will amply demonstrate, the musicians haven’t monopolised Hughes entirely these last two years. The libraries and archives which, in 2020 had stood closed to scholars are now open again and – in the case of Pembroke College, Cambridge and the University of Huddersfield – significantly bigger than they were previously. The full fruits of this opening up will soon be heard at the forthcoming 9th International Ted Hughes Conference, ‘Conversation with the World’, hosted at the University of Huddersfield, 7th–9th September 2022. But already, this issue of the *THSJ* presents four ground-breaking discussions of a wide range of Hughes’s work, carried out by both eminent and established scholars and exciting new voices in the conversation around Hughes.

In the first essay, Ann Skea draws on the British Library archive to consider ‘The Sorrows of the Deer’, the often-cited but not yet fully comprehended ‘strange

early title' for *Birthday Letters*. Tracking this evocation of the deer from a Gravesian 'Roebuck' in *The White Goddess* into the thickets of the sixteenth-century in Shakespeare and the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, Skea skilfully demonstrates how the significance of the image finds its root in the Celtic world of St Patrick, emerging as a magical creature and 'perfect shamanic guide' for the poet.

The first new voice introduced in this issue is that of Catherine Macnaughton, whose fascinating essay explores the lifelong engagement of Hughes with Jean Racine's *Phèdre* initiated by Sylvia Plath's essay on the play written at Cambridge. In demonstrating how Hughes's eventual versioning of *Phèdre* represented a re-establishment of what is termed a 'poetic folie-à-deux' with Plath, Macnaughton also surfaces the importance of Hughes's commissions and collaborations within the theatrical realm, particularly that with the director Tim Supple.

In the next essay of this issue another new voice addresses the critically-apprehended but not yet comprehended relationship between Hughes and the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert. Through a sequence of meticulous close readings and comparisons between Herbert's work and Hughes's *Crow*, Maria Kaminska demonstrates the resonances in both poet's response to trauma, tragedy and history, and shows how this kind of poetry can become a vital and sustaining force in hard times. Alongside this nimble argument, through her own translations Kaminska also introduces Herbert's perspectives on Hughes which have so far remained unavailable to English-language readers, providing us with the unforgettable image of the two poets enjoying a pint together.

The issue ends with a new essay by Mark Wormald which gives us a tantalising glimpse beyond the edge of his recent critically acclaimed book *The Catch*, which drew so valuably on the friendship between Hughes and the painter Barrie Cooke. Here, Wormald turns to consider the other axes in what was a four-way friendship including the Irish poets Seamus Heaney and John Montague. It is this latter, comparatively less-known figure who Wormald terms 'the fourth man' and here establishes as an important figure at the heart of what we could call the fishing-painting-poetry nexus which meant so much, and had such a lasting effect on, Hughes.

Finally the issue ends with a very significant review section including: a review of Carrie Smith's major new scholarly monograph on Hughes's compositional process; a consideration of a new edition of the 'work' of Assia Wevill; an addition to the deservedly-growing field of reviews of Mark Wormald's *The Catch*; and an appraisal of Heather Clark's *Red Comet: the Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*, a work which is, to my mind, undoubtedly the best book

yet written on Plath, and the most significant literary biography since Richard Ellmann's study of James Joyce.

James Robinson

York, August 2022

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List of abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes

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

And by Sylvia Plath

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

Birthday Letters and 'The Sorrows of the Deer'

by Ann Skea

Among Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* manuscripts in the British Library are a number of old school textbooks in which Hughes wrote drafts of poems, most of which were eventually published in *Birthday Letters*.¹ Hughes labelled these books S1 to S9, and the 'S' almost certainly alludes to Sylvia Plath. In five of these books Hughes inscribed the heading 'The Sorrows of the Deer', and this was clearly the original title he chose for the *Birthday Letters* sequence. I have described elsewhere how the structure of the published sequence of *Birthday Letter* poems fits the pattern of a Cabbalistic/Hermetic journey,² and in every such journey, as Hughes wrote when discussing *As You Like It* in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, 'nothing is accidental' (SGCB 275). So, why did he choose that strange early title for these poems?

Hughes was, of course, well aware that Robert Graves identified the deer as being sacred to the Great Goddess. Chapter XIV of *The White Goddess* is titled 'The Roebuck in the Thicket'; and according to Graves the Roebuck hides in a thicket of twenty-two sacred trees and its meaning is 'Hide the Secret'.³ Twenty-two happens to be the number of paths connecting the ten Sephiroth on the Cabbalistic Tree and the number of cards in the Major Arcana of the Tarot pack. Whether or not this was significant for Graves (he does not mention it), Hughes would have known it and it would have had significance for him in his final structuring of the *Birthday Letters* sequence. Writing to Keith Sagar shortly after the publication of *Birthday Letters*, he also identified himself with the Roebuck, saying that his decision to return to writing poems about his life with Sylvia, was precipitated by 'the huge outcry that flushed me from my thicket in 70–71–72 when Sylvia's poems & novel hit the first militant wave of Feminism as a divine revelation from their Patron Saint' (LTH 394).

¹ BL Add MSS 88918/1/6-8

² Ann Skea, 'Birthday Letters: Poetry and Magic', <https://ann.skea.com/BLCabala.htm> [accessed 20/06/2022].

³ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp.54, 251.

Hughes's deep knowledge of Shakespeare's work also meant that he would have come across the stricken, weeping deer in two of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*, in both of which the deer is linked to secrets and self-revelation. Of the two plays, the second is the most likely influence on Ted's choice of title, but *Hamlet*'s reference to a 'stricken deer' and its possible link with the Renaissance philosopher and Cabbalist Giordano Bruno may also be relevant. *Hamlet* makes this bitterly ironic remark when, after watching a performance of the play, *The Mouse Trap*, Claudius flees, fearing that his secret has been revealed:

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungallèd play,
For some must watch, while some must sleep,
So runs the world away.
Hamlet (3.2, 249-252)⁴

Here, there is paronomasia between 'hart' and 'heart'; and the word 'ungalled' suggests a heart untouched by anger but also, since a gall is a parasitic growth, a heart which has not been parasitically infected in some way. Taken together, these words suggest that *Hamlet* sees Claudius as a parasite who has sullied the pure love his mother had for his father. So, the deer, which in mythology is one of the forms of the shape-shifting Goddess of Love, weeps.

In a paper by Marianne Kimura, the 'stricken deer' is identified in several of Shakespeare's plays, most notably in *Hamlet*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.⁵ She links these references to the life and work of Renaissance philosopher, mathematician, poet and Platonist, Giordano Bruno.⁶ In *Gli Eroici Furori* ('The Heroic Frenzies'), Bruno describes the encounter between Actaeon (who is out hunting deer with his dogs) and the Goddess Diana:

Behold, the sylvan waters now display
The loveliest form that god or man might see;
All alabaster, pearl, and gold is she;
He saw her; and the hunter turned to prey.
The stag who sought to bend
His lightened step towards denser forest depths
His dogs devoured; they caught him in their trap.⁷

⁴ Stephen Greenblatt et al (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 1742 (all further references to the works of Shakespeare are to this edition).

⁵ Marianne Kimura, 'Hamlet's "stricken deer": a pointed reference to *Gli Eroici Furori* and the execution of Giordano Bruno', *英語英米文学論輯：京都女子大学大学院文学研究科研究紀要* [English-American Literature Bulletin: Bulletin of Graduate School of Letters, Kyoto Women's University] 17 (2018): 1-18.

⁶ For more on the connection between Bruno and *Hamlet* see Hillary Gatti, 'Bruno and Shakespeare: *Hamlet*', *Essays on Giordano Bruno* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 140-160.

⁷ Original:

Explaining his meaning here, Bruno wrote that:

Actaeon signifies the intellect intent on hunting divine wisdom, on grasping divine beauty. [...] Thus, Actaeon with those thoughts – those dogs – who sought outside himself for goodness, wisdom, beauty – the wild creatures – arrived into the presence of that prey, and was enraptured outside himself by such beauty. He became prey himself, and saw himself converted into what he sought. He realized then that he himself had turned into the longed-for prey of his own dogs, of his own thoughts.⁸

Thus, the myth of Actaeon and Diana becomes a metaphor for the passionate search by the heroic lover for Divine Eternal Truth, and Actaeon, the ‘stricken deer’, is the victim of the Goddess’s powers, but also of his own lack of self-knowledge. *Birthday Letters*, whilst resembling Bruno’s poem as a passionate and heroic expression of Hughes own search for truth, and as a record of his own negotiations with the Goddess, is also about seeking self-knowledge.⁹

In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Jaques weeps for the wounded deer and the whole play is about distorted love. Here, the First Lord describes to the Duke a wounded stag and Jaques’ identification with the creature:

FIRST LORD

Ecco tra l’acqui il più bel busto e faccia
che veder poss’il mortal e divino,
in ostro et alabastro et oro fino
vedde: e ’l gran cacciator dovenne caccia.

Il cervio ch’a’ più folti
luoghi drizzav’i passi più leggieri,
ratto voraro i suoi gran cani e molti.

Giordano Bruno, *On the Heroic Frenzies: A Translation of ‘Gli Eroici Furori’*, ed. and trans., Ingrid D. Rowland (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 106-107. An older translation can be accessed via Project Gutenberg: Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts (Gli Eroici Furori): An Ethical Poem*, trans. I. Williams (London: George Redway, 1887), pp. 90-91 (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19817/19817-h/19817-h.htm> - First) [accessed 20/06/2022].

⁸ Original:

Atteone significa l’intelletto intento alla caccia della divina sapienza, all’apprension della beltà divina. [...]Cossi Atteone con que’ pensieri, que’ cani che cercavano estra di sé il bene, la sapienza, la beltade, la fiera boscareccia, et in quel modo che giunse alla presenza di quella, rapito fuor di sé da tanta bellezza, dovenne preda, veddesi convertito in quel che cercava; e s’accorse che de gli suoi cani, de gli suoi pensieri egli medesimo venea ad essere la bramata preda

Bruno, *On the Heroic Frenzies*, pp. 106-107, 108-111.

⁹ Hughes owned copies of Frances Yates’s *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, and her *Lull and Bruno*, both of which describe Bruno’s writing about Actaeon. Whilst there are no volumes of Bruno in Hughes’s library now held at Emory University, there is a translation of *Gli Eroici Furori* in the Cambridge University library. Based on my own conversation with Hughes about Yates and Bruno, I am sure he had read *Gli Eroici Furori* in translation.

The melancholy Jaques grieves at that,
 [...]
 Today my Lord of Amiens and myself
 Did steal behind him as he lay along
 Under an oak, whose antic root peeps out
 Upon the brook that brawls along this wood,
 To the which place a poor sequestered stag
 That from the hunter's aim had ta'en a hurt
 Did come to languish. And indeed, my lord,
 The wretched animal heaved forth such groans
 That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat
 Almost to bursting, and the big round tears
 Coursed one another down his innocent nose
 In piteous chase.

[...]

DUKE SENIOR But what said Jaques?
 Did he not moralize the spectacle?

FIRST LORD O, yes, into a thousand similes.

[...]

DUKE And did you leave him in this contemplation?

FIRST LORD We did, my lord, weeping and commenting
 Upon the sobbing deer.

As You Like It (2.1, 26-66)

Hughes, in his own lengthy discussion of Jaques in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, writes of Jaques as 'a gloomy wallflower', the one character in the play who stands apart and sees the distortion of love which takes place all around him. So, the melancholy Jaques/Shakespeare weeps over the wounded stag, but he is also 'a summarizing, unifying intelligence' (SGCB 113), and 'a kind of Hermes, the guide to the mysteries of the Underworld' (SGCB 115) who, symbolically, will restore harmony and who 'reassembles the whole, with ego and soul reunited in perfect love' (SGCB 108).

Hughes's discussion of ritual Hermetic drama in this complicated analysis of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is revealing. Early in the book, when he writes about Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism, many of the things he says apply equally to himself and to his own method of meditative visualisation and re-creation in *Birthday Letters*. Among the 'archaic, magical, religious ideas and methods' which caught Shakespeare's attention, he notes:

The idea of as-if-factual visualization as the first practical essential of effective meditation (as in St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Disciplines*, as well as in Cabbala).

The idea of meditation as a conjuring, by ritual magic, of hallucinatory figures – with whom conversations can be held, and who communicate intuitive, imaginative vision and clairvoyance.

The idea of ritual drama for the manipulation of the soul. (*SGCB* 33)

In a letter to two German translators of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes wrote of his ‘sense of communicating with her [Sylvia Plath] directly, so to speak’ (*P&C* 323); and constantly throughout the sequence he conjures her and visualises her: ‘I see you’ (*CP* 1064), ‘There you are in all your innocence...’ (*CP* 1136), ‘Now I see, I saw, sitting, the lonely | Girl who was going to die’ (*CP* 1086); ‘you returned...’ (*CP* 1157). As he remembers their love and their lives together, he also created vivid images of himself, and of Plath’s father, Otto, ‘I glimpsed him...’ (*CP* 1147), ‘You stand there at the blackboard’ (*CP* 1167). Yet nowhere in the sequence does he name Plath. Everywhere, in spite of the detailed, remembered biographical details of their life together, he addresses her as ‘you’, a direct form of address, but also one which allows him to link her with the Goddess, because ‘Every living woman’, as he wrote, in his *Vacana* Notebook, represents a test which the Goddess sets for the human male.¹⁰ Every living woman embodies the Goddess.

Earlier in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes had expounded his idea of active ritual drama as a spell – ‘a kind of sympathetic magic’ – ‘working on the assumption (archetypal and instinctive) that a deliberately shaped ritual can reactivate energies on a mythic plane so powerfully that they can recapture and reshape an ego that seems to have escaped them on the realistic plane’ (*SGCB* 107). This is exactly the sort of sympathetic magic (a self-revelatory, self-changing dramatic ritual) which Hughes was attempting when he wrote the *Birthday Letters* poems. *Birthday Letters* is a carefully structured, ritual re-enactment of love and loss in which Hughes himself (like Jaques) weeps for the wounded deer.

There are other indications that Hughes had a special interest in deer. In 2003, when Daniel Weissbort was working on his book, *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations*, he told me of Ted’s fascination with a poem written by the Hungarian poet Ferenc Juhász – ‘The Boy Changed into a Stag Cries Out at the Gate of Secrets’. It is possible that Ted had first seen this poem in one of the collections of Hungarian poetry which he began to acquire when his interest in Eastern European poetry was first aroused. One anthology of Hungarian poetry from the thirteenth century to the present day, translated into French, was presented to Ted by the Hungarian poet Janos Csokits in 1963. Ted certainly saw the poem in *The Plough and the Pen*:

¹⁰ Ann Skea, ‘Ted Hughes’ *Vacanas*’, in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts, and Terry Gifford (eds.), *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 83. Also available at <https://ann.skea.com/THVacanas.html> [accessed 21/06/2022]

Writing from Hungary 1930-1956,¹¹ and, as Daniel Weissbort records in his book, he thought the translation by Kenneth McRobbie ‘problematic’, so he immediately rewrote it, ‘working with great concentration and at speed’.¹²

Juhász’s poem can be interpreted in many ways, including as a version of Actaeon’s vision of the Goddess and its results (‘human tears shone on his stag’s face’ in Ted’s poem ‘Actaeon’ in his *Tales From Ovid* [CP 937]); or even just as a poem about lost loved ones. If nothing else, Juhász’s lines ‘he stood over the Universe, on the ringed summit / there the boy stood at the gate of secrets’ (ST 36) would have caught Ted’s attention. Also, among a number of books of Hungarian poetry in Ted’s library (now held at Emory University in Atlanta) is an anthology entitled: *In Quest of the Miracle Stag: the Poetry of Hungary* which was published in 1996.¹³

Ted’s enduring interest in the sorrows associated with the Great Goddess’s shape–shifting, secret–hiding deer is clear. In 1978, when he and Seamus Heaney were collecting poems for *The Rattle Bag*, he wrote to his old friend Terence McCaughey, who was then Senior Lecturer in Irish Studies at Trinity College, Dublin, asking, among other things, ‘what is “The Sorrows of the Deer”?’ (LTH 394-5).¹⁴ It turned out to be ‘The Deer’s Cry’, a prayer which St Patrick is said to have uttered for protection when the fifth-century Irish King of Tara laid a trap to try and prevent him from entering Tara to spread the Christian faith. In answer to his prayer, Patrick and his monks were given the shapes of wild deer with a fawn following them. The prayer, which takes the form of an invocation and a charm, became well-known, was set to music, and was and still is a popular hymn. Two of its verses are likely to have had special appeal for Hughes: one calls on the natural energies, the other is a traditional protective charm against malign influences:

¹¹ Ilona Duczynak and Karl Polanyi (eds.), *The Plough and the Pen: Writing from Hungary 1930-1956*, trans. Kenneth McRobbie (London: Peter Owen, 1963). In his introduction to the volume, W.H.Auden describes ‘The Boy Changed into a Stag Cries Out at the Gate of Secrets’ as ‘one of the greatest poems written in my time’, see *The Plough and the Pen*, p. 11. Interestingly, the poem was not included in *The Rattle Bag*.

¹² Daniel Weissbort, *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.24. Ted’s translation of Juhász’s poem is published in full here; and the first lines of a translation made by David Wevill for Penguin’s *Modern European Poets* series in 1970, are included in an Appendix.

¹³ Adam Makkai et al (eds.), *In Quest of the Miracle Stag: the Poetry of Hungary: an Anthology of Hungarian Poetry in Translation from the 13th Century to the present in commemoration of the 1100th anniversary of the foundation of Hungary and the 40th anniversary of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956* (Urbana Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Hughes’s copy is available in the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, PH3441. E3 I5 1996 HUGHES.

¹⁴ Hughes was looking for a copy of Alexander Carmichael (ed. and trans.), *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations with illustrative notes on words, rites, and customs, dying and obsolete: orally collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Norman Macleod, 1900).

4. I bind to myself to-day,
 The power of Heaven,
 The light of the Sun,
 The whiteness of Snow,
 The force of Fire,
 The flashing of lightning,
 The velocity of Wind,
 The depth of the Sea,
 The stability of the Earth,
 The hardness of Rocks

6. I have set around me all these powers,
 Against every hostile savage power
 Directed against my body and my soul,
 Against the incantations of false prophets,
 Against the black laws of heathenism,
 Against the false laws of heresy,
 Against the deceits of idolatry,
 Against the spells of women, and smiths and druids,
 Against all knowledge that binds the soul of man.¹⁵

Poetry, as Hughes said, ‘is traditionally supposed to be magical’.¹⁶ In invocations and charms like that of St Patrick’s ‘Deer’s Cry’, together with music and ritual, it connects us to the Otherworld of our instincts and imagination. The Deer, too, has a long history of shape-shifting. It ‘Hides the Secret’ of moving between our world and the Otherworld of the gods where, especially in Celtic mythology, it is closely linked to love and loss. It is therefore the perfect shamanic guide for a poet who seeks to communicate directly with a lost loved one, as Hughes does in the poetic drama of *Birthday Letters*. And so, in this respect, Hughes’s early title for these poems clearly acknowledges his debt to this magical creature.

¹⁵ James Henthorn Todd, *St. Patrick: Apostle of Ireland: A Memoir of his Life and Mission with an introductory dissertation on some early usages of the Church in Ireland, and its historical position from the establishment of the English colony to the present day* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, & Co., 1864), 427-428; this work includes the full prayer and a discussion of its origins and use.

¹⁶ Ted Hughes, ‘The Critical Forum’, Norwich Tapes, 1978. Transcript at <https://ann.skea.com/CriticalForum.htm> [accessed 21/06/2022]

Ted Hughes and *Phèdre*: a 'poetic folie à deux'

by Catherine Macnaughton

On the night that Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath met, Saturday 25 February 1956, at a party in Cambridge, Plath was working on an essay entitled 'Passion as Destiny in Racine's Plays', with particular reference to the French dramatist Racine's neoclassical tragedy *Phèdre* (1677).¹ Two days later she wrote her poetic response to meeting Hughes: 'Pursuit', a poem 'dedicated to Ted Hughes' and composed of images of hunting, blood and 'the dark forces of lust' (*JSP* 214). It begins with an epigraph from *Phèdre*: 'Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit' [Deep in the woods your image follows me], which is followed by Plath's haunting opening lines: 'There is a panther stalks me down: / One day I'll have my death of him'.² In August 1997, more than 40 years later, Hughes accepted a commission to write his version of Jean Racine's *Phèdre* for the London stage. This decision came precisely at the point he was deciding to break his silence of more than 34 years since Plath's suicide and to publish *Birthday Letters*, his long deferred poetic response to his life with and without her.

