



The Ted Hughes
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The Ted Hughes Society Journal

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Contents

Editorial	4
List of abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes.....	6
Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes	7
Holly Ranger	
Welsh Origins of Ted Hughes’s Magical Poetry	25
Katherine Robinson	
An Alternative Medieval Tradition for Ted Hughes.....	35
James Robinson	
Hughes and Larkin: A Rapprochement?.....	47
Neil Roberts	
Ted Hughes: Etiquette of the Uncanny	57
Martin Shaw	
Ted Hughes and ‘Astrological Conundrums’	65
Ann Skea	
Ted Hughes’s ‘unacknowledged debt’ to ‘The Pike’ by Amy Lowell?	76
Terry Gifford	
The Ted Hughes Memorial Lectures at ‘Ways With Words’, Dartington.....	79
Christopher North	
Reviews	86
Contributors	109

Editorial

Literary historians sometimes refer to the long eighteenth century. Years too differ in their dimensions, their intensity, their capacity. The long 2018 has been something of an epoch for anyone interested in the work and life of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

Spring opened with Frieda Hughes's major London sale of her parents' literary and personal effects: the Bonhams catalogue is a treasure trove, and not just for those individuals and institutions lucky enough to add to their collections. (Contact the editor if you would like an electronic copy.) June and July brought no fewer than three new significant publications devoted to Hughes's writing. First came the special issue of this journal, guest edited with distinction by James Underwood, and bringing to the page a range of papers first aired at the conference on Ted Hughes and Place in Huddersfield the previous June. Then there was Lorraine Kerslake's fine monograph on Hughes's writing for children, the first devoted to that subject; shortly to be followed by the definitive *Ted Hughes in Context*, edited by Terry Gifford, its range of thirty-six short chapters belying the singularity of its title but opening up any number of lines of new research. Autumn brought more fruits: the second volume of Peter Steinberg and Karen Kukil's monumental edition of Sylvia Plath's *Letters*, as well as *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture*, edited by Neil Roberts, Terry Gifford and myself, which began life at the University of Sheffield's international conference *Dreams as Deep as England* in 2015. We should not forget the latest *Modern Poetry in Translation*, in which Hughes's work as founding editor of that magazine and as translator are celebrated. It is excellent to see *MPT* in such rude health at fifty-three. Our own indefatigable Chair and Reviews Editor has made sure that three more publications, two academic, one not, receive the attention they deserve later in these pages, along with most of the other books mentioned here. I am, as ever, grateful to him for all he does for Hughes studies, and to his team of reviewers.

And then there was August. Fishermen often refer to this month as 'the dog days', a time of comparatively poor pickings, when the fish keep their heads down, but most of the contributors and some readers of this issue will have much fonder memories of that month, which ended with the eighth international conference on Ted Hughes, 'Poetry in the Making', expertly hosted and organised by Carrie Smith and the University of Cardiff's School of English at the magnificent Gregynog Hall

near Newtown in Powys. Delegates from India, Bangladesh, Japan, the United States and Russia, as well as from every corner of Europe, the Principality and what the rest of what can still, just, be called a United Kingdom, gathered for three days of conversations, papers, presentations, a plenary lecture by Juliette Wood and a vividly expansive reading by Gillian Clarke.

This issue contains some of what Hughes might have called the ‘prize catches’ from just one of these Gregynog days. Indeed, Katherine Robinson’s paper on the medieval Welsh origins of Hughes’s magical poetry won the Ted Hughes Society’s prize for the best of several fine papers presented by post-graduate students. James Robinson stages another conversation, between Hughes and the sound of Dante, part of his ongoing work on Hughes’s response to the medieval. Neil Roberts presents a judicious reconsideration of a more recent but more contentious relationship, between Hughes and Larkin. And the mythologist Martin Shaw brings a new voice to Hughes studies, in a rich meditation on his and Hughes’s Devon, its rivers, the cultural history of its deep lanes, and the poet’s engagement with a romanticism that must keep growing.

Variouly reworked and extended since their presentation that day, each of these essays also benefits, as did all there at Gregynog, from the company and comments of Daniel Huws. I will always remember driving Daniel, early that morning, from his home in the hills above Aberystwyth to the conference, and what he told me about life at 18 Rugby Street. Rarely can the extended community of Hughesians have felt more connected. I look forward to the next issue, which will I hope contain a number of other expanded versions of papers from Gregynog.