The congruence of these two decisions in 1997 is no coincidence. Firstly, dates were significant to Hughes, who had a keen interest in astrology and frequently drew up horoscopes before making important decisions such as requesting publication dates, including that of *Birthday Letters*.³ Secondly, close study of his published and unpublished letters and his poetic trajectory reveals that Hughes's decision to translate *Phèdre*, whilst most certainly an artistic one and intimately linked to his vision of tragic theatre, was also, like *Birthday Letters*, a long-deferred confrontation with Plath. Hughes's version of *Phèdre* thus emerges as a valedictory recognition – he was to die less than two months after the first performance – of the poetic and personal relationship with the play that he had

¹ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), p. 98, and *LSP1* 1122.

² Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, ed. Richard Parish (London: Duckworth, 1996), l. 543. My translation. Further line references in body of text. Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 22.

³ On Hughes's astrological interests see Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes The Life of a Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), p. 240, and Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 25.

shared with Plath since their first meeting. Or, in other words, *Phèdre* becomes both his and their ‘poetic folie à deux’ (*LTH* 627), a phrase he coined from the French term ‘folie à deux’ (a shared psychosis or madness) to describe the poetic bond between him and Plath.⁴

Plath was studying *Phèdre* for the Cambridge English Tripos Tragedy Paper. *Phèdre*’s place in the tragic canon was well established: its pedigree as ‘one of the seminal masterpieces of French literature’ went back to Voltaire, who called it ‘[t]he masterpiece of the human mind’, whilst in 1921, T. S. Eliot had acknowledged Racine, and his ‘metrical disciple’ Baudelaire, as France’s ‘two greatest masters of diction [...and] also the greatest two psychologists, the most curious explorers of the soul’.⁵ Racine’s play, drawn extensively from myths contained in Seneca’s *Phaedra* and Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, explores the human mind of Phèdre, daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, who is dying as a result of her forbidden love for her husband, King Theseus’s son, Hippolytus. Believing Theseus to be dead, she confesses her love to Hippolytus, who is doubly repelled: by the morally aberrant adultery and incest of her desire, and because he is in love with Aricia, his father’s enemy. When Theseus returns unexpectedly and very much alive, Phèdre’s nurse tells him that it is Hippolytus who is guilty of loving Phèdre. In revenge Theseus calls on Neptune to kill Hippolytus; afterwards Phèdre reveals to Theseus his son’s innocence and then dies, having poisoned herself.

For Plath, whose history of depression, ambiguous feelings about her dead father, and an earlier suicide attempt are now well-known, *Phèdre* struck a resonant poetic and emotional chord.⁶ The appeal for Plath in 1956 lay in Racine’s mix of myth and Alexandrine verse, which lends both grandeur and measure to his psychological study of Phèdre’s irreconcilable conflict between guilt and illicit passion, and her overpowering desire to die.⁷ As we will see, Plath’s journal and letters written in the immediate aftermath of meeting Hughes, along with her poem ‘Pursuit’, show that she identified strongly with the character of Phèdre: she felt her own parallel conflict between an existing relationship with Richard Sassoon, by whom she had been recently rejected, and the new, exciting ‘dark forces of lust’

⁴ For usage of ‘folie à deux’ see ‘folie, n.’ OED Online, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72521> [accessed 29 December 2019].

⁵ Quotations from: Racine, *Phèdre*, ed. Parish, blurb; Jean Racine, *Iphegenia, Phaedra, Athaliah*, trans. by John Cairncross, p. 8, and T. S. Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 281-91, p. 290.

⁶ Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989), pp. 43-47 and Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl’s Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp. 270-84.

⁷ Alexandrines are lines of 12 beats in rhyming couplets.

ignited when Hughes ripped off her red hairband at the Falcon Yard party, and she bit him 'long and hard on the cheek' (*JSP* 212).

On 6 March 1956, a week after meeting Hughes, Plath wrote to Sassoon to try to resurrect their love affair. In grandiose, tragic tones which link passion and death, she told him: 'I have given myself to that fury and that death which is loving you', and says of herself: 'I go about full with the darkness of my flame, like Phèdre [sic]' (*LSP* 1128-9). In Plath's image of herself 'full with the darkness of my flame' she takes on Racine's metonym of 'une flamme si noire' [a flame so black] (l. 310) for Phèdre's illicit passion.⁸ This quotation comes from Phèdre's 47-line speech in act I, scene III, in which she reveals the fury and guilt of her passion:

Je voulais en mourant prendre soin de ma gloire,
Et dérober au jour une flamme si noire

[I wanted to die to preserve my good name
And to conceal from daylight such a black flame] (ll. 309-10)

Racine's 'black flame' combines and encapsulates Phèdre's illicit love for Hippolytus and her yearning for death, a tragic mix of human frailty with the conflicting dark from her father Minos and light from her mother Pasiphaë, daughter of Helios, the sun.

Plath clearly wanted to remember the words of her letter to Sassoon, because she copied them into her journal (*JSP* 220, 222). Whatever her intention, it ensured that after her death Hughes, as her executor, was able to read in her journal how Plath's identification with Phèdre at the time they met extended beyond her poem 'Pursuit' into a preoccupation with death and desire. He would have learned from the same journal entry that Plath's Cambridge supervisor, having read her 15-page essay 'Passion as Destiny in Racine', submitted a week after meeting him, reminded Plath that in Racine 'passion is only one aspect and not the fatal holocaust I made it' (*JSP* 225).⁹ Hughes may also have noticed in the journal that Plath adopts the possessive pronoun 'my' with the character of Phèdre, suggesting a tender, intimate relationship: 'Phèdre, my phèdre [sic] with her dark flame and that billowing cloak of scarlet which was blood offered and blood spilt' (*JSP* 564). In this entry, from 5 April 1956, written after watching Jean Cocteau's ballet of *Phèdre* in Paris, Plath extends her image of Phèdre's 'dark flame' to include her earlier description of her meeting with Hughes: the 'scarlet [...] blood offered and blood spilt' suggest her

⁸ My translation. Further translations from *Phèdre* are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁹ This essay, dated 3 March 1956, is currently held by Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Plath MSS II.13.2. See also *LSP* 1122.

hairband as the blood offered (she felt its loss as a violation) and the blood she drew from Hughes when she bit his cheek.¹⁰

Strikingly similar images of blood run through her poem, 'Pursuit', in which Hughes as the stalking panther cries 'blood, let blood be spilt' and the poem's speaker admits: 'to quench his thirst I squander blood' (*SPCP* 22-3). In 'Pursuit' Plath depicts Hughes as a male feline incarnation of Racine's Venus, whom Racine describes in *Phèdre* as a violent aggressor, attached by her claws to her helpless prey: 'Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée' [All of Venus fastened onto her prey] (l. 306). In the poem Plath similarly makes Hughes 'the black marauder', who 'prowls', with 'bright [...] claws that mar the flesh' (*SPCP* 22-3). At the time, Plath thought the poem one of her best and sent it to her mother, describing it as 'a symbol of the terrible beauty of death'.¹¹ This phrase also describes her fascination with the character of *Phèdre*, who is dying even before she appears on stage and, what is more, wants only to die. And thus Plath was identifying with a character for whom death is both the destiny decreed by the gods and her human desire.

Plath's and Hughes's relationship with *Phèdre* became a shared experience when, in March 1960, they went together to a performance in the original French by the Comédie Française in London. Plath wrote enthusiastically to her parents-in-law: '[We] saw a wonderful French play – Phèdre [sic] by Racine – in French with a French troupe'.¹² If, for Plath, with her intense identification with the tragic *Phèdre*, the performance was 'wonderful', for Hughes it was a revelation. Indeed, it was to become a seminal experience that stayed with him for the rest of his life and represented his vision of the ultimate theatrical performance.

This vision centres on the vocal qualities of sound which could be achieved by actors on stage, Hughes believed, only if they absorbed and *felt* the essence and energy of the words, rather than trying to act or project them. Hughes describes his vision in his essay 'Inner Music' (1988), where he recalls how director Peter Brook attempted to strip his actors of 'vocal mannerisms' by making them declaim at speed without gestures or movement (*WP* 244-8). This created a delivery that Hughes found 'utterly verbal' and made of 'pure sound', projecting 'explosive, express containment' (*WP* 245). It was also for Hughes a reliving of the 1960 performance of *Phèdre*. He writes in the essay: 'the closest thing to it that I have heard was the Comédie-Française [sic] playing Racine [...] I felt I had glimpsed a whole greater existence of drama' (*WP* 245-6).

¹⁰ '[M]y lovely red hairband [...] whose like I shall never again find' (*JSP* 212).

¹¹ Letter to Aurelia Plath, dated Friday 9 March 1956 (*LSP1* 1133).

¹² Letter to Edith and William Hughes, dated 11 March 1960 (*LSP2* 435).

Hughes's enduring memory of the intensity of this performance was key to his decision in August 1997 to translate *Phèdre* for theatre director Jonathan Kent's new production, starring Diana Rigg in the title role. Determined to try and recapture the effect of *Phèdre* on him in 1960, Hughes wrote to Kent on 13 August 1997:

[O]ne of my touchstone theatrical experiences was a performance of Phedre [sic] by the Comédie Francaise [sic]. Can we get that kind of deadlocked intensity? Face to face combat with flamethrowers?¹³

Hughes's letter rings with enthusiasm for the project, and particularly for working with Kent and Rigg, who he believes are best placed to achieve the same 'deadlocked intensity' which nine years earlier he had described as Racine's 'explosive, express containment'. He concludes the letter to Kent: 'Well, Diana's the one. And I know you can make absolutely the most of it. So I'll have a go'. After forty-one years, Hughes was ready to confront the 'dark flame' that Plath had appropriated.

Whether or not he was also thinking about Plath's identification with *Phèdre* when he wrote to Kent about 'deadlocked intensity' and 'flamethrowers', he was most certainly thinking about her two days later. Comparison of the dates of Hughes's unpublished letters to Jonathan Kent in the British Library with the dates of published letters to literary critic Keith Sagar shows that two days after agreeing to translate *Phèdre*, he revealed what he knew to be his most momentous personal literary decision about Plath. On 15 August 1997, two days after writing to Kent, he wrote to Sagar, his friend and correspondent of nearly 30 years, revealing that he was 'putting together a vast pile of pieces about S[y]lvia P[lath] & me' (PC 258). This was to be *Birthday Letters*, the poetic elegy of his life with and without Plath, that he had deferred for nearly 35 years, since her death in 1963. It would be, finally, his response to those who had long accused him of being responsible for Plath's death and for trying to distort her poetic legacy. It would also include, albeit with the benefit of long poetic hindsight, his interpretation of her haunting lines in 'Pursuit': 'There is a panther stalks me down:/ One day I'll have my death of him'.

In this letter to Sagar, Hughes feels the weight of his decision to publish *Birthday Letters* and its possible repercussions: 'It will bring the sky down on my head, if I publish it', he predicts. Despite his ambivalence about publication, Hughes's decision in the space of two days to reveal the existence of *Birthday Letters* to Sagar and to accept the *Phèdre* commission points to a commitment finally to confront Plath publicly in both elegy and tragedy. As a result, a heady sense of liberation and even rejuvenation, already gestating in the enthusiasm of

¹³ Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent, 13 August 1997, BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

Hughes's letter to Kent, developed in the months ahead. Hughes expresses this elation in a letter to poet Seamus Heaney in June 1998, some five months after publication of *Birthday Letters*, but while he was still working with Jonathan Kent on *Phèdre*, before its first performance in August 1998. He describes to Heaney the '[s]trange euphorias of what I can only call 'freedom' or a sense of self-determination, internally, that are quite new to me. Sometimes I have a mad waft of how I felt in 1955, before I met S[ylvia] P[lath]' (*LTH* 718).

Hughes must have set to work quickly after accepting the commission to translate *Phèdre* in August 1997, for, exactly three months to the day after his first letter, he wrote to Kent again on 13 November 1997.¹⁴ The letter opens: 'Here's the result of about five drafts', and evidently accompanied Hughes's first submission of his translation. The British Library archive contains three full autograph versions of the play and a series of typed versions with autograph amendments, which most likely make up the 'five drafts' to which he refers.¹⁵ What appears to be the earliest autograph draft is written in four different inks, suggesting that it was written in at least four tranches. Most lines are unchanged, as if written in bouts of fluid lucidity and certainty, whilst others are heavily corrected with crossings out and substitutions, suggestive of moments of artistic struggle. In his first letter to Kent, Hughes had spoken of investing 'massive labour' in such a translation, and the presence of this series of autograph and typed versions in the British Library manuscript attest to a sustained and intense level of labour.¹⁶

In a further significant congruence of dates, on 17 November 1997, four days after sending this draft of *Phèdre* to Kent, Hughes wrote again to Sagar about his decision to publish his poems about Plath. In this second letter Hughes quantifies the 'vast pile of pieces' of the first letter, informing Sagar that he has put together '88 pieces about S.P. and me'.¹⁷ This description corresponds with the published version of *Birthday Letters*, which comprises 88 poems. However, Hughes's trepidation about the public response to the collection, also expressed in the first letter, is still palpable: he asks Sagar to keep the news secret until publication in mid-January 1998, fearing that, if pre-warned, those who held him responsible for Plath's death would have 'entrenched weaponry mounted ready' (*PC* 260).

Having prepared himself for such a negative reaction, Hughes must have been entirely unprepared for the warmth and sympathy that greeted *Birthday Letters*. A selection of the poems appeared in *The Times* on 17 January 1998, along with a front-page story headlined 'Revealed: the most tragic literary love story of

¹⁴ Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent, 13 November 1997, BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

¹⁵ BL Add MS 88918/4/12-13.

¹⁶ Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent, 13 August 1997, BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

¹⁷ *PC* 260.

our time'.¹⁸ This hyperbolic headline eerily foregrounds the link I have traced between *Birthday Letters* and *Phèdre*. The term 'tragic' is used in its modern meaning of sadness and loss, but in the same issue poet Andrew Motion writes of *Birthday Letters* in terms redolent of classical tragedy. Motion describes the outcome portrayed by the poems as becoming 'inevitable', with Plath 'on the brink of her own grave', and the reader staring into 'a black hole of grief and regret' and feeling at the end, in line with Aristotle's description of catharsis, both 'changed and enriched'.¹⁹

Plath's 1956 portrayal of tragic destiny in *Phèdre* was of passion as a 'fatal holocaust' and in 'Pursuit' she portrayed death as the inevitable outcome of her relationship with Hughes. In *Birthday Letters* Hughes's evocation of their first night together, '18 Rugby Street', brings forty-one years of his poetic and emotional hindsight to bear on the same issues of destiny. He addresses Plath directly:

I invoked you, bribing Fate to produce you.
Were you conjuring me? I had no idea
How I was becoming necessary,
Or what emergency surgery Fate would make
Of my casual self-service. (*CP* 1056)

Hughes describes his combined sense of culpability and helplessness in the presence of destiny, echoing the duality of Racine's portrayal of Phèdre as both destined to die and wishing to die. He is 'bribing Fate to produce' Plath and suspecting that she was also 'conjuring' him, as if they were both players in a pre-ordained drama. With his own intensely personal and considered sense of tragedy (see below), he describes Fate as striking him with the violence and speed of Neptune's monstrous revenge in *Phèdre*, in the form of the 'emergency surgery' of Plath's suicide and in response to the 'casual self-service' of his infidelity. Hughes presents himself as an unknowing participant, 'becoming necessary' both to Plath and to a larger scenario, and admits simply, but with the tragic irony of his hindsight, 'I had no idea'. This admission, so long deferred, is Hughes's own 'deadlocked intensity', the 'explosive, express containment' that he so long admired in the 1960 production of *Phèdre*, and which in *Birthday Letters* is the tragic core that Motion recognised immediately on its publication.

Hughes began to develop his vision of tragedy when working on his selection of Shakespeare's verse, first published in 1971.²⁰ In the introduction and note to

¹⁸ Peter Stothard, 'Revealed: the most tragic literary love story of our time', *The Times*, 17 January 1998, p.1. *The Times Digital Archive* <https://gdc.gale.com/gdc/artemis?p=TTDA&u=cambuni> [accessed 6 December 2019].

¹⁹ Andrew Motion, 'A thunderbolt from the blue: this book will live forever', *The Times*, 17 January 1998, p. 22.

²⁰ Ted Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).

this edition Hughes locates a unifying mythology in Shakespeare's work, which he later termed the 'Tragic Equation' and expanded into his major prose work *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992).²¹ Central to the unifying mythology of this 'Tragic Equation' that begins with *Venus and Adonis* is the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus, as presented by Racine in *Phèdre* and in earlier plays by Euripides and Seneca, in which the hero rejects the love of a goddess (who embodies both good and bad, as symbolised in Racine by Phèdre's black flame) and is killed, albeit indirectly, in revenge (*SGCB* 1). Thus artistically, as well as emotionally through Plath, Racine's *Phèdre* is at the heart of Hughes's long-considered and lengthy vision of tragedy.

In his November 1997 letter to Kent, accompanying his version of *Phèdre*, Hughes begins by repeating the pivotal impact on him of the 1960 performance of Racine's original. He writes: 'It stayed with me as a proof that a certain kind of theatre [...] can take the top off your head'.²² The intensity of his 'take the top off your head' shares an idiom with similar colloquialisms in his version of *Phèdre*. It also sites the 1960 performance as his theatrical equivalent of the shamanic 'fundamental poetic event' of 'being torn into fragments & fitted together again', which was represented in Hughes's life by his dream of the burnt fox at Pembroke College Cambridge.²³ Such a profoundly transformative theatrical performance was achieved, he tells Kent, by the 'wonderfully hieratic contained explosion of every line' in 'the magnificent resonance, monotony – of [Racine's] Alexandrines'. Racine's poetry was combined in the performance with the 'ferocious intensity' of the French actors' delivery, he writes, which came from the 'carrier wave on which they played all their modulations'.²⁴ The term 'carrier wave' derives from the terminology of radio frequencies (Hughes was a radio mechanic at RAF Fylingdales radar listening station during National Service in 1949-50), and Hughes adopts it to describe a desired tempo and quality of the spoken voice, both inherent in and demanded by the verse.²⁵ He first uses the metaphor of the 'carrier wave' in his 1991 revised edition of *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, when discussing Shakespeare's quest to find a dramatic 'language of the common bond' which would grip both the groundlings and the aristocrats in his audience.²⁶ It was, according to Hughes, Christopher Marlowe's 'torrential yet compact eloquence' with its

²¹ Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, pp. 9-13 and pp. 181-200, later combined as 'The Great Theme: Notes on Shakespeare' (*WP* 103-121).

²² Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent 13 November 1997, BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

²³ See Hughes's essay 'Regenerations', (*WP* 56-59) as well as *LTH* 235, and Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*, p. 76.

²⁴ BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

²⁵ Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*, pp. 19-20.

²⁶ Ted Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p.176.

‘combination of terrific force and point-blank simplicity’ that proved to be ‘the carrier wave’ for Shakespeare’s development of such a language.²⁷ Hughes finds a force and simplicity common to both Marlowe and Racine, which he strives to recapture in translating *Phèdre*: ‘I went for the simple smack on the nose end impact of [Racine’s] simplicity – and the speed’, he writes to Kent.²⁸

In the letter Hughes then defines his own carrier wave for translating *Phèdre*, and in doing so sets out an intensely personal description of his working method that delves to the roots of his poetic art and his career-long focus on the power of voice:

It struck me – reading [my draft of *Phèdre*] through – that [in it] I’ve already resorted to my own carrier wave, based on the East Lancs/West Yorks way of speaking (developed in the weaving sheds) a sort of simplifying shout – but blessed with a big range of tones and inflections. I imagined it being played with that West Yorks vocal pitch as I was reading and there’s very little that wouldn’t sound ok – only slightly mucky fine.²⁹

The ‘big range of tones and inflections’ of Hughes’s voice can be heard in his recorded poetry readings. Christopher Reid describes Hughes’s voice at live poetry readings as having ‘a highly distinctive, rugged and gritty texture’ across which ‘a particularly hard, unsparing, tragic light was apt to fall’, a description pertinent to the effect Hughes wants to achieve in *Phèdre*.³⁰ Carrie Smith focuses on Hughes’s voice as central to his method of composition, and has established that in further unpublished manuscripts in the British Library Hughes describes his best poems as having been written at ‘top speed’ and having a sense of ‘breaking through a sound barrier’.³¹ Hughes uses a similar sound metaphor when he writes to Kent that he wants the actors ‘to get the rhythm and the pacing right for maximum wattage’.³²

His focus on honing the actors’ sound and delivery continued into the initial performances of *Phèdre* at the Malvern Festival Theatre, and in August 1998 he sent a fax to Kent, which, along with detailed instructions on line delivery, included two untitled typed pages that Hughes describes in the fax as ‘a sort of ABC intro to the ‘Duende’ which he hopes will assist Kent.³³ Hughes had written about Duende in

²⁷ Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse* (1991), p.176.