Still, though, the company was by no means complete, as two more major essays and one very useful set of notes suggest. Family commitments prevented Ann Skea from joining us, and presenting the paper she had hoped to give on Hughes’s ‘Astrological Conundrums’; her deft elucidation of these owes something to the time she had spent in 2017 in Cambridge. I am delighted to include a handsomely illustrated version here. I am also grateful to Holly Ranger for her meticulous expansion of a paper originally presented at the University of Ulster’s international conference on Sylvia Plath in November 2017 on Ovid, Plath, Baskin and Hughes. Her essay is exemplary in the range and detail of the relationships it presents, between myths, readings, texts, and the lives they reflect and transform. Finally, Christopher North reminds us of the important ongoing series of Ted Hughes Memorial Lectures at Dartington Hall’s Ways with Words Festival.

Mark Wormald

Pembroke College Cambridge

List of abbreviations of works by Ted Hughes

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

And by Sylvia Plath

- LSP1* *The Collected Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Volume 1, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017)
- LSP2* *The Collected Letters of Sylvia Plath*, Volume 2, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2018)

Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes

by Holly Ranger

Ann Skea records a conversation with Ted Hughes in 1995, in which he comments that he is currently translating more of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and writing 'about 100 poems about things I should have resolved thirty years ago. Should have written then, but couldn't'.¹ After the publication in January 1997 of the translations as *Tales from Ovid*, a letter to Keith Sagar in August suggests that this 'vast pile of pieces about SP & me [...] Written at odd times since the early seventies' have coalesced into the collection that would appear in 1998 as *Birthday Letters* (LTH 692). The exact dates of composition of the *Birthday Letters* poems remain contested (a letter to Sagar in July 1998 suggests that Hughes began 'writing the last few ones' after the publication of *Winter Pollen* (LTH 720)); but Hughes certainly begins to compile and edit the poems to Plath while he is translating Ovid and working on his translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: the poet describes how the psychic energy freed by writing poetic letters to Plath 'went into Ovid, then the *Oresteia*, Phèdre maybe – and parts of *Alcesteis*' (LTH 720). Critics have noted the seepage between the autobiographical poetry and the classical translations. Michael Silk has discussed Hughes's explicit figuration of Plath-as-Electra in both *Birthday Letters* and *Oresteia*.² Anne Whitehead, Lynda Bundtzen, and Leslie Cahoon have all scrutinised Hughes's self-figuration as Ovid's Orpheus in *Birthday Letters*.³

¹Transcription included in Ann Skea, 'A Timeline of Hughes' Life and Work', in *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes*, 2nd edn., Keith Sagar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. xxxii. This paper is an extended version of a paper presented at the conference Sylvia Plath: Letters, Words and Fragments, Ulster University, 10 November 2017. I wish to thank the Ted Hughes scholars I met on the Hughes panel for their warm welcome and intellectual generosity, and I thank Mark Wormald for his comments and suggestions for developing the conference paper. Thanks are due to Greg Woolf and the Institute of Classical Studies for the postdoctoral funding which has enabled this research.

²Michael Silk, 'Hughes, Plath, and Aeschylus: Allusion and Poetic Language', *Arion* 14:3 (2007), pp. 1–34.

³Anne Whitehead, 'Refiguring Orpheus: The possession of the past in Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Textual Practice*, 13:2 (1999), pp. 227–41; Lynda Bundtzen, 'Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in *Birthday Letters*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23:3/4 (2000) pp. 455–69; Leslie Cahoon, 'Haunted Husbands: Orpheus's Song (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10) in light of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*', in *Defining Genre and Gender in Latin Literature*, eds. William Batstone and Garth Tissol (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 239–67.

Bundtzen has also argued that Plath's spectral presence in the translated tale of Myrrha – an incest narrative that culminates in the birth of the boy Adonis – is used by Hughes to comment on the father–daughter narrative that proved so generative for Plath's late poetry.⁴

Yet the presence of Plath in *Tales from Ovid* has not been fully explored. The examples above illustrate how references to Plath – in the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, for example, two lovers fated to be reunited only in death – are consistently read biographically as representations of Plath-the-woman.⁵ This paper aims to explore some implications of reading the presence of Plath in *Tales from Ovid* as literary allusions to Plath's engagement throughout her body of work with the Roman poet Ovid and his epic poem of bodies changing forms, *Metamorphoses*.

Margaret Uroff, Ekbert Faas, and Diane Middlebrook, among others, have explored the 'call and response' between the work of Plath and Hughes; and Erica Wagner and Heather Clark remind us of the caution necessary in any attempt to establish a definitive chronology or direction of allusion between two poets who lived and worked so closely together.⁶ Yet many critical treatments of their poetic interaction have overlooked *Tales from Ovid*, and my argument here is that the connections between Hughes, Plath, and Ovid that erupt in Hughes's final two collections of poetry are similarly complex and longstanding. I begin by considering Hughes's 1988 essay 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"', in which he becomes the first critic of Plath's work to note her engagement with Ovidian figures. Building on Hughes's argument that the mythic figures of Phaeton and Icarus provide the interpretative key for understanding Plath's *Ariel* poems, I provide further examples of Ovidian figures in Plath's poetry. To focalise the allusive nexus between Ovid, Plath, and Hughes, I compare Plath's poem 'Sculptor' (1958) – dedicated to Leonard Baskin and in which Baskin is cast as Ovid's Pygmalion – to the tale of Pygmalion as translated by Hughes in *Tales from Ovid*. I present some further evidence for Plath's presence (or conspicuous absence) in *Tales from Ovid*, before discussing some implications of Hughes's (re)arrangement of the translations. Finally, I suggest that while *Birthday Letters* represents an explicit

⁴ Bundtzen, pp. 460–1.

⁵ See also, e.g., the essays collected in *Ted Hughes and the Classics*, ed. Roger Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Diane Middlebrook, 'The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes: call and response', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 156–71; Margaret Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Ekbert Faas, 'Chapters of a shared mythology: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: A Commentary on Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

engagement with Plath, *Tales from Ovid* presents an implicit dialogue with Plath's work and her own Ovidian allusion.

The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog'

In 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"', an essay written for an illustrated lecture to the Wordsworth Trust on 25 February 1988, Hughes delineates the underlying mythic elements of Plath's poems 'Ariel' and 'Sheep in Fog' (*WP* 191-211; *SPCP* 239, 262).⁷ He argues that a key mythic figure for Plath was Phaeton, child of Apollo, god of the sun and poetry. In Book 1 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Phaeton asks to drive the chariot of the sun across the sky, killing himself and scorching the earth when he loses control of his father's horses (*Met.* 1.750–2.366). In Hughes's reading, 'Sheep in Fog' represents a continuation of the Phaeton myth that first appeared in Plath's poem 'Ariel', written three months earlier. 'Ariel' ostensibly describes a ride on a horse ('How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees!'), and the speaker imagines herself first as Godiva, before flying like an 'arrow', 'Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning' (*SPCP* 239). Hughes writes, 'the speaker, the I, hurls herself free from all earthly confinement and aims herself and her horse – as the poem says, "suicidal" directly into the red, rising sun' (*WP* 199). He sets out for the reader how this theme – 'a dawn ride towards a kind of death' – continues in 'Sheep in Fog', a second poem inspired by this same morning ride (*WP* 199). While in 'Ariel' the speaker appeared as the triumphant 'spiritual hero, she is now the failed one, the one who disappoints, trudging towards a mournful dissolution in bottomless, starless, fatherless, darkness' (*WP* 199).

Using a manuscript draft of the poem, which contains the crossed-out lines, 'The world rusts around us / Ribs, spokes, a scrapped chariot', Hughes reads the retained word 'rust' in stanza two of the finished poem as referring to 'the rusty iron wreckage of a chariot', an image which ghosts the final version (*WP* 200). Hughes now introduces the myth of Phaeton to link the two poems, positioning Plath as the reckless child who dies in the process of attempting – 'suicidal' – to emulate the divine father:

As an image of her Ariel flight in the chariot of the God of Poetry, which was also her attempt to soar (plunge) into the inspirational form of her inaccessible father, to convert her former physical suicide into a psychic rebirth, that myth [of Phaeton] is the parable of *Ariel* and of her life and death. (*WP* 200–1)

⁷ *SPCP*: Sylvia Plath, *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1981).

At this point in the poetic process, however, ‘the myth shows no sign of having broken into her consciousness’ (*WP* 201).