²⁸ Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent, 13 November 1997, BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

²⁹ Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent, 13 November 1997, BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

³⁰ Christopher Reid, ‘Ted Hughes as Reader’ in Nick Gammage (ed.), *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p.229.

³¹ Carrie Smith, ‘The construction of a ‘Voice’ in Hughes’ Readings’, in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (eds.), *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 207.

³² BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

³³ Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent, 8 August 1998, BL Add MS 88918/4/15.

‘Inner Music’, quoting an essay by Federico García Lorca, in which Lorca describes an Andalusian flamenco singer whose voice became possessed by something close to ecstasy, and which ‘made those who were listening tear their clothes’ (*WP* 246-7). Theatre director Tim Supple, for whom Hughes translated Lorca’s play *Blood Wedding* (1996) and *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind (1995), recalls that Hughes tried to achieve *Duende* in *Blood Wedding*:

[H]e truly believed in this demonic spirit of performance – this moment that every performance aspires to, consciously or not, in which the actor and audience will experience together a kind of madness.³⁴

According to Supple, Hughes’s vision of tragedy and its link to Plath were also clear during production of *Spring Awakening*: Hughes emphasised the plot’s inexorable movement towards tragedy and wanted to introduce (anachronistically for the 1880s) a gas oven as the means of suicide. Supple writes that ‘it revealed the deep connections he was making [...L]ust and love [...] simply turn to tragedy’.³⁵ Hughes was, therefore, in 1995 and 1996 already searching for the right drama to articulate his carrier wave of sound and reconnect with Plath.

In translating *Phèdre* Hughes had inevitably to confront the line, ‘Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit’, which Plath adopted as her epigraph in ‘Pursuit’. The line is spoken by Hippolytus – object of Phèdre’s ‘flamme si noire’ – as he declares his love to Aricia. Writing to her mother in September 1956, Plath translates it as ‘In the depths of the forests your image *pursues* me’ (*LSP1* 1250 [my emphasis]) and her choice of verb, ‘pursues’, links the epigraph to the poem’s title. Hughes’s version is ‘Everywhere in the woods your image *hunts* me’.³⁶ There is a nuanced difference between Plath’s ‘in the depths of the forests’, which is a near literal translation of Racine’s ‘Dans le fond des forêts’, and which in the context of her poem represents deep emotions of lust and desire, and Hughes’s ‘Everywhere in the woods’, which more suggests the disorientation and helplessness of the quarry.

The crucial difference between the two versions, however, is Hughes’s choice of the verb ‘hunts’. With this one emblematic word Hughes appropriates Plath’s epigraph and brings it into his personal poetics. He thereby invokes in *Phèdre* his deeply personal poetic bond with hunting: the danger and excitement of an ancient and essential instinct for survival, which he felt most keenly when poaching as a

³⁴ Tim Supple, ‘Ted Hughes and the Theatre’ (n. d.) <http://ann.skea.com/TimSupple.html> [accessed 21 December 2019].

³⁵ Supple, ‘Ted Hughes and the Theatre’.

³⁶ Ted Hughes, *Jean Racine Phèdre*, A new version (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.26. My emphasis. Further page references in body of text.

youngster and which he recaptured as a fisherman for the rest of his life. Introducing his poem 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning', in which the speaker senses his own terror in the trout – 'So much for the horror / It has changed places' (CP 140) – Hughes describes such moments as 'an ancient kind of excitement'.³⁷ What is more, he continues, this excitement 'define[s] both poaching and the composition of poetry'; thus, for Hughes, hunting and poetry are so closely connected as to be virtually synonymous.³⁸

It is precisely this dangerous thrill of hunting and being hunted – by Plath's arrow – that pulsates through Hughes's version of Hippolytus's speech:

It happened in a moment.
[...]Desperate, humiliated,
With the arrow in me,
Fighting you, fighting myself.
I search your absence for you like a madman,
And yet I run from your presence.
Everywhere in the woods your image hunts me (*Phèdre*, 26).³⁹

The breathlessness, the gasps of the chase, the stops and surges, are enacted by Hughes's different line lengths, ranging from six to eleven syllables, while the variations in pace are emphasised and modulated by the short and longer pauses indicated by commas and full stops. Hughes highlights his intention in his letter of 13 November 1997 to Kent: 'I use the line length to control – and vary – the pitch and speed [...]he line lengths are my musical directions to the actors'.⁴⁰

The passage also operates as a poetic declaration by Hughes to Plath about his struggle to respond to her forty-year absence and presence, encapsulated in his image of Plath as 'the arrow in me'. Mediated by their convergent vocabulary of *Phèdre*, Hughes's voice is ventriloquised through Hippolytus. Whereas in 'Pursuit' Plath translated the speech into a study of the thrill and danger of lust, for Hughes the hunting lexicon remains, as in Racine's original, a declaration of love. Hippolytus's speech, as translated by Hughes, continues:

I search – but I cannot find myself,
My bow, my spears, my chariot,
They beckon to me, I ignore them.
The breaking and taming of wild horses
It is beyond me – I have forgotten it.
My own horses run wild –
They have forgotten my voice.

³⁷ Recording quoted by Mark Wormald in 'Hughes and Fishing', in Terry Gifford (ed.), *Ted Hughes in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 292-301, p. 294.

³⁸ Wormald, 'Hughes and Fishing', p. 294.

³⁹ 'Compare Plath's 'Ariel' 'And I / Am the arrow' (*Collected Poems*, p. 239).

⁴⁰ BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

Nothing hears my voice but the forest –
 [...] Your delicate snare has caught a strange creature.
 [...] My love speaks crudely, but do not reject it.
 Without you, I never could have known it (*Phèdre*, 27).

Read as a poem freed from its context in the play – as Hughes argues we should read Shakespeare’s dramatic verse – this speech about love also becomes a ventriloquised declaration of Hughes’s struggle to write poetry following Plath’s death.⁴¹ With Hughes’s correlation of hunting and composition, Hippolytus’s accoutrements of hunting, his bow, spears and chariot, are the fundamental experiences that make poetry, while ‘my own horses’ are his tools, the words that he cannot grasp and control. As a result, the horses, like words, ‘run wild – They have forgotten my voice’. This speech expresses poetically Hughes’s moving admission to his son Nicholas, during the period of *Birthday Letters* and *Phèdre*, that after Plath’s death ‘[I] lost contact with myself – and with my writing’ (*LTH* 712).

If the poems of *Birthday Letters* are Hughes’s letters to Plath, then *Phèdre* is a staged conversation, for as Phèdre and Hippolytus, the play gives a voice to them both. In this light some parts of the play become particularly poignant. Describing the moment she first saw Hippolytus, Phèdre says:

Suddenly he was there
 Standing in front of me,
 He had simply appeared –
 Staring at me,
 The man created
 To destroy me (*Phèdre*, 13).

The short lines, like breathless reverie, are frozen in the moment, as if Phèdre is reliving – conjuring up through the present participles of ‘standing’ and ‘staring’ – the vision that ignited her desire. The stressed first syllables of the first four lines emphasise the immediacy of this resurrected image, while the line end pause after ‘staring at me’ performs the length of her stare. This is then disrupted by her memory of what he was to become: ‘The man created / To destroy me’. The shock of this interruption, and of ‘destroy’ in the next line, showcases the ‘simple smack on the nose impact’ that Hughes chose as his means of conveying the ‘contained explosion’ of Racine’s Alexandrines.

Despite their divergent styles, Hughes closely follows Racine’s original text in content and imagery throughout his version. The six lines quoted above, however, form one of Hughes’s few additions (rather than expansions or clarifications) to the original text. Racine writes only one line: ‘Athènes me montra

⁴¹ Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, (1971), pp. 9-10.

mon superbe ennemi (l. 272)', which John Cairncross translates with appropriate Racinian grandeur, as 'Athens revealed to me my haughty foe'.⁴² Hughes, however, temporarily sets aside Racine's text to reconstruct and dwell on this deeply personal moment, which for him is, literally and poetically, where it all began. It is the moment he and Plath met, and around which she developed her personal mythology of death and desire, centred on the character of Phèdre, 'my phèdre [sic] with her dark flame'. By appropriating *Phèdre* for himself, by making it clear to Kent that 'I shan't be able to change it much. I screwed myself down pretty tight', and by insisting on using his own 'carrier wave' in voicing the verse, Hughes creates an intensely personal experience, like the performance in 1960.⁴³ In 1997, in the moment of the 'strange euphorias' released by his decision to publish *Birthday Letters*, the play becomes, as Hughes says to Kent, '*my* little Phedre [sic], and *her* special needs' [my emphasis].⁴⁴ The echo of Plath's phrase, with its tenderness and sense of possession, coupled with his acknowledgement of their differing 'special needs' confirms how, through Racine, Hughes finally finds a way to embrace Plath in a renewed 'poetic folie à deux'.

⁴² Racine, *Phèdre*, trans. Cairncross, p. 161.

⁴³ Ted Hughes to Jonathan Kent, 13 November 1997', BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

⁴⁴ BL Add MS 88918/4/13.

'Ironic Tenderness': Zbigniew Herbert and the Strategies of Survival in Ted Hughes's *Crow*

by Maria Kaminska

In his 1969 introduction to Vasko Popa's *Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes argued that what distinguished Eastern European poets from their Western contemporaries is that they 'have created a small ironic space, a work of lyrical art, in which their humanity can respect itself.' (WP 223) This 'small ironic space' through which the twentieth-century poets of Eastern Europe salvaged their sense of personhood was necessary to purge language from the ashes of the historical calamities they lived through. Hughes admired their ability to 'precipitate out of a world of malicious negatives a happy positive,' and their dedication to make 'audible meanings without disturbing the silence.' (WP 223) This transformational lesson is perhaps what Hughes most fully absorbed from the writings of Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, whom he once described as 'the greatest poet in the world.'¹ The first comprehensive selection of Herbert's poems in English, which Hughes owned, was published in 1968 with a foreword by Al Alvarez.² But Hughes first encountered Herbert's poetry in 1963, and a few years later published some of Herbert's poems in the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (1965) that he co-edited with Daniel Weissbort.³

Michael Parker insists that the role of Eastern European poetics in Hughes's oeuvre took on a special importance after the suicide of Sylvia Plath, and Hughes's existential and creative crisis that came in the aftermath, observing that 'his discovery of the poets of Eastern Europe was crucial at this time in providing models for survival, through whose experience he was able to come to terms with

¹ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorized Life* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 2015), p.361.

² Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott (London: Penguin, 1968); Hughes's copy is available in the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Books Library, Emory University, PG7167 .E64 A23 1968 HUGHES.

³ Ekbert Faas, 'Appendix II: two interviews with Ted Hughes', in *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 211.

A digital edition of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 1 (1965) can be accessed via: <https://modernpoetryintranslation.com/magazine/modern-poetry-in-translation-no-1/> [accessed 13 April 2022].

his own'.⁴ Hughes found one such 'model for survival' in the works of Herbert, whose poetry, albeit marked by the post-war crisis of meaning and the censor's red pencil, sought to salvage the significance of the European classical heritage while acknowledging its actual impotence when faced with individual suffering. In Herbert's work, it is irony that is a key poetic which enables the testing out of Western foundational myths against contemporary experience. His ironic reworkings of classical myths become a form of cultural endurance, averting individual and collective extinction. Al Alvarez sees Herbert's irony as one of his most important 'strategies for survival,' a mode of expression that enables speaking about the indescribable suffering, working towards the restoration of the world after disaster.⁵ As we will see, this distinctive feature of Herbert's lyric poetry is also one of the strategies that governs the movements of Hughes's *Crow* (1970), a collection haunted by the cataclysm of Plath's death together with the more recent deaths of Assia Wevill and her daughter Shura. Whilst Hughes's collection springs from a sense of individual and collective disaster, it employs what J.M. Coetzee identified in Herbert's work as 'irony [as] an ethical value,'⁶ and in doing so provides its readers with a model of endurance.

'Like a fall of Rome...': the world's collapse

Terror continuous dark terror
Against the fragile human land
Zbigniew Herbert, "To Mark Aurelius"⁷

In a 1981 interview, Zbigniew Herbert said that his life was defined by two historical catastrophes: the year 1939 with the collapse of Polish army against Nazi invasion, and the postwar occupation of Poland by the Soviets. For Herbert, who was in his early teens when the war broke, 'it was like a fall of Rome (...) it felt like a collapse of the world.'⁸ The Second World War left the Polish poet personally and culturally uprooted. The apocalypse occurred both on the individual and collective plane: not only marking for the poet the end of the times of innocence, but also, 'like a fall of

⁴ Michael Parker, 'Hughes and the poets of Eastern Europe', in Keith Sagar (ed.), *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p.44.

⁵ Al Alvarez, 'Introduction to the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert', in Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott (London: Penguin, 1968), p.11.

⁶ J.M. Coetzee, 'Zbigniew Herbert and the figure of the censor', *Giving Offense: essays on censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.152.

⁷ Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p.22.

⁸ Adam Michnik, 'Interview with Zbigniew Herbert' ('Płynie się zawsze do źródeł, pod prąd, z prądem płyną śmiecie'), *Krytyka: kwartalnik polityczny* 8 (1981) <https://fundacjaherberta.com/zbigniew-herbert/zycie/herbert-o-sobie/plynie-sie-zawsze-do-zrodel-pod-prad-z-pradem-plyna-smiecie/> [accessed 21/06/2022] (my translation).

Rome,' testifying to the crisis of the Western European intellectual tradition that eventually begot concentration camps and nuclear weapons. The lesson that Herbert drew from the ideological and moral bankruptcy of the twentieth century is that there is a thin veneer between civilization and barbarism. As Jarosław Anders argues, Herbert's poetry 'indicates that "high culture" must stay aware of its dark roots lest it become aloof and complacent, convinced it is a separate, divine domain governed by its own set of rules'.⁹ As Herbert explained: 'I turn to history not for lessons in hope, but to confront my experience with the experience of others and to win for myself something which I should call universal compassion.'¹⁰

Herbert was one of the poets most actively struggling with Theodore Adorno's infamous question about the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz.¹¹ The postwar crisis of values was for him also a crisis of poetic language. It is a double-bind: the vastness of suffering, both endured and witnessed, escapes description and yet demands commemoration. In the face of the indescribable cataclysm, Herbert turns towards myth to be able to speak at all. In Herbert's view, classical traditions cannot offer any hope when confronted with individual suffering; what they can do, however, is to provide the one who suffers with a model of endurance, creating a sense of transhistorical community of people united in grief and compassion. Ironic reworkings of ancient myths become for Herbert a strategy for survival, because they provide him with a vantage point of distance, at the same time delineating the movement of his poems from the personal to the universal plane.

In his 1973 interview with Janusz Pasierb, Herbert argued that poetry had a more significant social role in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe and mentioned his conversation with Hughes:

Z.H.: [...] The West has lost it [a social resonance of poetry]. My friend Ted Hughes told me once over a pint: »Listen Zbigniew, you can write a book that would make you go to prison. I can write a book against the Queen of England and get money for that.« This boy envied me. That was a revelation to me. We have to admit that we are living here [in Poland] on some sort of a cape.

J.P.: The cape of what? Of Good Hope?

⁹ Jarosław Anders, 'Zbigniew Herbert: The Darkness of Mr. Cogito', in *Between Fire and Sleep: Essays on Modern Polish Poetry and Prose* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 83-112 (p.108).

¹⁰ Zbigniew Herbert, quoted in 'Introduction', in *Selected Poems*, trans. John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xii.

¹¹ Theodore Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), pp.17-35.

Z.H.: No, rather the Cape of Bad Hope.¹²

Herbert's recollection mildly mocks the romanticized image of Eastern Europe which Hughes undoubtedly had, but also signals something important about Hughes's poetic objectives. Like the poets of Eastern Europe, Hughes wanted his poetry to be, in his own phrase, 'equipped for life in a world in which people actually do die' (*WP* 221). His poetry is infused with a concern about what Herbert called the 'fragile human land,'¹³ understood both in environmental and societal terms. Hughes's poems are positioned outwardly, to the world, not inwardly, to the self, seeking the ways in which individual suffering can relate to the universals, but also preconditioning the possibility of cultural transformation in the aftermath of crises.

These two planes of catastrophic experience, the private and the collective, are both present in the poems of *Crow*. Like Herbert, in this collection Hughes protests against the 'restless discursive rational abstract mind [...] characteristic of our Western civilization,' (*LTH* 175) which produced death camps, environmental crisis, and nuclear weapons. But there is also a generative context in Hughes's private cataclysms of the 1960s. 'Death was the midwife that delivered *Crow*', as Rand Brandes puts it.¹⁴ Hughes's work on the collection has often been seen as an attempt to overcome writer's block and depression in the aftermath of Plath's suicide in 1963, but the development of the project was abruptly halted by the death of Assia Wevill and their daughter Shura in 1969.¹⁵ According to Michael Parker, Plath's death 'became Hughes' Auschwitz, the apocalyptic experience that to a major extent defined his poetic development'.¹⁶ Parker's use of Auschwitz as a metaphor might seem questionable, but it suggests that Plath's suicide constituted for Hughes a dividing point in the timeline of his life. From the perspective encapsulated by Adorno and other 'cultural theorists', the occurrence of disaster undermines existing aesthetic orders, exposing the irrelevance of language from before the cataclysm. And yet, to write poetry after the catastrophe is to constantly confirm that life can, and indeed does, go on. As Barbara L. Estrin has cogently observed, 'after Auschwitz, it is barbaric to write the *same* poems'.¹⁷ This

¹² Janusz S. Pasierb, '1973 Interview with Zbigniew Herbert', *Zeszyty Literackie* 4 (2002) <https://fundacjaherberta.com/zbigniew-herbert/zycie/herbert-o-sobie/ze-zbigniewem-herbertem-rozmawia-ksiazk-janusz-s-pasierb/> [accessed 13 April 2022] (my translation).

¹³ Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott (London: Penguin Modern European Poets, 1968), p.22.

¹⁴ Rand Brandes, 'Ted Hughes: *Crow*', in Neil Roberts (ed.), *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p.513.

¹⁵ For more on the 'myth' of the beginning of the *Crow*-project see Peter Fydlar, 'Crow Zero: Leonard Baskin, Ted Hughes, and the Birth of a Legend', *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* 8 (2020): 31-41.

¹⁶ Parker, 'Hughes and the Poets of Eastern Europe', p.44.

¹⁷ Barbara L. Estrin, *The American Love Lyric after Auschwitz and Hiroshima* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p.9.

consideration leaves Hughes with a dilemma similar to that of Herbert: how to respond to an event so traumatic that a direct continuation of existing tradition seems impossible? How to speak sincerely about the experience which is beyond the effable without resorting to conventionalized rhetoric?

In response to his catastrophe, Hughes turns to myth, the myth of his own making, to be able to speak at all. However, like the Polish poet, he does not expect to find there any ‘lessons in hope.’ What characterizes the *Crow* project is rather the ‘bad hope’ that Herbert mentions in his interview: the helpless hope of myth, which, albeit unable to bring any tangible consolation, to make any difference in its historical actualization, folds one’s individual suffering into the transtemporal community of those in sorrow. It is as in Anders’s remark on Herbert: ‘Evoking old myths of humanity will not save you from death. But is it really better to die in petrified silence?’¹⁸ The *Crow* project is thus aimed against ‘[dying] in petrified silence’ at the same time attempting to ‘make audible meanings’ (*WP* 223) without disturbing the state of mourning.

‘And word to silence’: poetic language after the catastrophe¹⁹

only in great silence
can be felt
the pulse of your existence

Zbigniew Herbert, ‘Reconstruction of a Poet’²⁰

The full title of Hughes’s 1970 collection, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, implies that it is a fragment of a bigger whole, as if it was brought to the public eye by some sort of an excavating procedure. The aesthetics of the fragment, of unearthing old tales, is also close to the poetic imagery of Herbert. In his 1960 radio play *Reconstruction of a Poet*, Herbert imagines that archeologists discover lost fragments of Homer’s poems. It is, however, no longer the Homer of epic poetry, of battlefields and bloodshed, but a Homer of the fragile and the material who praises ‘a little finger, a tamarisk, stones.’²¹ A professor discussing the discovery in the radio broadcast fails to recognize the style of the Greek master, deploring the ‘degeneration of form’ and the ‘poverty of the poetic world’ depicted in the unearthed fragments.²² Miraculously, Homer interrupts the broadcast and explains that it was the sight of a man slaughtering the sheep that turned him blind

¹⁸ Anders, ‘Zbigniew Herbert: The Darkness of Mr. Cogito’, p.93.