Keeping the myth of Phaeton in mind, Hughes re-reads the lines retained in stanza three of the finished poem, with the rhyme and repetition of ‘morning’ (mourning) and the ‘dolorous bells’ of the horse’s hooves, as ‘bells for the dead Phaeton’ (*WP* 202; the transformation at the end of Phaeton’s story in *Metamorphoses* occurs when his grieving sisters become poplar trees). Then, as Hughes writes, ‘with a real shock we come to the actual body of the fallen charioteer’ in Plath’s draft line ‘Like a dead man left out’ (*WP* 202). This dead man has metamorphosed into a wilting flower by the final version of stanza four: ‘(like the flower which replaces the body of Adonis in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*), this metamorphosed flower now has a lively, coded meaning for us’ [i.e. of a dead man] (*WP* 203). Shakespeare is a possible intertext for Plath’s engagement with Ovid here – and as a favourite author of Hughes, one through whom he may suggest his own influence on Plath – but Shakespeare is drawing on Ovid: the tale of Venus and Adonis is found in Book 10 of *Metamorphoses*, and is one of the twenty-four Ovidian episodes chosen for *Tales from Ovid*. Next, Hughes turns to the new image which completes stanza four (‘the far / Fields melt my heart’ (*SPCP* 262)) and takes the word ‘melt’ to suggest that the myth of Phaeton here ‘reaches through to another myth’ and ‘has metamorphosed the sun’s chariot and horses into the wax of the wings of Icarus’ (*WP* 205–6). Icarus, who appears in *Metamorphoses* Book 8, is a boy who, like Phaeton, ignores his father’s advice and whose wings ‘melt’ when he flies too high and too close to the sun. Instead of flying into the cauldron of morning as at the close of ‘Ariel’ – a ‘triumphant Phaeton reaching her Father’ – the speaker now plunges as Icarus into the ‘Starless and fatherless... dark water’ of the sea that swallows the boy at the end of his tale (*WP* 206); in Ovid, Phaeton’s journey in the chariot of the sun also ends with a plunge into the waves when Tethys welcomes him into her waves, *quae me subiectis excipit undis* (*Met.* 2.68).⁸ Hughes concludes by positioning ‘Sheep in Fog’ as a coda to ‘Ariel’ which ‘admits’ that Plath’s biomythographical narrative project had ‘failed’ (*WP* 207).

Hughes argues persuasively for the presence of Phaeton and Icarus in ‘Ariel’ and ‘Sheep in Fog’. Further evidence for his reading can be found in Plath’s poems. The lines ‘People or stars / Regard me sadly’ (‘Sheep in Fog’ (*SPCP* 262)) suggest both the personified constellations who flee Phaeton’s flaming chariot (The Plough, Scorpio, and the Ploughman Boötes), and the mourning of his sisters, the Heliades,

⁸ All Latin quotations are taken from P. Ovidi Nasonis. *Metamorphoses*, ed. Richard Tarrant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are my own.

which closes the episode (*Met.* 2.171-7; *Heliades lugent*, 2.340). In ‘Ariel’, the speaker’s horse ‘Hauls me through air’ (*SPCP* 239), translating the violence of Ovid’s *trahit* (Phaeton is ‘dragged along’, *Met.* 2.230); and the deleted lines from the manuscript draft of ‘Sheep in Fog’ include the detail of the ‘spokes’ (*radii*, *Met.* 3.317) of the wrecked chariot. A more momentary allusion in ‘Sheep in Fog’ may be suggested by ‘They threaten | To let me through to a heaven’ (*SPCP* 262): when Phaeton’s mother, Clymene, tells the hitherto ‘fatherless’ boy to seek out his father’s house, Phaeton leaps up ‘his head ablaze / with the idea of heaven’ (*concipit aethera mente*, *Met.* 1.776; Hughes’s translation (*CP* 881).

One criticism of Hughes’s approach is his alignment of Plath’s poetic voice with a male poetic voice (Phaeton, Icarus), which overlooks the complex work in myth and gender with which Plath is engaged in much of her poetry. Hughes may have wished to position Plath within a male literary tradition to protect her reputation (that is, to establish her as a poet not a ‘poetess’); and Plath herself does initially look to male models – both authorial and archetypal – and suppresses references to female models, real and mythic. A further criticism may be levelled at Hughes’s biographical interpretation of the mythic presences in Plath’s work. He chooses to link ‘Sheep in Fog’ and ‘Ariel’ by two mythical episodes that both contain wayward children and their ultimately destructive relationships with their genius or divine fathers (a popular narrative of Plath’s own life). Elsewhere, Hughes vehemently refutes the image of Plath as ‘a young woman hurtling to disintegration shedding rags of poetry – leaping into Aetna [and] bursting into flames as she fell’; but this is an elegant *praeteritio* that serves to emphasise the connection between Plath and spectacular self-destruction.⁹ In alluding to Typhon, the monster buried beneath Mt Etna (and a tale found in *Metamorphoses* Book 5, 5.346-358), Hughes links Plath once more to a progeny rebelling destructively against the divine father (or, perhaps, rebelling against herself: Typhon, also known as Set, is the mythical enemy of the goddess Isis, whom Hughes uses as a cipher for Plath in his ‘Isis’, (*CP* 1114)). In his focus on an autobiographical use of the Phaeton myth Hughes misses Plath’s literary classicism. An alternative reading begins by recalling that in *Metamorphoses*, Phaeton’s is not a story about emulating one’s father, but about establishing paternity (Phaeton is attempting to prove that Apollo is his father).

Read in this light, ‘Ariel’ and ‘Sheep in Fog’ may represent Plath’s attempt to establish a literary heritage and insert herself into the paternal literary canon, proving herself a rightful heir. The speaker’s confidence in ‘Ariel’ even suggests that she is ready to forge on ahead without any sense of male literary anxiety (the female element is emphasised by ‘lioness’, ‘sister’, ‘Godiva’). Three months later in ‘Sheep

⁹ Quoted in Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes*, p. 69.

in Fog', the speaker is 'fatherless' (*SPCP* 262) – in my reading, Plath does not inevitably repeat the destructive myth or fail in the act of emulation, but breaks out of the myth's confines.

Plath references Phaeton explicitly in a journal entry from June 1959: 'about Ambition: universal, driving Ambition; how to harness it, not be a Phaeton to its galloping horse' (*JSP* 495).¹⁰ Here, Phaeton represents literary ambition, perhaps at risk of being out of control. Plath emphasises the need for measured intellectual risk-taking (the passage comes at the end of an ambitious list of potential literary projects), and she reminds herself not be 'dragged along' (*trahit, Met.* 2.230) in its power – to show more discipline than Phaeton. She similarly employs Icarus as a code for ambition in a letter to her brother expressing the necessity to challenge herself and travel to the UK to study in Cambridge: 'my wings need to be tried. o icarus' [sic] (*LSP1* 944).¹¹ Plath's linking and encoding of these myths chimes with Ovid's own self-figuration as both Phaeton and Icarus, who appear as a pair in two of Ovid's poems of exile, *Tristia*, suggesting that Plath may have drawn on Ovidian sources additional to *Metamorphoses* (Valerie Wise has argued that Ovid similarly uses Phaeton and Icarus as ciphers for his poetic ambition).¹² Plath uses her Ovidian models here to express an 'unfeminine' desire to be a successful intellectual, an idea contra to 1950s views of feminine propriety (compare how Apollo tells Phaeton that to successfully control the horses, he must fly against the prevailing winds, *in adversum... contrarius, Met.* 2.72-3). Plath harnesses the aura of authority of the paternal literary canon, but tames it by subverting the gender and conclusion of the tale. Reading Plath's use of Phaeton and Icarus intertextually with her fiction – which often portrays a young woman caught at the moment of choosing between the seemingly mutually exclusive roles of 'writer' and 'mother' – we find a metaphor for the difficulty facing a young woman in the 1950s attempting to negotiate the 'middle path' safely by taming her masculine ambition. Both Phaeton and Icarus are advised by their fathers not to fly too high or too low, but to take the middle path: *medio... ibis, Met.* 2.137; *medio... limite, Met.* 8.203. Compare Hughes's description of the 'extreme polarity... of Plath's inspiration, and achievement' (*WP* 199).

In his essay, despite his claim that 'We know where this chariot comes from', Hughes declines to name a source for Plath's allusions to Phaeton and Icarus (*WP*

¹⁰ *JSP*: Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).

¹¹ *LSP1*: Sylvia Plath, *Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume 1: 1940-1956*, eds. Peter Steinberg and Karen Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017).