¹⁹ Zbigniew Herbert, ‘Reconstruction of a Poet’, trans. Magdalena Czajkowska, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 1 (1965), pp. 3-5.

²⁰ Herbert, ‘Reconstruction of a Poet’, pp. 3-5.

²¹ Herbert, ‘Reconstruction of a Poet’, pp. 3-5.

²² Herbert, ‘Reconstruction of a Poet’, p.5.

and enforced a change of aesthetics. In the play, Herbert uses his own poems as representatives of Homer's new style. One of them is particularly interesting in the context of the *Crow's* 'Lineage':

between the shout of birth
and the shout of death
look intensely at your nails
at a sunset
at a fish tail
and what you will see
do not take to market
do not sell at reduced prices
do not shout

[...]

between the clamour of the beginning
and the clamour of the end
be like an untouched lyre
which has no voice
yet has all ²³

What designates the conditions of human life is 'the shout of birth / and the shout of death.' Yet the poet who puts this experience into words should 'not shout' himself. For Herbert, poetry should give voice to suffering without capitalizing on it. This is perhaps what Hughes had in mind when in a letter written in the aftermath of Plath's death, he shuddered at the prospect of becoming 'a public shrine of mourning and remorse' (*LTH* 215). For both Herbert and Hughes, poetry capable of giving a truthful account of one's despair cannot sell suffering 'at reduced prices,' but instead, must make 'audible meanings without disturbing the silence' (*WP* 223). The picture that emerges is as follows: human existence spans between the two clamours, of the beginning and of the end. The poet, however, is the one who should be as 'an untouched lyre,' and adopt a position of distance in order to give truth to experience. This is of special importance in the *Crow* project which situates scream at the beginning of *Crow's* genealogy: In the beginning was Scream [...] Who begat *Crow*' ('Lineage' *CP* 218).

'Remember this: the center of *Crow's* cosmology is a scream,' writes David Troupes.²⁴ Indeed, in *Crow*, scream replaces *logos*: existence grows out of the visceral, not out of the rational. The idea is similar to that of Herbert: the shout is a condition which marks the boundaries of one's being in the world. *Reconstruction of a Poet* was published in the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (1965),

²³ Herbert, 'Reconstruction of a Poet', p.5.

²⁴ David Troupes, *Ted Hughes and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.95.

edited by Hughes and David Weissbort. Hughes wrote *Crow* between 1966 and 1969,²⁵ so he definitely knew Herbert's radio-play before finalizing his work on the collection. The 'degeneration of form' that the Homer of *Reconstruction of a Poet* represents and the 'super-ugly and super-simple language'²⁶ of the *Crow* project goes thus hand in hand. The aesthetic principles that guide both works emerge in the response to the unavoidable suffering which is rendered both by Herbert and Hughes as a condition of existence. The work of a poet is built on the paradox: a poem can become an authentic expression of human feelings only when its form is reduced to bare minimum. Poetic language, however, with its baggage of tradition and sophisticated linguistic infrastructure, distances the subject from the lived experience and inevitably gravitates towards the order of *logos*.

This problem, very close to Hughes's poetic imagination, is well illustrated in Herbert's poem 'Apollo and Marsyas,' in which the sterile but emotionless music of Apollo – 'the god with nerves of artificial fibre' – is contrasted with the humane scream of Marsyas, skinned alive:

in reality
Marsyas relates
the inexhaustible wealth of his body

bald mountains of his liver
white gorges of nourishment²⁷

In his ironic reworkings of myths, Herbert is particularly interested in moments when the overflow of feelings ruptures the protective armour of high culture. Witnessing or enduring suffering forces Herbert's protagonists to step out of character and reveal their vulnerable side. It is as if in his poems Herbert attempted to balance the authenticity of experience against the cultural reworkings of it. As Anders claims:

... a cry seems the only true expression of pain, says the poet, but mere expression solves nothing and leaves us as exposed as we were before. The true function of culture is to go beyond the expression of man's hurt.²⁸

This trajectory, from a cry as 'the only true expression of pain' to its cultural interception that aims to 'go beyond the expression of man's hurt', is reenacted in the first of *Crow*'s 'Two Eskimo Songs': 'Fleeing from Eternity.' In the poem, the

²⁵ Neil Roberts, 'Poetry by Ted Hughes', Ted Hughes Society, <http://thettedhughessociety.org/crow> [Accessed 13 April 2022].

²⁶ Faas, 'Appendix II: two interviews with Ted Hughes', p.208.

²⁷ Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p.82.

²⁸ Anders, 'Zbigniew Herbert: The Darkness of Mr. Cogito', p.107.

‘eyeless and mouthless baldface’ man seeks ways to escape the condition of his existence as a temporal and fragile being who ‘trod the stone of death’ (CP 256). When confronted with the finitude of living organisms — a slug, trout, and mouse — he ‘gashed holes in his face’ and ‘through the blood and pain he looked at the earth’ (CP 257). As suggested by Nathalie Anderson, it is as if blood and pain became his ‘sense organs.’²⁹ However, what eventually brings man back from the state of despair, enabling him to look ‘at the earth’ through a different lens than that of ‘blood and pain,’ is a song:

Then lying among the bones on the cemetery earth,
He saw a woman singing out of her belly

He gave her eyes and mouth, in exchange for the song.
She wept blood, she cried pain.

The pain and the blood were life. But the man laughed –

The song was worth it.

The woman felt cheated. (CP 257)

Hughes here dramatizes a violent dynamic between the male and the female, but the scene seems to also have undertones similar to that of Herbert’s ‘Apollo and Marsyas’: the woman’s ‘singing out of her belly’ resembles the music of guts, the piercing scream of Marsyas who encapsulated in his song ‘the inexhaustible wealth of his body.’ For both Herbert and Hughes, songs grow out of the visceral, ‘[t]he pain and the blood were life.’ The workings of songs, however, do not stop there, seeking, as Anders puts it, to ‘go beyond the expression of man’s hurt.’³⁰ By transcending the individual and uniting the experience of man and woman through ‘blood and pain,’ the song becomes a culture-making procedure aimed against ‘the stone of death.’ The song is a strategy for survival, a counter-power to external conditions that testifies to man’s fragility and finitude: ‘the lighting,’ ‘the frost,’ and ‘time.’ The price paid for a shelter of a song is that of self-distancing: ‘in exchange for the song,’ the woman gains ‘eyes and a mouth,’ a conscious knowledge of one’s condition, a sometimes painful self-awareness. The song brings man back a self-composure by providing a vantage point of distance from the immediate experience, but also perpetuates the torments of consciousness.

In this respect, the trajectory of *Crow* can be traced as follows: the gut scream of the beginning as in ‘Lineage’ is engineered into the song which grows out

²⁹ Nathalie Anderson, ‘Ted Hughes and the Challenge of Gender’, in *The Challenge of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1994), pp.91-115 (p.101).

³⁰ Anders, ‘Zbigniew Herbert: The Darkness of Mr. Cogito’, p.107.

of, but also shelters from, ‘the pain and the blood’ of existence towards the end of the collection in ‘Two Eskimo Songs.’ The problem that *Crow* investigates is thus how to sing ‘out of belly,’ sing ‘utterly clear,’ (*CP* 258) giving truth to experience, at the same time transcending individual suffering towards the universal plane. This is where Hughes’s affinity with Herbert comes to the fore: for both of them, a poetic utterance should be as close as possible to Marsyas-like music from the depths of guts, but in order to become something more than a mere ‘expression of man’s hurt’ and perform its cultural role of sheltering against suffering, it has to also provide a standpoint of distance. The *Crow* project asserts thus that ‘the blood and the pain were life.’ The song, however, provides man with a way out from looking ‘at the earth’ only ‘through the blood and pain.’ In Hughes’s collection, a poem itself becomes an alternative sense organ, a strategy for survival which makes existence more bearable while acknowledging man’s fragility and finitude.

If, then, the poems of the *Crow* are a strategy for survival working against ‘the blood and the pain’ of existence and enabling the restoration of the world after disaster, they need to be equipped to describe reality ‘in which people actually do die’ (*WP* 221). Hughes would later argue that the collection was an attempt:

to produce something with the minimum cultural accretions of the museum sort – something autochthonous & complete in itself, as it might be invented after the holocaust & demolition of all libraries, where essential things spring again.³¹

This statement does not fall far from Herbert’s 1973 remark that:

language is an impure tool of expression. It is tortured, banalized, subjected to shameful tricks on a daily basis. Thus, the dream of the poets is to reach the primordial meanings of words, to give the right word to thing, as put by Polish poet Norwid. For me, a dialogue with things was this kind of attempt to find the uncontaminated sources of language.³²

What pulses under the surface of the *Crow* project is this Herbertian longing for ‘the uncontaminated sources of language’ and the awareness of the impurity of language that comes with its cultural circulation. The crucial poetic tool that enables Herbert’s search for the ‘primordial meanings of words’ is irony, because it illuminates the split between the intention of the speaker and the actual signification of the utterance. Irony is, after all, a device for a crisis: once words

³¹ Ted Hughes, quoted in Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.107.

³² Zbigniew Herbert, ‘Rozmowa o pisaniu wierszy’, in Zbigniew Herbert, *Poezje wybrane*, (Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1973) <https://fundacjaherberta.com/zbigniew-herbert/zycie/herbert-o-sobie/rozmowa-o-pisaniu-wierszy/> [accessed 13 April 2022] (my translation).

cannot mean what they should in particular contexts – historical and beyond – the edge of irony cuts through the hypocrisy and delusion that took over their original meanings, so that the most ‘essential things [could] spring again.’ This is why the ironic mode becomes for Herbert a necessary tool of restoring his poetic world in the aftermath of the Second World War. It serves as a building material that enables the rehabilitation of poetic act from the ‘shameful tricks’ of history.

J.M. Coetzee argues that Herbert’s irony is ‘quite different in nature from the irony of New Criticism poetry, [...] [it] is ontologically more fundamental.’³³ In a similar tone, Al Alvarez remarks that:

Herbert’s irony has nothing to do with the dandified, touch-me-not distaste – by Eliot out of Laforgue – which was fashionable among the post-Symbolist poets of the 1920s and the American academics of the 1940s. For that irony was, in essence, a slightly less than noble art of self-defense; it protected those who wielded it from emotions they felt would be better without – feelings for other people, the temptations of commitment. In contrast, Herbert’s irony is neither elegant nor embattled [...] It is, in short, the irony of a vulnerable man.’³⁴

It is striking that both Coetzee and Alvarez emphasize the distinctiveness of Herbert’s irony in relation to the dominant poetic discourse of the Anglophone world. The key difference that Alvarez notes is that Herbert’s ironic mode does not enclose the speaker in his own solipsistic mind, fencing him off from the ‘feelings for other people, the temptations of commitment,’ but in fact reinforces such feelings by revealing the vulnerability of the lyrical subject himself. Irony becomes Herbert’s most important form of survival not because it forms an impenetrable protective coating between the self and the world, but because it illuminates the common condition of fragility that the subject and the world share. ‘[T]he ethical value’ of Herbert’s irony stems thus from its relational nature: it seeks to form a connection between the speaker and the other.³⁵

This is perhaps why Hughes turned towards the poets of Eastern Europe in search for the poetic idiom ‘equipped for life in a world in which people actually do die’ (*WP* 221). The black humour and wild irony of *Crow* bears a mark of this kind of ‘ironic tenderness’³⁶ that Alvarez identifies in Herbert’s work and, in fact, corresponds with Hughes’s own comments about the poets of this region:

...whatever terrible things happen in their work happen within a containing passion – Job-like – for the elemental beauty of the

³³ Coetzee, ‘Zbigniew Herbert and the figure of the censor’, p.159.

³⁴ Alvarez, ‘Introduction’, pp.11-12.

³⁵ Coetzee, ‘Zbigniew Herbert and the figure of the censor’, p.152.

³⁶ Alvarez, ‘Introduction’, p.10.

created world. Their poetic themes revolve around the living suffering spirit, capable of happiness, much deluded, [...]so undefinable as to be almost silly, but palpably existing, and wanting to go on existing[...] They have got the simple animal courage of accepting the odds. (*WP* 221-222)

As in the works of Eastern Europeans, the brute reality of Crow's over-consumption testifies to the biological principle of adaptiveness and is a positive sign that the creature's main struggle is to 'go on existing' despite the external odds. However, this does not mean that poetry should give up on its passion for the 'elemental beauty of the created world.' Quite the contrary. What Hughes praises in the Eastern Europeans is also present in *Crow*. According to David Troupes,

Crow is a book defined by irony: an attempt to locate beauty as the negative space in a language of ugliness; an attempt to establish the eternity of God by parading "God" around as a petty buffoon; an attempt to hymn the possibilities of humanity by insulting and degrading us at every opportunity [...] an attempt to mourn Sylvia Plath by writing a book that appears to do nothing of the sort.³⁷

This kind of irony, like Herbert's, is 'ontologically more fundamental,' because while acknowledging that fragility and finitude is a condition of existence, it attempts to salvage 'the living suffering spirit' that persists despite the vulnerability of creatures.³⁸ The poem, however, works towards survival – both of an organism and of language – only when purified from the lyrical conventions, as in 'Crow and the Birds':

When the eagle soared clear through a dawn distilling of emerald
When the curlew trawled in seadusk through a chime of
wineglasses
When the swallow swooped through a woman's song in a cavern
And the swift flicked through the breath of a violet (*CP* 210)

The poem's opening lines embody the birds' entrapment in the sentimental pastoral discourse. Devoid of creaturely vitality, the birds are incarcerated in the aestheticized – and anaesthetizing – images reproduced only for the sake of their standardized lyricism. The action is suspended: a long, list-like staccato of lines starting from 'when' or 'and' gives the impression of a monotonous languor. Yet the change of tone comes with the poem's last lines:

Crow spraddled head-down in the beach-garbage, guzzling
a dropped ice-cream. (*CP* 210)

³⁷ Troupes, *Ted Hughes and Christianity*, pp.90-91.

³⁸ Coetzee, 'Zbigniew Herbert and the figure of the censor', p. 159.

The final twist reconfigures the poem not only as a text about the survival of species – in contrast to the rest of birds which are stripped of their creatureliness, Crow indulges himself in the essential organic act of consumption – but also about the survival of language despite its conventional appearances. ‘It is,’ Nick Bishop argues, ‘as if Hughes wishes systematically to identify the exact moment at which language ceases to be a transparent instrument and becomes reflexive world-unto-itself, producing not “instances of reality” but “instances of pure discourse,” to adapt Barthes’ words.’³⁹ What is at stake is not merely an aesthetic stance but also a moral one. ‘Crow and the Birds’ questions the ethics of certain aesthetics: their relation, if any, to the world outside of the poem’s lines.

However, contrary to Bishop’s intuitions, this does not testify to Hughes’s belief in the ‘death of poetry,’⁴⁰ but rather to its survival: after all, the convoluted moments ‘of pure discourse’ become identified and exposed, and yet the poetic utterance is still made possible. What speaks through ‘Crow and the Birds’ is this sense of the ethically-oriented, ontological fundamentality of irony as in Zbigniew Herbert’s work. His ‘A Tale’ deals with a similar set of ideas:

The poet imitates the voices of birds
 he cranes his long neck
 his protruding Adam’s apple
 is like a clumsy finger on a wing of melody

when singing he deeply believes
 that he advances the sunrise
 the warmth of his song depends on this
 as does the purity of his high notes⁴¹

At the centre of the poem’s thinking is again a conventionalized comparison of bird-singing to poem-writing. The tone of the poem is mildly ironic, and yet seems to be warm rather than straightforwardly mocking: the poet’s ‘protruding Adam’s apple’ and his bird-like ‘long neck’ invites an indulgent smile rather than a sly grin. The humour of the scene is generated by a sharp contrast between the poet’s appearance and his belief in the omnipotence of the poetic act: ‘when singing he deeply believes / that he advances the sunrise.’ What testifies for the mildness of Herbert’s irony is that the joke is, after all, on a poet himself: Herbert ironizes here nothing less than the potency of his own craftsmanship. But the ironic distance of lyrical voice in the poem’s first four stanzas dissolves into the full seriousness of its last:

what would the world be

³⁹ Nick Bishop, ‘Ted Hughes and the death of poetry’, in *The Challenge of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1994), pp.4-5.

⁴⁰ Bishop, ‘Ted Hughes and the death of poetry’, p.5.

⁴¹ Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p.44.

were it not filled with
the incessant bustling of the poet
among the birds and stones⁴²

The last stanza of 'A Tale' is infused with a rather optimistic belief that despite its entanglement in excessive ornamentality, the poetic utterance can still be a relevant descriptor of reality. As in 'Crow and the Birds,' here also aesthetics eventually slips into ethics: by commenting on the misleading surfaces of lyrical conventions, the speaker eventually asserts the ontological fundamentality of the poetic act as such ('what would the world be'). Crucially, 'the incessant bustling of the poet' happens among real-life birds and stones: it is turned toward outward experience, not a linguistic conventionalized appearance. Herbert believed that poetry should enact 'a persistent dialogue between the man and a concrete reality that surrounds him.'⁴³ Paradoxically, the ironic distance of the poet-speaker in the first part of 'A Tale' is an attempt to get closer to things as they are in the poem's last stanza. The seriousness of the poet and his mission is salvaged precisely because of his distance from the poetics detached from the reality of concrete matters.

Both 'Crow and the Birds' and 'A Tale' follow a similar pattern: the ironic tone of the first part is turned upside down with a moment of paradoxical seriousness in the poems' last movements. The closing lines of 'Crow and the Birds' correspond with Herbert's claim that poetry should be in a reciprocal dialogue with 'concrete reality.' The profundity of 'Crow and the Birds,' then, is not straightforward and yet it is there: being more of a serious joke than facetious seriousness, the poem's punchline pulls the lyrical utterance down to earth and reconnects it to the 'instances of reality,' re-channelling the poem's descriptive forces to the realities of organic life. Both 'A Tale' and 'Crow and the Birds' express belief that poetry is not condemned to reproduce conventional *worlds-unto-themselves*, but can become a force of survival when acknowledging and addressing the matters of life.

In his introduction to *New Poetry: an anthology*, Al Alvarez argued that:

what poetry needs, in brief, is a new seriousness. I would define this seriousness simply as the poet's ability and willingness to face the full range of his experience with his full intelligence; not to take the easy exits of either the conventional response or choking incoherence.⁴⁴

⁴² Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p. 44.

⁴³ Zbigniew Herbert, *Węzeł Gordyjski oraz inne pisma rozproszone 1948 -1998*, ed. by Piotr Kądziera (Warszawa: Biblioteka „Więzi:”, 2001), p.45 (my translation).

⁴⁴ Al Alvarez, 'Introduction', in *New Poetry: an anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p.28.

It is this ‘new seriousness’ grown out of ironic surroundings that designates the continuum between Hughes and Herbert. For both of them the ironic mode becomes a strategy for survival, enabling the purification of poetic utterance from the ‘instances of pure discourse,’⁴⁵ but also purging the *insides* of language as such. Herbert’s irony enters Hughes’s *Crow* as an instrument enabling the rehabilitation of poetic utterance after disaster.

‘Nest of tenderness’: irony as a mode of vulnerability and commitment

You can’t abandon me
Now when I am dead and need tenderness

Zbigniew Herbert, ‘At the Gate of the Valley’⁴⁶

Albeit written in the shadow of Hughes’s personal tragedies, the poems of *Crow* are not, as Patrick Jackson observes,

simply a private elegy or an utterance of personal pain but an expression of a greater collective sorrow through the subjective experiences of the poem’s hero. They are the narrative of a single voice aimed at a larger community, speaking a common language of grief.⁴⁷

This transition from ‘an utterance of personal pain’ to ‘an expression of a greater collective sorrow,’ emerges in a particularly striking way in those poems of the collection where *Crow* ceases to be a merely materialistic creature driven by an instinct to survive and comes to terms with personal remorse. Take ‘*Crow’s Nerve Fails*,’ which concludes:

He cannot be forgiven.

His prison is the earth. Clothed in his conviction,
Trying to remember his crimes

Heavily he flies. (*CP* 232)

Biographical contexts pulse under the surface – as Patrick Jackson observes, the line ‘he cannot be forgiven’ movingly echoes Hughes’ own words in a letter to Plath’s mother ‘I don’t want to be ever forgiven’ (*LTH* 232) – and yet there is more at play here. In the poem, *Crow* discovers the paradoxes of existence, the perplexing pains of looking inward: ‘How can he fly from his feathers? And why have they homed on

⁴⁵ Bishop, ‘Ted Hughes and the death of poetry’, p.5.