¹² Phaeton, Tr. 1.1.79-80 and 3.4.29-30; Icarus, Tr. 1.1.89-90 and 3.4.21-24; Valerie Wise, 'Flight Myths in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: An Interpretation of Phaeton and Daedalus', *Ramus* 6 (1977), pp. 44-59.

200). He briefly considers Plath's print of Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560s) as a source of inspiration (only Icarus's foot is visible in the painting), but ultimately concludes that it was a 'submerged' 'mythic force' trying to break into her consciousness, a 'certainly terrible large-scale psycho-mythological drama' (*WP* 207). Hughes is a careful reader of Plath, and astutely notes that she has incorporated the myths of Phaeton and Icarus in these two poems 'with beautiful, extremely powerful effect, yet without any overt mention of either' (*WP* 206). Heather Clark has proposed that by providing the myth of Phaeton as the interpretative key for Plath's poems, Hughes may have wished to suggest an indebtedness of her great poem 'Ariel' to his own earlier 'Phaetons' poem, published in *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957 (*CP* 33); Plath read and suggested edits for this poem (*LSP1* 1281).¹³

I think that in this essay Hughes becomes the first critic to note Plath's allusions to Ovidian figures (more recently, Jo Gill has noted the presence of the tales of Echo and Narcissus, and Diana and Actaeon in Plath's work, but she does not link Plath explicitly to Ovid).¹⁴ Although he chooses not to name her source explicitly, he uses the verb 'metamorphosed' four times, perhaps unconsciously betraying the origin of the tales (*WP* 202, 203, 206, 211); Hughes also uses 'metamorphoses' of Plath's work in his essay 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', and is quoted using this term by Ekbert Faas.¹⁵ Further, in his emphasis on the covert nature of the allusions of these two poems, he also becomes one of the first critics to note the influence of what Kathleen Connors has called Plath's 'hidden mentors'.¹⁶ Hughes's demurral may therefore be an attempt to protect Plath's hidden sources ('any mention would have killed the suggestive power of the mythic ideas', *WP* 206); such covert literary allusion has become an important aspect of my own readings of Plath's Ovidianism.

I am interested in the ways in which Plath's Phaeton resurfaces, or is perhaps re-used in Hughes's translation of the tale of Phaeton. *Tales from Ovid* is notable for its 'characteristic expansion[s]' and deviations from the Latin text.¹⁷ A close reading reveals that Hughes's additions to Ovid's Phaeton episode borrow

¹³ Clark, p. 156.

¹⁴ Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 54, 60.

¹⁵ Ted Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. C. Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 187; Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1980), p. 180.

¹⁶ Kathleen Connors, 'Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, eds. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 118-28.

¹⁷ Raphael Lyne, 'Ovid in English translation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 262.

vocabulary from both the essay on Plath's Phaetons and the two poems 'Ariel' and 'Sheep in Fog'. In the essay, for example, he writes that the poems express 'a wish to emulate her father and follow him into death', a wish restated in his translation of Phaeton's 'idiot emulation', amending Ovid's description of Phaeton as 'unwitting' (*in scius*, 2.148; *CP* 887; later, Phaeton is 'unlucky', *infelix*, 2.179). The cities Phaeton flies over (in the Latin, *magnae pereunt cum moenibus urbes*, 'Great cities are destroyed with their walls', 2.214), become 'black stumps of burnt stone' (*CP* 890), picking up the 'blackening' and 'black' charred imagery of Plath's poems. The translation of the Phaeton episode is not alone in its use of Plath's poetry, and I suggest that many of Hughes's expansions and deviations from the Latin – and many of his unusual choices of episodes for inclusion (and exclusion) in *Tales from Ovid* – may be explained by looking at Plath's engagement with those tales.

Sylvia Plath's *Tales from Ovid*

Plath first learned Latin from her father Otto, who had majored in classical languages at Northwestern College and continued his Latin to doctoral level at Harvard, where it was mandatory for studying entomology.¹⁸ Later, she studied Latin formally for four years at Gamaliel Bradford High School, Wellesley (1945-1949), where Ovid's poetry remains on the syllabus today. Childhood letters and journals detail her Latin homework and reveal playful experimentation with Latin prose composition to communicate secretly with her brother (*LSP* 87, 105, 106, 107). The poem 'Ouija' wittily recalls 'every foul declension' of her school Latin lessons, and her fears of miscomprehension are conveyed by the 'unintelligible syllables' of her new bee hive 'like a Roman mob [...] I lay my ear to furious Latin' (*SPCP* 77, 212). Plath seems to have received a standard introduction to Latin poetry, evidenced by allusions to Catullus, Virgil, and Apuleius – and her personal library catalogued so far contains many books in Greek and Latin as well as classical works in English, French, German, and Italian translation – but it is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which most often lends characters and themes to Plath's myth-infused poetry.¹⁹