⁴⁶ Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p.35.

⁴⁷ Patrick Jackson, ‘The Narrative of Grief in Ted Hughes’ *Crow*’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 42 (2019): 89.

him?’ What Crow acknowledges is the unerasable discomfort of being alive: the fact that ‘the pain and the blood were life.’ (CP 257) For Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, the axis that organizes the thematic workings of ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’ is:

an introspection itself, without which we cannot think about the poem: the deadlock that occurs when we examine the objective evidence of ourselves as the attributes of something external, [...] while all the time the examining consciousness remains unaccounted for.⁴⁸

It is as if Crow’s discovery of consciousness was predicated upon his recognition of suffering. This shift from self-ignorance to self-knowledge in ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’ is accounted, for Gifford and Roberts, ‘an introspection itself,’ but it seems that in the centre of the poem’s workings is not an act of gazing inwardly but rather Crow’s commitment ‘to remember his crimes.’ Indeed, remembrance is a culture-making procedure: it encapsulates the knowledge of the past for the sake of the future. But above all, it is also a form of commitment between the living and the dead. This notion is further complicated by the poem’s title. *Why* does Crow’s nerve fail? One may say that it is an ironic title for a serious poem: it implies that the speaker, or rather the poem’s hero, is caught off-guard, exposing his raw nerve, and sharing more than he would like to. It is, then, as if the title of the poem worked against the poem, trying to diminish its meaning to a moment of lost control, self-conscious oversharing.

This matter takes on more significance once we consider ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’ in relation to the poem that precedes it: ‘Crow’s Tries the Media.’ Gifford and Roberts see ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’ as a ‘kind of companion-poem to ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus,’” but I would rather suggest that it thematically works together with ‘Crow Tries the Media’ precisely because of their shared interest in the relation between remembrance and language.⁴⁹ Hughes added the poem in the 1971 American edition of *Crow* and inserted it before ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’ not without a reason.⁵⁰ Tying together loving, poem-writing, and remembering, ‘Crow Tries the Media’ is infused with what Alvarez called, in relation to Herbert, the ‘irony of a vulnerable man’⁵¹:

He wanted to sing about her

⁴⁸ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p.145.

⁴⁹ Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p.144.

⁵⁰ For further details about differences between the 1970 British edition and 1971 American edition of *Crow*, see: Keith Sagar and Stephen Tabor (eds.), *Ted Hughes: A bibliography 1946-1980* (London: Mansel Publishing Limited, 1983), pp.44-45.

⁵¹ Al Alvarez, ‘Introduction’, p.12.

He didn't want comparisons with the earth or anything to do with
 it
 Oversold like detergents
 He didn't even want words
 Waiving their long tails in public
 With their prostitute's exclamations

He wanted to sing very clear (*CP* 231)

These lines move beyond the conventional lyricism of 'Crow and the Birds,' seeking a mode of expression close to that of 'a woman's singing out of her belly' in the 'Eskimo Song,' 'Fleeing from Eternity.' Without a camouflage of lyrical conventions 'oversold like detergents,' the hero seeks to speak with a language of unmediated feelings:

He shuddered out of himself he got so naked
 He wanted to sing to her soul simply (*CP* 232)

This state of full exposure that the speaker evokes implies his own fragility: the one who avoids taking, in Alvarez's words, 'the easy exits of either the conventional response or choking incoherence,'⁵² risks being vulnerable and accused of banality. What is at play here is exactly Alvarez's 'new seriousness': the speaker searches for a mode of expression that would boldly give truth to the order of feelings, encapsulate in language the experience of past intimacy. However, the main tension that the poem enacts is that of the speaker's urge to remember and the limitations of his medium. Its main thematic axis runs from the opening 'he wanted to sing about her' to the final 'her shape dimmed.' It is as if the web of the poem's lines failed to secure the lover's fleeting presence. 'Crow Tries the Media' is a poem spoken in heightened emotional registers as if with an exposed raw nerve. It ties the knot with 'Crow's Nerve Fails' precisely because of its commitment to remembering despite the limitations of medium and despite the emotional costs for the speaker.

A mild ironic distance seems to originate somewhere between the poem's title and the operations of its lines. 'Crow Tries the Media' is an antiphrasis, an ironic euphemism which reveals only half-truths about the poem's intentions. It knowingly draws our attention to its own poetic artifice, testing out language as a device of mediation between the inner and the outer world. What complicates this matter further is a question: who is the 'he' of the poem? If, as the title suggests, Crow is the one who 'tries the media,' the poem positions him in the role of a storyteller, switching places with its actual author. In other words, it is as if Crow took over the voice of his author and spoke in his name. This masking of the 'he' of the poem offers a vantage point of distance, which allows Hughes to avoid a

⁵² Alvarez, *New Poetry*, p.28.

confessional tone while at the same time ensuring that the poem's workings would not reproduce rhetorical *worlds-upon-themselves*. In this sense, the *Crow* project is itself 'trying to remember' against the dimming shape: its mild employment of ironic distance serves as a vehicle for meaning, transporting the workings of the collection from the sphere of 'utterance of personal pain', to the 'common language of grief'.⁵³

The investigation of ways in which poetry can become more than a mere 'expression of man's hurt'⁵⁴ and work against 'the stone of death' (*CP* 256) is an interest that Hughes shares with Herbert. Gifford and Roberts recognize this, arguing that 'the closest parallel to the wit and seriousness of *Crow's* critical and humane poems is to be found in the work of Zbigniew Herbert' and they offer Herbert's 'At the Gate of the Valley' as a prime example of this parallel.⁵⁵ For Gifford and Roberts, it is the 'intense love for the material world' that defines Herbert's influence on Hughes.⁵⁶ This kind of love is articulated in Herbert's poetry through the tenderness of his irony. In 'At the Gate of the Valley,' people awaiting the final judgement are characterized through their earthly commitments, whether it be to other living beings ('an old woman [who] carries the corpse of a canary') or items with sentimental value ('fragments of letters ribbons clippings of hair'). What is at stake here is a plea to mark one's fleeting presence:

she begs
— hide me in your eye

in the palm of your hand in your arms
we have always been together
you can't abandon me
now when I am dead and need tenderness

a higher ranking angel
with a smile explains the misunderstanding⁵⁷

Herbert's ironic mode does not escape 'feelings for other people, the temptations of commitment,'⁵⁸ but rather emphasizes them. It resides here in the contrast between the affection of people and the cold distance of angels. People in 'At the Gate of the Valley' are defined by their affective commitment to the worldly matters as if the strength of bonds they form was to endure historical cataclysms. This

⁵³ Jackson, 'The Narrative of Grief', p.89.

⁵⁴ Anders, 'Zbigniew Herbert: The Darkness of Mr. Cogito', p.107.

⁵⁵ Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p.131.

⁵⁶ Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p.133.

⁵⁷ Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p.35.

⁵⁸ Alvarez, 'Introduction', p.12.

theme returns in ‘Two Drops,’ years later anthologized by Hughes and Seamus Heaney in *The Rattle Bag* (1982):

When it got very bad
they leapt into each other’s eyes
and shut them firmly

So firmly they did not feel the flames
When they came up to the eyelashes⁵⁹

Herbert’s poetry restores to a man – with his fragile body and vulnerable psyche – the ability to feel strongly and authentically despite the great devastation. What brings consolation in the face of a disaster is a realm of affection.

A very similar dynamic organizes the thinking of Hughes’s ‘Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days’ in *Cave Birds*:

She gives him his eyes, she found them
Among some rubble, among some beetles

He gives her her skin
He just seem to pull it down out the air
[...]
Like two gods of mud
Sprawling in the dirt. But with infinite care

They bring each other to perfection. (*CP* 437-438)

The mythological framework of *Cave Birds* is closely connected to the *Crow* project and can be thought of, as Margaret Dickie suggests, as ‘an extension of *Crow*.’⁶⁰ ‘Bride and Groom’ seems thus to take up a theme of exchange between man and woman similar to ‘Fleeting from Eternity’ as well as Herbert’s ‘Two Drops.’ Here again someone’s presence becomes enclosed in the body of their beloved. It is then as if the material could become a shelter against oblivion. Herbert’s ‘intense love for the material world’⁶¹ attests to his insistent commitment to establish poetry as a space where the forces of life and death meet. Hughes’s collection is infused with a similar kind of thinking, employing this kind of humane, invigorating matter as a form of cultural remembrance and renewal.

If the *Crow* project transforms the ‘utterance of personal pain’ into the ‘expression of a greater collective sorrow,’ the question that stands is: what can it offer to the living? Edward Hadley insists that *Crow* is the least elegiac of Hughes’ collections, arguing that:

⁵⁹ Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p.21; see also, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes (eds.), *The Rattle Bag*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p.441.

⁶⁰ Margaret Dickie, ‘Ted Hughes: The Double Voice’, *Contemporary Literature* 24 (1983) , p.52).

⁶¹ Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p.133.

For the most part, elegy is a means of preserving the dead against the sterility of death so that they might be remembered and evoked through language. But one must consider how the elegy serves the living; it is meant to console those who survived the deceased [...] The poet/ persona is to one degree subject to a harrowing [...] so that by the elegy's conclusion, they are consoled and spiritually content to continue towards fresh woods and pastures new.⁶²

From the normative perspective advanced by Hadley, *Crow* does not conform to this description, because it fails to offer a stable vision of spiritual renewal for those who mourn: '... there is no evidence of renewal common to elegy, but there are traces of decomposition.'⁶³ Yet against Hadley's intuitions, the collection does gesture towards the processes of healing.

The two last poems, the 'Two Eskimo Songs' and 'Littleblood,' delineate an upward movement: from catastrophic 'harrowing' to the enlivening albeit sometimes obscure spiritual renewal. In the second of the 'Two Eskimo Songs', water begins to play once there's 'no weeping left' as if the amounts of despair could not stop it from circulating, and hence invigorating the matter. The moment of crisis reveals that it 'lay at the bottom of all things,' and allows the speaker to see things as they are, and sing 'utterly clear.' (CP 257-258) The persistence of life against its own fragility comes to the fore also in the closing 'Littleblood':

O littleblood, little boneless little skinless

[...]

Grown so wise grown so terrible
Sucking death's mouldy tits.

Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood. (CP 258)

Here, the nursery-like tenderness of the speaker's tone is merged with a straightforward description of the creature's biological strategies for survival ('grown so wise so terrible / sucking death's mouldy tits'). If then growth is predicated on death, what *Crow* makes visible is the awareness of life. As Gifford and Roberts note, 'certainly wonder and tenderness are the keynotes of the wholly delightful conceit with which the poem (and the volume) ends.'⁶⁴

For both Herbert and Hughes, poetry serves as a 'nest of tenderness,'⁶⁵ a place in which the forces of death and life melt together. What Herbert's 'irony of a vulnerable man' makes possible in Hughes's collection is an equilibrium between

⁶² Edward Hadley, *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.44.

⁶³ Hadley, *The Elegies of Ted Hughes*, p.45.

⁶⁴ Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p.146.

⁶⁵ Herbert, *Selected Poems*, p.29.

wonder and distress. *Crow* acknowledges ‘that the pain and the blood were life,’ but seeks ways to transcend it. Zhuo Wang argues that ‘when compared with love lyrics and nature lyrics, disaster lyrics, due to their special thematic focus, intensify the ethical dimensions of poetry.’⁶⁶ The barbaric humour and wild irony of Hughes’s work is – like Herbert’s – governed by ‘an ethical value’⁶⁷: it interrogates the capacity of poetic verse to respond to the catastrophe in such a way that would not banalize the immediate experience, but provides a reader with a vantage point of distance, delivering a model of endurance.

World-building against the catastrophe

And nonetheless
I raise up eyes and hands
I raise up song

Zbigniew Herbert, ‘A Priest’

In a 1998 letter to Keith Sagar, Hughes reveals that the myth of Orpheus and Euridice was the first narrative structure that come up to his mind as a possible platform to discuss Plath’s death and his own sense of guilt (*LTH* 723), but he rejected it, fearing that biographical parallels were too obvious: ‘[i]n poetry, I believed, if the experience was to be dealt with creatively, it would have to emerge obliquely, through a symbol, inadvertently [...] I can see that it began to emerge in exactly this fashion in *Crow* [...]’ (*LTH* 719) Why then a Trickster tale instead? Hughes’s essay ‘*Crow and the Beach*’ sheds some light on this matter:

Trickster literature expresses the vital factor compressed beneath the affliction [...] – the renewing, sacred spirit, searching its depths for new resources and directives, exploring towards new emergence. (*WP* 240)

Trickster stories operate in an essentially processual manner: they are oriented outwardly, speaking from within the world ‘not yet fully created,’ and leading towards ‘new emergence.’ (*WP* 239)

The figure of Trickster was also crucial for Herbert: albeit often identified with the eponymous character of his 1974 collection *Mr. Cogito*, Herbert insists that it is Hermes, yet another god of tricksterish nature, that is patron to his poetic

⁶⁶ Zhuo Wang, “Our Common Sufferings”: Reflections on the Ethical Dimensions of Contemporary Disaster Poetry’, *Journal of Cambridge Studies*, 4 (2009), 114-126 (p.116).

⁶⁷ Coetzee, ‘Zbigniew Herbert and the figure of the censor’, p.152.

endeavors.⁶⁸ This is a peculiar choice for a poet usually associated by scholars with the Apollonian order. As Robert McGahey explains:

[Hermes] is the "god of ways," patron of merchant and thief alike, as well as god of boundaries, including that between public and private space in the form of the phallic "herm," the original door-knocker. More especially, he is a psychopomp, guide of souls bound for Hades.⁶⁹

In his mischievous manners, *Crow* performs a very similar function to Hermes: his mediacy allows Hughes to skillfully hover between the private and the public, attempting to move beyond a mere expression of man's suffering. Strikingly, Hermes is the one who escorts Euridice to Hades and leads Orpheus back to the earth's surface.⁷⁰ *Crow* also delineates something of a psychopomp's journey. The effect that the collection induces in its readers is close to Hughes's description of Eastern European poets who 'like men come back from the dead they have an improved perception, an unerring sense of what really counts in being alive.' (*WP* 222) The *Crow* project inscribes a search for such an 'improved perception.' In his book *Herbert-Hermes*, Artur Grabowski argues that:

Herma is a trace/ an orientation point which makes one aware where he is – not by indicating a direction, but by orienting a traveller in circumstances; because *herma* is *sema*: a marker/sign.⁷¹

This element of signposting is key in *Crow*, in which Hughes seeks ways to move beyond 'a tendency [of] the Western poet to become isolated and turn inwards.'⁷² Instead, *Crow* is, in Jackson's words, 'aimed at a larger community, speaking a common language of grief.'⁷³ In its attempt to restore the world after disaster, Hughes turned towards Eastern Europeans because of the outward orientation of their poetry. Like the Herbertian *herma*, *Crow* is also an orientation point that informs a traveller about the circumstances: life is conditioned on 'the pain and the blood,' but the song becomes a model of survival, working towards new cultural emergence. In this regard, *Crow* itself is a form of *living-on*.

⁶⁸ Hermes is a key character in Herbert's 1957 volume *Hermes, Dog, and Star* (some of the poems from this collection were published in Herbert's 1968 *Selected Poems* and 1966 issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation*)

⁶⁹ Robert McGahey, *The Orphic Moment: Shaman to Poet-Thinker in Plato, Nietzsche, and Mallarme* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p.24.

⁷⁰ McGahey, *The Orphic Moment*, p.144.

⁷¹ Artur Grabowski, *Herbert-Hermes: Konteksty nowoczesności w esejach dramatach i wierszach Zbigniewa Herberta* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2013), p.52 (my translation).

⁷² Editorial, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 5 (1969), in Michael Parker, 'Hughes and the poets of Eastern Europe', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp.37-51.

⁷³ Jackson, 'The Narrative of Grief', p.89.

The Fourth Man and the XV: John Montague, Barrie Cooke, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney

by Mark Wormald

In late 2012, early in the writing of my recently published book *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes*, and with my first visit to the artist and fisherman Barrie Cooke at his home and studio in rural Co. Sligo that May still a fresh memory, curiosity about the origins, motivation and setting of ‘Madly Singing in the Mountains’ (CP 629), one of the poems in *River* which I had been unable to trace or find a reference to in Hughes’s fishing diaries, led me to write to its dedicatee John Montague. I mentioned in my email – which I sent via his third wife the American novelist Elizabeth Wassell – that I had found his extraordinarily sensual early poem ‘The Trout’ on Cooke’s bookshelves and enjoyed reading it. During my stay with Cooke I had also noticed in the bibliography of the recent Irish Museum of Modern Art’s publication *Barrie Cooke* (2011) that Montague had dedicated the poem to the painter: Hughes’s ‘Madly Singing in the Mountains’ is listed there as the first of eight poems dedicated to Cooke, and ‘The Trout’ was included in the Gallery Press’s 1995 edition of Montague’s *Collected Poems*.¹ From what Cooke had told me, somewhat disparagingly, about Montague’s only passing interest in fishing, as shallow as Hughes and his son Nicholas’s interest was deep, I thought I knew the answer to at least one of the questions I asked the poet in that email – had he ever fished with Hughes? How well did he know him? But I was hoping that, as had already begun to happen with other friends of Hughes, my inquiry might open a door, even lead to a meeting and a conversation that would allow the poem, ‘Madly Singing in the Mountains’, to open inwards, as so many others in *River* were beginning to for me at that time.

After some weeks Montague replied, briefly but courteously, from the home he and Elizabeth Wassell shared in the south of France. Illness as well as that physical distance immediately made the prospect of a meeting recede. He hoped to write more fully in due course. A few months went by, without that follow up, so I

¹ Karen Sweeney (ed.), *Barrie Cooke* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011), p.160.

wrote again, eventually receiving another brief but courteous holding reply. But the door did not open.

When, in May 2013 at his spartan warden-supervised maisonette in Graiguenamanagh, Cooke showed me the cardboard box of letters and poems from his poet friends which his daughter Julia had feared he had lost or destroyed as his dementia was taking hold, prompting the move back to Co Kilkenny from Ballinlig, I saw many vivid letters about fishing from Hughes, and more letters and one beautiful manuscript poem, ‘The Island’, from Seamus Heaney.² (I recognized his clear fluent hand from our own correspondence well over twenty years before, when my editorship of *Oxford Poetry* magazine as a DPhil student coincided with his arrival as Professor of Poetry; he took up a Fellowship at Magdalen College, where his close friend Bernard O’Donoghue had been my Tutor as an undergraduate). But I didn’t recognize any from Montague – and if I had I might have had difficulty reading it. His handwriting needs patience: more than once he reverted to typewriter.

John Montague died in December 2016, aged 87, having outlived Barrie Cooke (born in 1931) by two and a half years. Heaney himself, although fully ten years younger than Montague, had died suddenly in August 2013; and all three men had of course lived well into the old age of which cancer deprived Hughes. The passing of the last member of this closely entangled, yet in some ways curiously distanced, group of male artists prompted me to wonder again what Montague might have told me of his relationship with Cooke and Hughes, and what, if anything he might have said of the waters and bogs that held those two in such thrall. So I went online, and discovered a video of one of the final poetry readings he gave in Ireland, if not indeed the very last, at Claregalway Castle on 4th July 2015.³

It was deeply moving: though I’d never heard or attended a reading by Montague, and never met him, his choice of poems, and his commentary on them, felt as though he was using that reading to answer, in public, those email enquiries two years before. He began with ‘The Trout’, as sensual a poem as it ever was – if notionally about tickling a trout, then surely, also, more about the wild excitement of ripping upwards to onanistic climax – which he described as ‘a favourite poem of Ted Hughes.... now he was a real fisherman’. Even kindly mentioning a book on Hughes and fishing that was still years away from completion, Montague talked with bright eyes of the excitement of plunging, naked, down the mill race on an

² Heaney’s poem ‘The Island’ is now in the Barrie Cooke archive at Pembroke College Cambridge, at <https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/3/resources/13705>, GBR/1058/COO/1/1/1. [Accessed 28/06/2022]

³ Montague’s reading is at <https://vimeo.com/132932001>. [Accessed 28/06/2022]

island in the River Nore, at forty miles an hour, ‘a non-Irish occupation’; then read the poem he had written and published in *Mount Eagle* (1985), ‘Springs’, for Ted Hughes, after a lunch that Montague had once shared with him and Cooke, on ‘an island’ in the Nore. Montague recalled that the three men weren’t alone that day: they were surrounded by diseased blackened salmon, lifting their heads from the water.

Whenever that lunch took place – and if that island is The Island, then it was probably before 1972, when Cooke and his second partner Sonja Landweer moved with their daughter two miles upriver and two fields back from the Nore to Jerpoint, and likely before mid-November 1971, when Cooke’s invitation to the Heaneys brought a decisive tilt to the orbit of these friendships – ‘Springs’ is also full of the full-throated environmental advocacy that swelled into prominence in Hughes’ work in the 1980s. The poem, ‘for Ted Hughes’, first describes a dying salmon which ‘heaves up its head / in the millstream’.⁴ But soon it becomes a form of lament to a specifically male fish, addressed to the ‘Great river king’, ‘Prince of ocean’:

I mourn your passing
and would erase
from this cluttered earth
our foul disgrace.⁵

That conditional ‘would’ becomes, by its final lines, a series of imperatives to match those of Hughes’s own salmon poem ‘The Best Worker in Europe’, also published in 1985. Montague’s final verse rails against the pollution of rivers, the fouling of the seas, and the horrors of the nets, urging:

Drain the poison
from the streams,
cleanse the enormous
belly of ocean, tear
those invisible miles
of mesh so that your
kin may course again
through clear waters.

When, in 2020, Cooke’s literary archive and associated collection of artwork arrived at Pembroke College, it was fascinating as well as moving to see the proof it contained of Cooke’s own connective and sometimes excited responses to his three friends’ work. On ‘Springs’ he had drawn a simple but powerful sketch of two salmon bodies and heads, their snouts almost touching, and each obviously male from the kype or hooked jaw which sexually mature cock salmon develop; the

⁴ John Montague, ‘Springs’, in *Mount Eagle* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1985), p.13.

⁵ ‘Springs’, p.14.

shockingly graphic sketch he drew over most of the page of Montague's 'Sheela na Gig' from the same collection, and the poet's own contribution, to match Heaney's 'Sheelagh na Gig' and Hughes's 'Salmon Eggs' (CP 681-2), for an exhibition of modern Sheelas which Cooke tried for years, and ultimately in vain, to bring to the Douglas Hyde Gallery at Trinity College Dublin.⁶

These collaborations issue from the maturity of their interactions, and are confirmed by material already in the public domain. But Cooke's archive also contains much earlier evidence of these overlapping friendships – earlier, by some years, than the collaboration Montague engineered, as founding co-director with Garech Browne of Claddagh Records, on the recording, notably watery in its theme, that he and Heaney made of their poetry for *The Northern Muse*, released in November 1968.⁷ Cooke, whose own paintings of water, currents and rocks, had earned him rhapsodic comparisons with Leonardo da Vinci from James White (the future Director of the National Gallery in Dublin) when he reviewed Cooke's first solo exhibition at the Ritchie Hendriks Gallery in March 1962, was a natural choice of illustrator for the album cover, and well before its release his reading of Heaney's poems had led him, in August 1968, to attend a teachers' conference Heaney was addressing in Nottingham. That was their first meeting, even if a 1985 letter in the Cooke archive confirms that Heaney had encountered Cooke's art years before the man, possibly at a month-long exhibition of Cooke and Camille Souter's work at the Ulster Museum in Belfast in January 1965.⁸

The fifty works Cooke showed in the 1965 exhibition included three Sheelana-Gigs, one of which Heaney, in his 1998 essay on the artist 'Total Absorption', would recall in terms which reveal the challenge and danger of categorizing Cooke's timeless, primitive but also timely work. The 'little pelvic arching creature' Heaney remembered over thirty years later, and which he celebrated as 'a kind of river reliquary', 'could as easily have issued from the hand that modelled the Willendorf Venus as from the one that had done its apprentice work under the guidance of

⁶ Cooke's sketches in response to the poems in *Mount Eagle* are in the Barrie Cooke archive at Pembroke, GBR/1058/COO/3/1/19. Montague's 'Sheela na Gig' is in *Mount Eagle*, p.31; Heaney's 'Shelagh na Gig' in *Station Island* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p.49. See also my essay 'Beyond the Riverbed: Barrie Cooke, Seamus Heaney and Friends', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 March 2022, pp.11-13.

⁷ John Montague and Seamus Heaney, *The Northern Muse* (Claddagh Records, 1968), cover illustration by Barrie Cooke. A copy of the album is in the Barrie Cooke archive at Pembroke, GBR/1058/COO/1/5/1.

⁸ I will explore this in more detail in my next book, for details see below. For James White's review, 'Stimulating Paintings by Barrie Cooke', see *Irish Times*, 29 March 1962, p.5. Cooke's letters to Heaney, including this first letter in August 1968, are in the Heaney papers at the Manuscripts and Rare Books Library at Emory University, MSS 960 Seamus Heaney Box 37 folder 14; Heaney's letter to Cooke, written on 26 May 1985, is in the Barrie Cooke archive at Pembroke, GBR/1058/COO/1/3/15.

Kokoschka'.⁹ (Cooke had spent a summer in Austria at Oskar Kokoschka's School of Seeing in 1956.) And the image he produced was, Heaney recalled:

a votive object as well as a self-aware, post-Freud, post-Frazer image, and [...] combined a relish of the specific properties of paint and clay with an awareness of the ecological, the psychological and the anthropological.

This framing was shrewdly done, as well as bravely, by a poet whose gender politics had itself been attracting criticism from feminists such as Patricia Coughlan, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford and Clair Wills by the time he wrote.¹⁰

For now, I want to emphasise two linked aspects of that 1965 exhibition at the Ulster Museum, because it helps take us back to a still earlier and formative phase of the mutual if also phased, staggered and for a period interrupted admiration and collaboration of Heaney, Cooke, Hughes and Montague. The first point to make is that the catalogue introduction was written by that reviewer of Cooke's solo exhibition three years before, James White, who had in 1964 become Director of the National Gallery of Ireland. The second is that all the paintings exhibited by both of Ireland's two leading young artists under forty, Cooke and Camille Souter, came from the collection of their patron, Sir Basil Goulding.¹¹ He had agreed to speak at the opening of that Ritchie Hendriks show, on a night when, quite remarkably, most of the works on display sold. And he had agreed only because Barrie Cooke's long-established mentor from his undergraduate days at Harvard, the Irish American millionaire, lecturer in English and for three decades convenor of the Woodbery Poetry Room, Jack Sweeney, was unable to make it. Sweeney had, in 1957, hosted a reading of Hughes and Sylvia Plath, and in 1958 had recorded their poems when they moved to Boston after their year living in Northampton, Massachusetts while Plath taught at her Alma mater, Smith College. And it was Sweeney who had introduced Cooke to Hughes by sending Cooke, then living in remote rural County Clare with his first wife, New Yorker Harriet Leviter, a copy of that recording. I have yet to establish whether Cooke's or any copies survive.

⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Total Absorption', in *Barrie Cooke: Gandon Profiles*, 1998, p.6.

¹⁰ See Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens': The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney', in Michael Allen, ed., *Seamus Heaney* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 185-205; Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially pp. 28-66; Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'Thinking of Her as Ireland – Yeats, Pearse, and Heaney', *Textual Practice* 4.1 (1990), 1-21.

¹¹ *An Exhibition of the work of two painters, Camille Souter and Barrie Cooke: from the collection of Sir Basil Goulding, Ulster Museum January 28-February 27 1965* (Belfast: Ulster Museum, 1965).

When Hughes wrote to Cooke and Harriet to thank them for their hospitality in September 1962, there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no hint of the surprise and discomfiture he had caused Richard Murphy by leaving without forewarning in the middle of the week's stay he and Plath were scheduled to enjoy at Murphy's home at Cleggan in Connemara. But Hughes's letter and its enclosures make it abundantly clear that he and Cooke did much more than fish for trout and salmon – which is how Plath described Hughes's trip to Murphy.¹² They also talked about each other's work. Hughes expressed his admiration for Cooke's paintings of fish, women and water in particular, and the two men either hatched or developed plans; however poignant a possibility, events later that autumn made one of them – that the families might spend Christmas together, during Plath's projected winter in Connemara, for which Hughes sought Harriet's help in finding her help with childcare – impossible.¹³ But for another plan, the fact that Sir Basil Goulding had established himself as a vital and enabling figure in Cooke's artistic life, alongside Jack Sweeney, lent substance and credibility. As I have written in *The Catch*, by this point he was already sufficiently familiar to Cooke, and known to Hughes as a source of likely pecuniary advantage, to enable a wry wordplay, in that thank you letter: 'How is Golding [sic] gilding?'.¹⁴ Never let spelling get in the way of a joke.

The project Goulding was prepared to underwrite or subsidize was set to be the two men's first joint publication, for which though Cooke's letters to Jack Sweeney make it clear that he had already been preparing the ground in a number of sketches inspired by Hughes's poems before then – one letter expresses nervousness that Hughes had not yet let him know what he thought of one such drawing.¹⁵ That letter was written on Christmas Day 1961; Cooke had produced a Christmas card, its image inspired by a Hughes poem, but Hughes's continuing silence made Cooke worry:

did I appear over-eager and frighten him off? We do hope we'll see them here. Hope you got the drawing. It's a bit of a 'mood' drawing and the wrong sort of thing for most of his poems. Should be hard and structural and formal. But that poem is rather unlike the others.¹⁶

¹² See Richard Murphy, 'A Memoir of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes in Connemara, September 1962', in Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London:, 1989, pp. 348-54.

¹³ The idea of a shared Cooke-Hughes family Christmas is reported in a letter from Cooke to Sweeney that autumn. Cooke's letters to Sweeney are in the Jack and Maire Sweeney papers at University College Dublin, LA 52/69

¹⁴ Ted Hughes's letter to Cooke is in the Barrie Cooke archive at Pembroke, GBR/1058/COO/2/2/1.

¹⁶ Cooke to Sweeney, in Jack and Maire Sweeney papers, U.C.D., LA 52/69

Hughes's visit to the Burren the following September clearly sealed their mutual confidence, because in that letter of thanks Hughes now sent his friend ten recent poems, giving the impression that they were a work in progress but also that Cooke was free to use them as he wished. These poems included 'Toll of Air Raids' (published in *Recklings* as 'Toll'), 'Fishing at Dawn', 'Pibroch', 'Mountains', 'Unknown Soldier' (the typescript has Plath's handwritten record that it had been sent to *Critical Quarterly* and PEN), 'The Warriors of the North', 'A Vegetarian' (the title of which lost its definite article when published in *Wodwo*), 'The Road to Easington', 'Sugar-loaf' ('Sugar Loaf' in *Wodwo*) and 'Thistles' (with Plath's note that it had been sent to the *TLS*, *Mlle* magazine, the BBC and PEN; Hughes thought that might make a card).¹⁷

Cooke took Hughes at his word, and assumed the leading role in managing the project, soon identifying Liam Miller's Dolmen Press as the publisher with the right credentials. He opened negotiations with Miller that winter, and demonstrated himself a tough negotiator – distinctly unsatisfied with an early example of a proof printing of one of his drawings, where the blacks and greys were nothing like definite or clear enough for his liking. The next step was to ask Sweeney to draft 'a sort of publisher's blurb', in the spring of 1963, confessing that it was the kind of thing he would find 'terribly difficult to write', and which he didn't want to bother Hughes with, given 'the terrible news of Sylvia'. Sweeney obliged:

This is not a book of illustrated poems or poetic illustrations. It is a selection of correspondences. Delacroix wrote in his *Journal* "there is within us an echo which replies to all impressions." Barrie Cooke's responses to Ted Hughes's poems are echoes in black and white but they come from his own experience as distinctly as Ted Hughes's poems come from his.

The late Edwin Muir said "Out of hawks and jaguars in their cages and macaws and winds Mr Hughes creates a world." Barrie Cooke has responded to that creation with the creatures of his own world.

A rare dated letter from 24 April 1963 expresses Cooke's thanks for this tribute.

But for all this blurb's power, Cooke didn't rest there. He also sought Montague's help in adding to it, essentially with a view to establish above all the parity and parallel visions of the two men, and Cooke's independence from Hughes. An additional paragraph was the first result of that request, slotted in between Sweeney's existing two: a month later, on 'Wednesday 24th [May 1963], Cooke told the publisher Liam Miller that this addition was 'a combination of Montague and myself where I thought some correction was necessary':

¹⁷ Typescripts of these poems are in the Barrie Cooke archive at Pembroke, GBR/1058/COO/2/1/1-10.

Some of the drawings were, in fact, done without the poems in mind – they were later found to have an inevitable conjunction (with certain poems). For although both Hughes and Cooke are naturally solitary workers, both are immersed in a detailed attention to nature where flux, and even violence, seem a lawful order.¹⁸

The publication was to be neutrally titled ‘XV’, then, but Cooke’s cover designs enforced the rhetoric of the blurb or introduction: this was not just an illustrated edition of poems, but an expression of correspondences, a conjunction of visions: poems by Ted Hughes and drawings by Barrie Cooke given equal credit and font size. And Cooke was prepared to make his own not insignificant backing to the project: a letter to Miller in which he confesses he has not yet heard more from Hughes (‘a terrible retardatory letter writer’) about a go-ahead from Faber goes on to mention other sponsors and a subscription model, used for a recent Italian fine press edition of T.S. Eliot, before pledging £100 of his own to add to Goulding’s committed £200. He flattered Miller, invoking his and Dolmen’s ‘high repute’ as a way of persuading him to make up for Hughes’s silence by writing to Faber himself.

But it was to no avail. By the end of the month, or early June – another undated letter to Sweeney reports that the mayfly were almost over – Goulding had lost his nerve, and pulled out. Cooke now shared hopes, and figures, with Jack Sweeney, himself a man of very considerable wealth, and whose own sense that, as Cooke would put it years later, nature and violence were fascinations he and Hughes shared, had brought the two men together, evidently trying to persuade him to replace Goulding as an investor in the project. But Hughes’s continuing silence in the aftermath of Plath’s death – that ‘terrible news’, as he’d put it to Sweeney, having made its awkward way into Cooke’s characterization of his friend’s tardiness as a correspondent – meant that the project foundered. And indeed Cooke would hear nothing more from Hughes for almost three years: as the silence endured, it became a recurrent concern in Cooke and Montague’s correspondence, now split between Cooke’s literary archive at Pembroke and Montague’s papers in the NLI. Not until Hughes returned to Cleggan in 1966 with Assia Wevill and the children would painter and poet meet again, though it’s clear from Hughes’s letter to Gerald the previous November that Cooke’s exemplary dedication to the life of the countryman artist remained a central attraction of Ireland to him.

Well before then, however, Cooke’s engagement of Montague (who was then living between Spain and Paris) to refine that blurb had another outlet, itself of

¹⁸ Barrie Cooke drawings and correspondence, Dolmen Press Collection, ZSR Library, Wake Forest University, Box 7 folder 7.

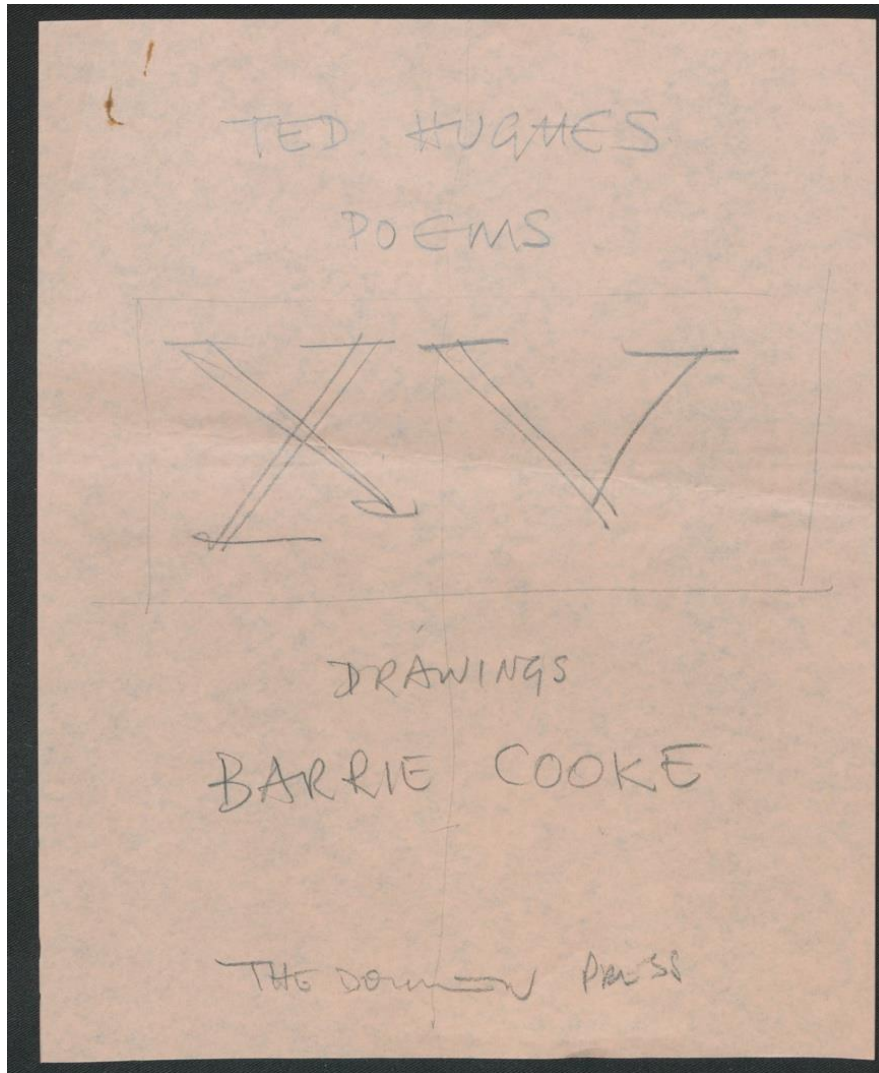


Figure 1 Barrie Cooke, pencil sketch of proposed cover for 'XV'; Dolmen Collection, Wake Forest University Library. Reproduced with permission of the Estate of Barrie Cooke, with whom copyright remains.

vexed as well as genuine importance, not just in promoting Cooke's work but in providing proof of the closeness of the shared vision and aesthetic between the painter's poet friends, even if the poets themselves remained at a distance. This was an essay, written by Montague about Cooke's paintings, which in the course of its long gestation was the subject of some fascinating exchanges between the two men; ultimately resulting in its publication in *The Dublin Magazine* in March 1964. The essay's value was such that it also appeared more than two decades later as Montague's contribution to Aidan Dunne's outstanding monograph on *Barrie Cooke*, timed to coincide with the major retrospective of the painter's work held at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin in the spring of 1986. The essay, 'The Painting of Barrie Cooke', appeared there on the pages immediately after Heaney's own first essay on 'Barrie Cooke' (itself reprinted from 1983) as well as images of the text and

two of Cooke's pictures for Hughes's 'The Great Irish Pike', reprinted from 1982. But it was by some distance the longest and most considered essay on Cooke's magnificent early paintings, and remains a revelation.

Three features of Montague's essay are of particular relevance to Cooke's relationship with him and Hughes. First, it confirms and amplifies that review of Cooke's March 1962 exhibition at the Hendriks Gallery by James White, by placing Cooke's water paintings not in comparison with Leonardo da Vinci, as White had done, but in a fuller aesthetic context, involving not just painters but writers. Montague praised Cooke's 'Heraclitean vision' as the dominant note of that exhibition, explaining why its emphasis was 'on paintings of water, plunging over rocks, spreading darkly in a pool', and why elements hitherto in the background of portraits Cooke had exhibited in earlier shows – 'flux', that principle of detailed attention and technique established in that corrective paragraph for the 'XV' blurb – now were given full treatment.¹⁹ As Montague puts it, 'for Cooke water is not merely the handiest correlative for his sense of flux, but a form of space, combed by currents, as the air is by winds.' That allowed Montague to follow White in praising the sheer textural surface of Cooke's paintings, which he knew 'was born from the lovingly observed interaction of water and light and stone'. But Montague went further; he knew, too, that these surfaces were also derived from the informed and deep literariness of what he had begun his essay by noting of his friend's 'classic enthusiasm'. So 'The rushing movement of *Mountain Stream, Kerry*, surviving interruption to emerge as a thinner, swifter spate, recalls Hopkins's *Inversnaid*:

This darksome burn, horseback brown
His rollrock highroad roaring down....

Montague went on:

It is mainly in literature that this kind of vision has found expression in modern times – Hopkins, Lawrence, Pierre Gascar, Ted Hughes. This is not to say that Cooke is a literary painter – he is entirely the opposite – but to stress the paradox that links a careful natural observer, in the tradition of Courbet and Turner, with one of the most powerful currents in modern literature. It is as though, as nature dies, the poets respond to an invisible call, to defend and examine its vestiges. And like some of these artists, Cooke can be regarded as most daring when he is being most factual.

A number of claims deserve comment here: the first, Cooke and Hughes's cooption into a literary-artistic tradition in which Hopkins and Lawrence and Turner become

¹⁹ John Montague, 'The Painting of Barrie Cooke', *The Dublin Magazine* (March 1964), p.39. Reprinted in Aidan Dunne, *Barrie Cooke* (Dublin: the Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1986), pp. 16-18.

part of a wider European aesthetic vision; second, that Montague is already striking a version of the elegiac note of environmental protest that would surface again in ‘Springs’ – it is in response not just to natural flux, death within life, but also to the possibility that nature itself might be dying, that it is under unprecedentedly, possibly terminal pressure from environmental damage and destruction, that the most urgent art might issue. Third, and this too is an insight equally applicable to Hughes, and especially his own water and *River* poems, the most powerful, controversial and memorable of Cooke’s works are also those that proceed from empirical observation and experience. And in terms of the memorable, Hughes would choose ‘Inversnaid’ as an exemplar of the way poetry can at its best transcend ‘actual scenery’ in ‘Writing about Landscape’, the May 1964 BBC broadcast that would become a chapter in *Poetry in the Making* in 1967.²⁰ Thirty years on, ‘Inversnaid’ remained his inspiration for his ‘Afterword: Memorising Poems’ in the second of the anthologies he co-edited with Heaney, *The School Bag*, published in 1997.

This series of linked convictions, embodied by his friend and in his work, led Montague towards the climax of his essay, and to the second and third points I wish to emphasize in it. Montague kept ‘the vexed questions of the Sheela-na-gigs’ till last, and Cooke and Montague’s correspondence tells us why.²¹ Cooke’s fascination with the ancient crude stone Celtic carvings had early become an obsession, and from 1960 to 1964 he made successive attempts to capture that fascination in mixed relief works of clay figures rearing from canvas stuck with river rocks and pebbles. Changes in emphasis between these works – which kept coming thick and fast after they had attracted notice and immediate sales at the Hendriks show – accompanied changes in his own interpretation of what the figures and their land- and river-scapes meant to him, and what they might mean to others. Montague does not reveal those exchanges in his essay, but he does reveal that his friend had treated him, as in September 1962 he had treated Hughes, to a Cooke’s tour of the most important of them. ‘Once, when I was in County Clare, Barrie Cooke brought me to see a ruined church near the Burren.’²² That ‘brought’ has the air of a pilgrimage, somehow, an initiation, that the more conventional ‘took’ would have lacked. And the importance of the induction is clear, when Montague goes on to emphasise the nature of the distance of its Sheela-na-Gig from more conventional Catholic

²⁰ ‘It is so clean and right that whenever I see anything like it in actual scenery I think – “It’s almost as good as *Inversnaid*”’. ‘Writing about Landscape’, BBC Home Service 1.5.1964, reprinted in *PiM* 79-80. I’m indebted to the editor for this point.

²¹ Montague, ‘The Painting of Barrie Cooke’, p.41

²² *Ibid.*, p.41.

Christian iconography, for all that both men knew of its enduring grip over the culture of contemporary Ireland.

In the interior, there was a delicate crucifixion, carved in stone, but over the porch stood an unmistakable fertility figure, a grosser, mocking version of the famous Laussel Venus found near Lascaux, where European man began. That it had remained so long (I understand that there are over 60 in Ireland) shows that medieval Ireland knew the power of the Mother Goddess, the primal principle of fecundity.

This figure was what Cooke called ‘the Kilnaboy Venus’; the long European aesthetic context Montague was invoking, along with the power of the Mother Goddess, and his estimate of the number of them in Ireland, all relied on Cooke’s own ongoing study of them, which would in time prompt A.W.Raftery of the National Museum of Ireland to undertake his own research.²³ It had been thirty years since the feminist archaeologists and folklorists Margaret Murray and Edith Guest had made claims for the importance to women of the Sheela na Gigs, and Jørgen Andersen’s *The Witch on the Wall* was still fifteen years away.²⁴ And Montague’s indebtedness to Cooke’s at-the-time uniquely idiosyncratic informed enthusiasm for ‘Sheela-na-Giggery’, and his enduring sense of the figure as celebratory as well as tough, recalcitrant, ultimately became Heaney’s, thirty-five years later, when he looked back in ‘Total Absorption’ to his first encounter in 1965 with one of the Sheelas Sir Basil Goulding had bought.

For Montague as for Cooke, there was an element of aesthetic and cultural protest in the Sheela-na-Gig, as well as a desire to revive what the conservatism of contemporary Catholic Ireland had suppressed. And in carefully chosen words Montague risked something like heresy. His friend’s ‘version of this theme’, Montague wrote, was ‘the presiding deity of the present stage of his art’, and the first of its contributions to contemporary life was that it ‘restores this lost aspect of our heritage.’

He then describes Cooke’s version, immediately also admitting to its compelling effect on the viewer, one which I have myself felt and witnessed recently, for instance among the staff of the Hugh Lane Gallery who brought a 1963 Sheela out of storage for me to witness in September 2021, and then with Cooke’s daughter Aoine. Montague’s essay captures that moment of encounter: ‘A clay version, as

²³ Cooke, letter to Jack Sweeney, October 1962, in Jack and Maire Sweeney papers, UCD.

²⁴ Margaret Murray, ‘Female Fertility Figures’, (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 64 (January 1934), pp.93-100; Edith Guest, ‘Irish Sheela na Gigs in 1935’ (*Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* VI.1 (1935), pp.330-54 and ‘Ballyvourney and its Sheela na Gig’ (*Folklore* 48.4 (1937), pp.107-29 . Jørgen Andersen, *The Witch on the wall: medieval erotic sculpture in the British Isles* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977).

though created by a swirl of the riverbed (there are even real pebbles) it has almost hallucinatory power.’ He had a particular reason to be vivid: Cooke’s letters to Montague in the National Library of Ireland reveal a persistent anxiety, in the months when Montague was working on the essay and then as they waited for its appearance in *The Dublin Magazine*, that it would appear without photographs of the Sheelas, and one letter even dismisses the idea of a compromise – line drawings of the work – proposed by the editor. This mattered intensely to Cooke, not least because he confessed to his friend that the Sheelas had come to dominate his output, even as he pondered, and doubted, what they represented. One undated letter posits, and rejects, lack of personal fertility – he had two daughters – and impotence, but wonders about paranoia and lesbianism – a possible reference back to Murray and Guest’s response to the Sheelas in the thirties.

Montague’s essay both contains and moves beyond those doubts, as it qualifies and corrects that ‘almost hallucinatory power’ of the encounter with the Sheela, seeking to up the stakes and to give his friend’s art the assessment it deserved. And in doing so he returned to the comparison with the one contemporary figure he regarded as worth it, and to the insight that had marked that paragraph Montague had helped draft for ‘XV’. ‘But it is more the power of ritual gesture than of tasteful contemplation, and it seems to me to suggest the central fascination of Cooke’s work’, and the real ‘vexed question’ of and beyond the Sheelas:

how closely can an artist expose himself to flux, and still transpose his findings into that other form of life called art? Recently, Cooke began a series of drawings based on the poetry of Ted Hughes: it will be interesting to see if he can match the almost organic unity of poems where natural forces are brought closer to expression even than in Lawrence.

In the event *The Dublin Magazine* did print a photograph of one of Cooke’s 1961 Sheela na Gigs to illustrate Montague’s essay when it appeared, months after the ‘XV’ project had been abandoned.²⁵

By then, of course, the possibility that Hughes had entertained, after his own visit to Cooke and his family and to the Kilnaboy Venus, of naming his own next collection after the Sheela na Gig, and asking Cooke to provide a huge image for the cover, had receded too. It was only in November 1965 that Hughes felt able to consider a return to Ireland, only in the first months of 1966 that he did so, and felt the revival of his creativity in Connemara. And it would not be until the 1980s when Heaney, Montague and Hughes himself wrote and published their own Sheela na

²⁵ The illustration appeared on p.41 of *The Dublin Magazine*.

Gig poems. Heaney's successive attempts, like Montague's, are now in Cooke's literary archive at Pembroke College Cambridge; Hughes's, 'Salmon Eggs', went into *River* (via publication in Ben Sonnenberg's *Grand Street* magazine) – Hughes's letter to Sonnenberg of 30th May 1981 (*LTH* 448) making its Irish connections clear. All were intended for an exhibition of modern and ancient Sheela na Gigs which Cooke had used his position on the Board of the Douglas Hyde Gallery at Trinity College Dublin to agitate for since the mid 1970s. But his attempts were finally thwarted in 1982; this failure being one of only two regrets in his career, he told Vera Ryan in 2006.²⁶ One needs only to read Fintan O'Toole's vivid accounts of the enduring grip of Catholic conservatism on Ireland during the first three decades of Cooke's career, and the shocking success of agitators for the insertion of a clause – via a referendum in 1983 – amending the Constitution to criminalise abortion, to understand the decision to suppress Cooke's Sheelas then.²⁷ But by 1986 the tide was turning, when the Cooke retrospective at the Douglas Hyde was followed by an ICA-sponsored exhibition of the New York based artist Nancy Spero which included her own avowedly feminist response to the same Sheela, at Kilpeck Church in Herefordshire, which had inspired Heaney's poem. That was the beginning of Irish women's reclamation of the Sheela na Gig – a movement which has culminated in the ongoing Project Sheela, which were Cooke still alive now, would no doubt have benefited from his acknowledgement and endorsement.²⁸

As for Montague's larger question, which he asked not just of Cooke but of the handful of notably male artists and poets of his generation – 'how closely can an artist expose himself to flux, and still transpose his findings into that other form of life called art?' – the letters, poetic manuscripts and paintings in Cooke's literary archive and collection, and in the Irish and American archives that hold his letters to Heaney, Montague and Hughes, hold the answer. I will be attempting to answer it, and tell the story of their friendship, in my next book, named after the poem Heaney wrote for Hughes on his sixtieth birthday and sent to Cooke too: *Casting and Gathering: A Painter and some Poets*.

²⁶ Vera Ryan, 'Barrie Cooke', in *Movers and Shakers 2: Irish Visual Art 1940-2006* (Wilton, Co. Cork: The Collins Press, 2006), pp.257-292; pp.276-7.

²⁷ Fintan O'Toole, *We Don't Know Ourselves: a personal history of Ireland since 1958* (Dublin: Head of Zeus, 2021).

²⁸ See the Project Sheela website: <https://www.projectsheela.com> [accessed 28/06/2022]

Reviews

Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath, by Heather Clark, London, Jonathan Cape, 2020, 1118 pp., £30.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-787-33253-9/London, Vintage, 2022, 1152 pp., £14.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-529-11314-3

There have been more than a dozen biographies of Sylvia Plath, ranging from the traditional ‘cradle-to-grave’ approaches, to biographies that focus on particular parts of Plath’s life like Elizabeth Winder’s *Pain, Parties and Work* (2013), which examined Plath’s time in New York in 1953, and Andrew Wilson’s *Mad Girl’s Love Song* (2013), which, as its subtitle states, looked at Plath’s relationships before she met Ted Hughes. Plath biographies have always stirred great debate, and the controversies over bias, objectivity and omissions were examined by Janet Malcolm in *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1993), a book which provides a useful and eminently readable discussion of the problem of biography. All Plath biographies – whether good, bad or somewhere in-between – have their points of interest; they may be extremely helpful to understanding Plath’s work, or they (by accident or design) reveal the critical, and sometimes misogynistic, responses to women writers in the twentieth century, or they may seek to place Plath and her writing within wider cultural discourses. However, some of these biographies seem to suggest that the most interesting thing about Plath is her death, and the narrative tends to propel itself reductively forward to Plath’s final night in February 1963, as if nothing could be more important than her tragic end. Heather Clark’s *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* is a riposte to these death-obsessed texts, and she portrays Plath as a woman who sought to experience everything life had to offer. Clark carefully considers the position of women in the mid-twentieth century and suggests that ‘Plath spread her wings, over and over, at a time when women were not supposed to fly’ (xvii).

In the last few years, new Plath material has been released, which has shed new light on her life. For instance, Peter K Steinberg and Karen V Kukil’s edited two-volume collection of Plath’s letters, with many unseen letters published for the first time, and the Rosenstein archive, which was opened just as Clark was nearing the completion of her biography. Clark makes excellent use of these new resources and points out that she is the first biographer allowed by both the Plath and Hughes

estates to scan archival sources (xix), thus offering a much richer and more considered engagement with this material. Despite the likelihood of more emerging treasures, *Red Comet* is the fullest and most complete biography to date.

At 1118 pages in hardback, *Red Comet* is huge, and it provides an exceptional amount of context to Plath's life and work. Clark's engaging style – and at times, the sheer beauty of her writing – ensures that the reader never feels overwhelmed with the level of detail. Indeed, chapter endings often feel novelistic in their encouragement to the reader to keep turning the pages. For example, the ending of Chapter 19, which sees Plath and Hughes about to depart England for the US ends thus: 'She boarded the Queen Elizabeth filled with visions of Nauset, the black edges of her past dissolving in the clean emerald surf of her future' (495). The book's structure also helps to keep the narrative on track; the three parts are divided into Plath's life before Cambridge (1850–1955); Plath at Cambridge and back to the US with Hughes (1955–1959); return to England (1960–1963). As is common in Plath biographies, Clark also includes an epilogue detailing the events after Plath's death, and in particular, the impact on Hughes and his complex role in managing her estate.

Clark begins Part I in Prussia in the mid-nineteenth century and traces Plath's roots through her paternal family. She explores how the Plath family emigrated from West Prussia and suggests that Plath's 'perfectionism' should be 'understood within the historical and sociological context of the American immigrant experience, which framed her life' (4). This is an important argument and the excellent research deployed here sets up a framework for new ways to read Plath's work. As Clark follows the Plath family to America, she contextualises their experiences with wider social and political changes, such as the Great Depression. Clark writes convincingly about what she calls an often overlooked aspect of Plath's life – class; and details her attempts 'at moving between classes' (69). Of course, this was something that Christine Jeffs' biopic *Sylvia* got completely wrong, in what seemed to be an attempt to present Plath as a spoiled rich girl. In this section, Clark makes excellent use of Plath's teenage diary to present a full picture of Plath's experiences and points out where Plath's voice acts as a precursor to her later work. Interestingly, Clark notes the 'Hughesian description of cliffs' in a 1947 poem 'Steely-Blue Craggs!' She also reclaims the infamous early poem 'I Thought That I Could Not Be Hurt' as an example of Plath's 'creative experiment', in opposition to other biographers who read it as a 'foreshadow[ing] of Plath's future neuroses' (90).

Clark also rightly seeks to change the perception of Plath's mother Aurelia, a task that she begins in this first part of the biography. She writes that Aurelia has been viewed as a 'meddler' (21), and as a mother who put unbearable pressure on

her daughter. However, Clark demonstrates through interviews with Plath's friends in Wellesley that she was not the domineering character that she has been portrayed and Clark praises her as 'resolutely pragmatic' when dealing with the death of her Otto Plath (48). Clark re-evaluates the way Aurelia dealt with Plath's mental health illness and concludes that 'in 1953, neither [Plath or Aurelia] had the language to speak honestly or openly about mental illness' (304). In the epilogue, she follows Aurelia's reaction to Plath's death, and despite the tragedies she had endured, and the unfair characterisation of her as a bad mother, Clark argues that she 'never lost her faith in humankind's potential for goodness' (923). In Part II, Clark makes an interesting comparison between Aurelia and Ted Hughes's mother, Edith. Chapter 16 focuses on Hughes and his background and she shows that Edith Hughes 'was nearly as ambitious for her talented son as Aurelia was for her daughter' (401).

Before reaching Plath's infamous meeting with Hughes, Clark demonstrates the difficulties that Plath would have faced on arriving at Cambridge, detailing prevailing sexist and classist attitudes. Later, after meeting Hughes and his set, Clark suggests that 'Plath's ambition was held against her' (415) due to her desire for financial success and her business acumen. But this determination led to publication for both Hughes and herself, and as Clark puts it, Hughes 'would owe his career to her' (444). A theme that runs through *Red Comet* is the gender roles that the couple had to navigate, reject and eventually accept in some form, and even in these early days of the relationship, Clark writes of the 'gendered tightrope [Plath] was walking' in encouraging her husband's career (461). Hughes's awareness of the way in which culture – especially American culture – enforced 'limitations' (494) on women helped him to understand some of Plath's, in his words, 'awkward' (461) behaviour. This part of the biography is strengthened by Clark's discovery of a fragment from *Falcon Yard*, in which Plath's heroine, considered as a cipher for herself, is attracted to Gerald (Hughes' fictional representation) 'not only for his "incredible violent presence" but for the force of his language' (435).

In the final section of the biography, Clark continues to explore Plath's life and the marriage through gendered expectations, and thoughtfully elucidates how, despite Plath's burgeoning success as a writer, 'she was expected to drop everything to be a hostess and maid' (654). Clark is careful to point out that Hughes also did his part domestically, at a time when this was unusual. However, following the move to Devon, Clark writes that 'they both found themselves locked into traditional gendered roles that had once terrified them' (702), and that Hughes was particularly aware that their move may have been a 'mistake' (702).

Clark's close reading in this section, particularly of the October poems, is absolutely terrific. She reads the Bee poems alongside Otto Plath's *Bumblebees and Their Ways* and Hughes' poetry – a continuation of the comparative work she undertook in *The Grief of Influence*. Clark emphasises the importance of the cultural contexts in Plath's poetry, rightly claiming that 'hers are poems of personal grief transformed into public protest' (765).

As with all Plath biographies, *Red Comet* is not without its controversies. The cover of the book features an image of Plath and Hughes looking directly at each other in Cambridge 1957; Plath occupies the front and Hughes the back. The inclusion of Hughes certainly caused some discussion on the book's publication, although any biography of Plath is inevitably also a biography of Hughes, at least for the latter part of Plath's life. In Chapter 32, 'Castles in Air', Clark explores the rumoured relationship between Plath and Al Alvarez, the first biographer to investigate this so thoroughly. She reads 'Letter in November' as a 'love poem for Alvarez' and speculates that 'Thalidomide' may have been partly inspired by 'fears of pregnancy [...] if she had planned to become – or indeed, had become – sexually active again' (809). Alvarez did not answer Clark when she put the question to him in an interview, although he has, of course, made a number of statements rejecting this over the years.

Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath is an astonishing achievement. It is exhaustively researched, persuasively argued, and filled with nuanced and intelligent close reading. Clark succeeds in her aim of reclaiming Plath as an ambitious, gifted and creative woman, who was 'determined to live as fully as possible' (xvi). This is currently the definitive biography of Sylvia Plath.

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The Page Is Printed: Ted Hughes's Creative Process, by Carrie Smith, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2021, xii + 238 pp., £90.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-80085-535-9

The title of this excellent new study of Hughes's working practices is appropriately a quotation of the last line of 'The Thought-Fox', a poem which appears to be a moment by moment, real time recreation of the process of composition – a process which, in the poem at least, appears to involve little for the poet to do apart from

recording the events of a dream hunt in which the poet appears at different points in the roles of hunter, prey, and finally the creature's resting place or lair. The last line has the immediacy and disdain for the usual process of cause and effect that suggests the kinds of magical processes, and their possible correlations with the creation, reception and effects of poetry, which fascinated Hughes throughout his writing life. 'The Thought-Fox' is a good place to begin also because it was the first poem in the various selections from his poetry which were published during Hughes's lifetime: his opus one, and a conjunction with his earlier dream of 'the scorched fox' whose shamanic traces, Hughes claimed, confirmed his vocation as a poet. As Smith demonstrates through her meticulous analysis of a mixture of Hughes's correspondence and drafts, 'The Thought-Fox' also depicts an ideal of spontaneous composition and authentic connection between the writer's powers of attention, his subject matter and his unconscious which Hughes repeatedly tried to attain, with varying degrees of success, at various points throughout his working life.

But there is also a mischievous wit at play in the choice of title, because the pages on which Carrie Smith mainly focuses her considerable critical skills are precisely those which have *not* been printed: the many drafts and compositional sketches held in the burgeoning archives housed in a number of universities and libraries in the UK and USA. As the back cover blurb states, this is the first book-length study concentrating specifically on Hughes's compositional process based almost exclusively on the intensive study of the now voluminous collections of drafts, compositional sketches and correspondence which has been divided between Emory University, the University of Exeter, The British Library, the University of Indiana, the University of Liverpool, Pembroke College Cambridge and a number of other university libraries. And the first two sections of the book – a lengthy introduction, and a brief note on the particular challenges in transcribing Hughes's increasingly illegible hand – summarise in some detail the particular difficulties of archival research, especially when dealing with such a large body of material located in a number of different collections as is the case with the Hughes archive. Each library has its own methods of organising and cataloguing its share of the material: which may or may not follow Hughes's ordering and initial cataloguing of the items, and which may either help or hinder a scholar attempting to establish the chronology and relative status of the dispersed drafts and fragments relating to a single printed text.

A more detailed account of the particular challenges of archival research of this kind can be found in the case study of Smith's considerable efforts to establish what she characterises as the 'evolution' of a single poem: 'Skylarks' which was

published in *Wodwo* (1967) (65-92). It is a poem which also plays a significant part in the 'evolution' of poems in *Gaudete* (1977) and *Birthday Letters* (1998) and what Smith identifies as 'the germ of the argument that *Crow* develops about poetic subjects and inspiration'. It might seem at first sight somewhat excessive to concentrate so much of a relatively short book (237 pages, including index) in examining the genesis of a single text; but this case study reveals what Smith describes as 'the painstaking process of piecing together disparate sources and [...] moments of archival happenstance' (66) through which she observes 'Hughes's compositional wrestling with the idea of how to be a poet' – a metaphor which fittingly for Hughes combines notions of struggle, violence and sport. The metaphor of wrestling also recalls Jacob, struggling against his god, and emerging damaged but renamed and reborn in ways not dissimilar to that experienced by the shamans of Hughes's extensive reading and imagining.

Throughout the book Smith examines Hughes's various identities and periods of self-examination and self-dramatisation: 'The Professional Poet' of his first two collections; the poet of *Crow* and *Moortown* striving to believe that it is possible for poems to write themselves; the collaborator of *Cave Birds*, *Elmet* and *River*; and the archivist, biographer and apologist of *Birthday Letters*. Smith is again and again confronted with the particular challenge of the Hughes archive or archives: trying to make sense of the chaotic bulk of a lifetime of drafts, proofs, letters; the dismaying variety of the physical material which faces the researcher in the Hughes archives. Hughes used a bewildering variety of conventional and unconventional stationery throughout his working life. As well as conventional notebooks of different sizes – from small pocket sized notebooks to foolscap and A4 journal-type books – Hughes frequently used and reused both small and large duplicate invoice books with numbered pages, the numbers sometimes indicating (but frequently not) the sequence of individual versions in the often protracted process of drafting and redrafting. And as well as notebooks and carbon books of various kinds, Hughes used almost any scraps of paper – the backs of old typescripts, used envelopes, previous drafts of his own and other people's poems, even the backs of children's entries to the *Daily Mirror* and subsequently W. H. Smith Young Writers Competition – in the creation and re-drafting of published, unpublished and never completed poems. But, as Smith shows, the careful study of this material can result in a significant reassessment of Hughes poetry, particularly his early poetry, by revealing the often tortuous process by which the final printed texts were constructed. Smith quotes Jonathan Bate's observation that, '[t]he hawk, the jaguar, the thought-fox and the horses all seem fully formed [...] But Ted's

notebooks reveal that all were struggled for through draft after draft' (*Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* 112, quoted by Smith 39).

In addition to the numerous boxes and files of drafts, Hughes was an astonishingly prolific letter writer. Christopher Reid, editor of *Letters of Ted Hughes*, which contains a selection of 750 letters, has estimated that Hughes wrote approximately 2,500 letters, although this now looks like an underestimate. As the reviewers of Reid's selection noted, Hughes was an exceptionally patient and generous correspondent, spending hours drafting lengthy replies to questions about his poems and how he composed them from scholars, teachers and children. And many of these letters – such as Hughes's justly famous letter to Lissa Paul – cast valuable new light on individual poems, books, or whole areas of his work. Significant amounts of correspondence and other writings remain embargoed, for the present, so it's no wonder that Smith notes that, 'As much as we would like to think of the archive as a fixed, bounded, evidentiary set of papers in reality it ebbs and flows with acquisitions, disintegrations, enlargement and diminishment so that what we can know from the archive often filled just beyond our grasp'.

Whether or not this was her intention, what Smith presents us with, in her distillation of her years of painstaking reading in Hughes's archives, is not merely a summary of Hughes's compositional techniques, but what is surely a most subtle and evocative work of biography. What Smith reveals through her painstaking reassembly of the day by day, week by week, or month by month progress of poems like 'Skylarks' is the constant self-questioning and self-examination of a dedicated but seemingly profoundly uncertain writer; and what emerges from the sometimes anguished letters to friends and confidants, is a much more nuanced figure than the Plath-haunted philanderer that emerges from Bate's unauthorised life; a more uncertain and self-doubting person than appears in Feinstein's more compassionate portrait.

A key question which is implicitly raised by Smith's excellent book is: what kind of person hoards what appears to be every fragment, every single scrap, no matter how apparently insignificant, of draft material for nearly fifty years? In some writers it would be a sign of an overweening sense of their importance to be so confident that posterity will value even the most indecipherable shred. But the more one reads of Hughes consistently accusing himself, particularly when re-reading whichever was his most recently published book, of missed opportunities, of being too egotistical, of being too accommodating to one or other of his many collaborators (and there is hardly a book by Hughes which did not involve either a real or a notional collaborator, or process of collaboration), the more one senses and feels pity for the frequent anguish of someone who held such an exalted and

elevated notion of poetry and its potential power that, notwithstanding his prodigious talent, he could never live up to such ideals.

What emerges from Smith's book is that throughout his writing life Hughes was in search of an authenticity of composition and utterance – often the ideal of spontaneous composition depicted in 'The Thought-Fox', or perhaps the sort of automatic writing that Yeats witnessed his wife George produce but could not emulate himself. In the chapter 'Authenticity and Sincerity', which deals mainly with the composition of *Moortown Diary* (1989) the book where Hughes seems to have felt he came closest to his aim to achieve 'improvised verses', Smith summarises: 'For Hughes, naturalness is associated with spontaneous writing, whilst poetic process is somehow deadening and causes vitality to be "lost"' (164). This yearning for spontaneity she also sees reflected in Hughes's great admiration for what he saw, in his own words, as Coleridge's 'spontaneous effort to find direct expression for balanced wholeness of being' and Keats's poetry as a 'healing substance' which appeared 'as if it were produced in a natural and spontaneous way' (163).

Perhaps this should not seem so strange or singular. 'Authenticity' was an abiding concern, and a key criterion of worth, in both 'high' and 'popular' culture, throughout Hughes's life. In music especially, the 'authentic' jazz of Bix Biederbeck and Sidney Bechet was praised while the diluted 'revival' of Kenny Ball or Acker B was disparaged – notably by Philip Larkin; the infamous accusation of 'Judas' shouted at the electrified Bob Dylan at Manchester's Free Trade Hall; the 'authentic instrument' performances of Roger Norrington's 'London Classical Players' compared to the mellifluous gushing strings of von Karjan's Berlin Philharmonic playing Beethoven: the abiding question was 'Is it *authentic*?' In the 1960s and 1970s the writers and directors of *Look Back In Anger*, *Chips With Everything*, *A Taste Of Honey*, *A Kind of Loving*, *Kes*, and *Cathy Come Home* and many others – reacted against the so-called 'well-made plays' of middle- and upper-middle class lives and the depictions of stoic wartime self-sacrifice of the previous generation of dramatists and screen writers by creating supposedly authentic depictions of working class life. Al Alvarez's similarly demanded that the 'New' poets of the 1960s achieve a new seriousness through a full engagement with even the darkest parts of their interior lives by going 'Beyond The Gentility Principle', and in so doing identified Hughes and Sylvia Plath as the poets whose work came closest to this ideal of authenticity. Despite his recurring sense of his own failure to write 'authentically', according to his ideals of spontaneity and immediacy, Hughes's voluminous archives also preserve the evidence of an eventual 'armistice' in this internal emotional and intellectual struggle. As Smith notes in her concluding

remarks about *Birthday Letters*, ‘Although Hughes manipulates the language with which he characterises the creative process, the sheer amount of draft material, both manuscripts and edited typescripts, illustrates the time and mental effort expended on these poems’ which finally results in ‘a sort of hard-fought treaty - some kind of reconciliation between the inspiration and other parts of the poet’s character, a precarious jagged, touchy kind of agreement’ which resulted in ‘exciting pieces of writing even when they are anything but what you would call a perfect poem’ (211).

But perhaps, inveterate self-questioner and reviser that he was, Hughes also hoped and intended someday to return to at least some of the multitude of rejected drafts and discarded fragments (as he did in some instances for *Birthday Letters*) and finally shape something that would, to his personal satisfaction, match the marvels made by his beloved Beethoven, Coleridge, Shakespeare – and, maybe also, the achievements he so admired in the works of his greatest collaborators: Leonard Baskin and Sylvia Plath.

Smith’s exceptionally well-written book implicitly raises a number of issues concerning not only potential future areas of Hughes scholarship, but also the future of archive-based literary criticism and biography. Firstly, as far as textual scholarship is concerned, surely Smith’s revelatory work makes a very strong case for a variorum edition of Hughes poems. As Smith shows, so much of Hughes’s efforts was in purging the earliest versions of his poems of their personal contexts and perceptions, meaning that many first and last drafts are in many significant respects different poems. Secondly, Smith’s archival research is an example of one of the more fruitful directions in which literary criticism can and should go now that authors no longer have to be considered ‘dead’. It also shows that there is a way in which, those aspects of a writer’s life which often escape conventional biography – the actual processes of writing – can be written about in a way which is not merely accessible, but is engaging and even exciting.

This brings me, finally, to my negative criticisms – for none of which I would blame Smith herself. As is too often the case with academic books, the editing is poor. It may be a convention in university essay and thesis writing, but there is no need for the reader to be told what the next few paragraphs or chapters will be about, or to have pointed out what the past paragraphs and chapters proved. An eminent writer to whom I showed my copy of *The Page Is Printed* commented that when a building has been as carefully and attractively constructed the scaffolding shouldn’t be left up to obscure it. Removing this ‘scaffolding’ should be the job of the editor; sadly in both trade and academic publishing this kind of basic editing is rarely accomplished. Lastly, the price: £90 for hardback *and* also the ebook is

unreasonably high. *The Page Is Printed* has been put out of reach of most readers who do not have access to a university library which has a generous acquisitions budget. This is a great shame, because Smith's writing is clear, jargon-free, and when loosened from the unnecessary shackles of scholarly convention she tells of Hughes's creative struggles and successes as a highly engaging narrative which I'm sure would find a wider audience than this price point will allow. Perhaps university presses should stop emulating the worst practice of trade publishing – over publishing; publish less, and support – even one might dare suggest actively promote – the titles which they do publish, which would enable them to reduce the unit cost. And might I also suggest that Liverpool University Press might start with *The Page Is Printed*.

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The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill, edited by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick and Peter K. Steinberg, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2021, xx + 295 pp., US \$45.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8071-7135-6

There is a sad irony about Assia Wevill's last entry in her journal, dated 21 March 1968, published in this book for the first time:

A programme on Dorothy Wordsworth last night on the radio – 'The Exquisite sister' – readings from a pedestrian journal – she ended mad and old. The tenderness with which these terrible relationships are evoked, once the players are dead. Their lives so compost for the sentimental bouquets of 'compilers' of the future.

Ted is to pick me up this morning. He went to visit his mother in hospital yesterday – spent the night at the Beacon, he said. (196)

Assia is staying in a pub in Haworth (not in Manchester as her biographers suggest) and does not visit his ailing mother with Ted. On an earlier visit to the Beacon Assia had been told by Olwyn that Ted had disappeared to lay flowers on the grave of Sylvia Plath. Now, isolated, feeling 'totally bankrupt', and knowing, she says that Ted's desire for her 'is dead in him', Assia adds the apparently doubting, 'he said', to where Ted spent the night.

The journal entry for the previous day is simply harrowing:

The terrible talk in the 'lounge' of the Elm Hotel [Manchester]. 'It's Sylvia – it's because of her' – I can't answer that. No more than if it were a court-sentence. It says die – die, soon. But execute yourself and your little self, efficiently. But I can't believe it – anymore than I could believe hearing of my own death. How tall cats' front legs seem, when they sit up. (195)

Three days later, back in London alone, Assia killed herself and her four-year-old daughter, her 'little self'. Assia was not 'mad and old', as she characterised Dorothy Wordsworth. She was 41 years old, had written a will and farewell letters to Ted and to her father. Only the latter, written two months earlier, survived, although Goodspeed-Chadwick and Steinberg, say that 'the original has not been located' (155) and they quote it from Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev's biography of Assia, *Lover of Unreason* (2006). This is strange since Koren and Negev collaborated in the making of this book and wrote the Foreword.

In fact, almost all of the above quotations from this book are to be found in *Lover of Unreason*. All the translations in this book by Assia Gutmann (Wevill) have been published in Yehuda Amichai's *Selected Poems*. If you have the Penguin Modern European Poets edition (1971) you will have them because Penguin took them from the original 1968 edition, the American publication of which is used by Goodspeed-Chadwick and Steinberg. The Penguin edition title page adds 'with the collaboration of Ted Hughes'. In a letter to Amichai, Assia says 'Ted has seen all these translations and combed them a little' (145).

So what is the evidence in the four sections – Letters, Journals, Poems and Miscellaneous Texts – of Assia Wevill's *Collected Writings* for the editors' claim that she was a 'significant artist' (12)? Certainly not her letters which reveal her facile values and, like the journals, contain no literary insights. The Miscellaneous Texts section contains two brief notes, her will and a transcript of a BBC Radio 3 programme of poems by Amichai, for which Assia wrote the links and Ted read the poems. Since most of the Poems section consists of translations, which are very fine, but are probably a three way collaboration as the Penguin edition suggests, that leaves five unpublished poems by Assia. Three of these were written when Assia was married to the second of her three husbands (Ted's family apparently referred to him as 'Edward the Fourth'). Although there is a recurring sense of personal insecurity in these poems ('my time's / Unlamented, springless, passed'), they could be said to represent a resistance to it, their melancholy confronted, if not overcome. The ultimate question is whether, had Assia *not* resolved to seduce Ted on that weekend visit to Court Green, would a scholarly edition of *The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill* have been published? If the answer is 'no', as I think it must be, one must conclude that, as Assia wrote of Dorothy Wordsworth, 'a pedestrian journal'

is only 'so [much] compost for the sentimental bouquets of "compilers" of the future'. So these 'compilers' have produced a book that is of biographical interest, a case study for gender studies, a sad document from a neglected, marginalised, displaced, tragic, murderer.

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The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes, Mark Wormald, London: Bloomsbury, 2022, 320pp., £20 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-5266-4424-4

I thought of beginning this review by saying that *The Catch* is the most eccentric book ever written about Ted Hughes. But then I thought, if so, what is the centre? Would Hughes have thought it eccentric? Almost certainly not. Fishing was central to Hughes's life, an obsession, to an extent that possibly only a fellow obsessive could appreciate – almost as central as poetry, perhaps even more so. He wrote in the *Birthday Letters* poem 'Ouija' that if he had not been caught up by Plath's ambition for both of them, he would have been 'fishing off a rock / In Western Australia' (CP 1078). In 'Flounders' he speculates, uniquely in *Birthday Letters*, that a day spent fishing together off Cape Cod might have been a happy day, a 'visit from the goddess' who had come 'To tell poetry she was spoiling us' (CP 1085).

And certainly *The Catch* is an obsessive book, as its author admits. Its value is that half the obsession he shares with Hughes. The other half, more widely shared by readers of this journal, is with Hughes himself. The most important point to make is that Wormald is not merely an obsessive fisherman; the nature of his obsession is closely akin to Hughes's. Consider this passage:

The throng and slide and rush of the water going over the lip as the light seeped away into the grey held me, of course, in its grip, and I cast, and cast from the tussocks of grass across and down, covering the water; once I thought I saw a bulge and a slither of a fish easing over that lip, surging into the pool. (212)

Or this, describing the last occasion on which Wormald killed a fish:

The fly dances, the water split around the head of the lure, and I keep it there in the current. And after two hundred casts that morning, three hundred, nothing, I watch the surface burst and a large snout rise and turn on the Muddler, and I lift, rod and soul,

and the river explodes and the line slides sharp and true away and
within me. (291)

That concluding ‘within me’ is the unmistakable Hughesian note. Wormald’s main conventional scholarly source is Hughes’s fishing diaries, held in the British Library, which he is the only scholar qualified or interested enough to exploit, and it is often difficult to distinguish his prose from his subject’s. This is a writer who knows at first hand the sense of connection memorably re-created by Hughes in ‘Earth-Numb’:

A piling voltage hums, jamming me stiff –
Something terrified and terrifying
Gleam-surges to and fro through me
From the river to the sky, from the sky into the river

Uprooting dark bedrock, shatters it in air,
Cartwheels across me, slices thudding through me
As if I were the current – (CP 541)

His other important source is an obsessive visiting and revisiting of the places where Hughes fished – above all on the occasions that resulted in poems such as ‘Stealing Trout on a May Morning’, ‘Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan’ and ‘Saint’s Island’. He tries to find the exact spot where Hughes was fishing, at the right time of year and of day. The result is not literary criticism exactly, but a vivid re-creation both of the poems’ context and of the experience that inspired them.

Wormald also meets, and befriends, the people with whom Hughes fished, most importantly the artist Barrie Cooke. (Another valuable fruit of Wormald’s obsession is the acquisition of Barrie Cooke’s archive by Pembroke College.) Cooke, in particular, is vividly brought to life through Wormald’s own encounters, Hughes’s diaries and conversations with his friends and family. Although the importance of fishing for Hughes is inescapable for readers of his poetry, one can easily get the impression that this was a solitary activity. *The Catch* makes it clear that this was far from the case. Even when he fished alone – in Devon, Ireland or Scotland, on which *The Catch* mostly focuses – at the end of the day he would join groups of friends who shared his passion. Many of these friends were distinctly upper-class; by the 1980s, on which this book mainly focuses, he had travelled a long way from his early fishing companions such as John Wholey at Crookhill in South Yorkshire. We hear of ‘Lord and Lady Clinton and their son, significant land and riparian owners on the Torridge’, Gregor McGregor, ‘a baronet and twenty-third Clan Chief of Clan Gregor’, not to mention the Queen Mother. This is no accident – it cost money to fish in the places where Hughes was fishing at this time in his life, a ‘privilege few could afford’, as Wormald notes (237).

Fishing is not merely a pastime but a craft, and the reader is left in no doubt about the amount of specialised knowledge that you need to reach Hughes's standard. There are times when the non-angler gets lost in the detail of fishing tackle and the peculiarities of different stretches of river. This is probably necessary – taking time out for elementary instruction would dissipate the intensity that is an important feature of the book. There is more to this intensity than the concentration needed to catch a fish. There is a strong emotional undertow. The book opens and closes with moments of guilt – leaving a smudge with a licked thumb on a page of the diaries in the British Library, and finally announcing that he will never kill another salmon because 'The rivers need their salmon more than I do' (interesting that it's for the river's benefit, not the salmon's). Hughes himself felt, and resisted, a similar feeling of guilt: 'That effort – that cornered + desperately contriving savage attempt to escape, that focus of craving for life – might stop me fishing some day. Bad day it will be' (210). And occasionally Wormald hints at a less attractive aspect of Hughes's passion, for example when catching thirty-six salmon in one day makes him, in his own words, 'dizzy with the exultation of plunder' (237). Wormald questions whether Hughes's fishing companions would have used the word 'plunder', insinuating a complexity of feeling that others might not have shared.

There is also a personal story – the death of his mother when he was a child, his father's awkward announcement of remarriage, the father's eventual death, and the difficulties of two of his sons in adjusting to the adult world. There is a confession of guilt about taking a call from his wife about a family crisis, when he is away fishing. The autobiographical element doesn't obtrude, but it gives us an emotional and experiential hinterland which gives depth to, if it doesn't explain, the author's obsession.

Hughes, especially in *River*, makes liberal use of religious language when writing about fish and their environment. Wormald doesn't follow the master in this respect, but one closes this book feeling that one has been granted an insight into something equivalent to religious devotion, and the centrality of this to one aspect, at least, of Hughes's writing.

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Ann Skea is an independent scholar, author of *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (UNE Press, 1994). She first met Ted Hughes in 1992; and in 1995 he invited her to stay at Moortown Farm to help him collate his archive of manuscripts, a task he ultimately completed himself, having found things he thought lost and things he "wanted no-one else to see". She and Hughes remained friends and met and corresponded until his death in 1998. In 2016 she was elected as an Associate Scholar of Pembroke College, Cambridge University. Her Ted Hughes webpages, at: <http://ann.skea.com/THHome.htm> are archived by the British Library and her extensive writing about Hughes's work is internationally published.

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