Her work displays a sustained thematic interest in images of metamorphosis, repeatedly meditating on insects and the changing moon, and using metamorphic imagery to describe pregnancy and the ill or menstruating body. Mental ill-health is also repeatedly figured as a type of metamorphosis, most frequently represented by images of women overwhelmed by plant-life, as in the unsettling blur between

¹⁸ Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness: A Biography* (Tucson: Schaffner Press, 2003), p. 4.

¹⁹ Available online at: <http://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary/yourlibrary> (accessed 2 December 2018).

woman and plant as a woman melts into the flower-patterned carpets in ‘Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper’ (*SPCP* 41). One characteristic of Plath’s experimentation with Ovidian allusion is her postmodern blend of classical images overlaid by domestic scenes, pulp fiction, and pop culture references, and the transformation of the Ovidian *locus terribilis* – a parodic inversion of a Virgilian pastoral idyll, the *locus terribilis* is a place that signals danger to women – into the hallucinatory and opium-filled hospital wards of surgeons and psychiatrists. (We can compare Hughes’s approach in *Tales from Ovid*, punctuating the narrative with turn-of-the-millennium slang and imagery, and pathologising the mania of Ovid’s characters.) Plath’s interest in the potential for dark humour and the grotesque in metamorphosis may owe a debt to Franz Kafka’s tragic insect-man (Plath received a copy of Kafka’s short stories for her twentieth birthday (*LSP1* 518)), but there are allusions to many specific stories found together in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The tales of the metamorphosed tree-nymphs Daphne, Syrinx, and Pitys, for example, explicitly inform the poem ‘Virgin in a Tree’, which uses the myths to critique cultural imperatives to chastity, and the diptych ‘On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad’ and ‘On the Plethora of Dryads’, poems which satirise the male nature poet’s poetic vision and need for a female muse (*SPCP* 81, 65, 67). The reader finds a reversal of the tale of Diana and Actaeon as a woman is chased down by an angered lover’s hounds in ‘The Snowman on the Moor’ (*SPCP* 58); the conception of a child is experienced both as a Narcissus-like rapture and Danaë’s shower of gold in the verse play ‘Three Women’ (*SPCP* 176); and the dazzling beauty of the Midas effect of autumn’s spread of gilded leaves in ‘In Midas’ Country’ (*SPCP* 99) is given a chilling twist in ‘The Rival’, a poem addressed to an Other whose ‘first gift is making stone out of everything. / I wake to a mausoleum; you are here, / Ticking your fingers on the marble table’ (*SPCP* 166).

Among the many literary references that saturate their love affair, Ovidian characters and imagery can be found in many of their early exchanges. Plath is Semele to Hughes’s Jove, who blasts women with lightning and in whose wake ‘Charred and ravened women lie’ (*LSP* 1166; *SPCP* 22); and she evokes *Metamorphoses* in letters to her mother which describe her transformation upon meeting Hughes.²⁰ One of the first poems Plath writes for Hughes and which takes him as its subject, ‘Faun’, describes a Pan-like figure’s transformation to woodland beast (*SPCP* 35); ‘Ode for Ted’ was also originally titled ‘Poem for Pan’ (*LSP1* 1168). Initially titled the more explicitly Latinate ‘Faunus’, the poem was composed under

²⁰ John Henderson, ‘Ch-ch-ch-changes’, in *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on the Metamorphoses and its Reception*, eds. Philip Hardie, Alessandro Barchiesi and Stephen Hinds (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1999), p. 303.

the working title ‘Metamorphosis’, and provides an early representation by Plath of Hughes as Orpheus, a bard whose songs charm animals, trees, and stones to follow him (*LSP1* 1165; *JSP* 410; 163, 323; *Met.* 11.1-2). It is also to Ovid that Plath turns at the breakdown of their marriage. ‘The Courage of Shutting-Up’ (*SPCP* 209) is crucially informed by the tale of Philomela – sister of Procne, raped by Tereus, mutilated of her tongue, and metamorphosed into a bird from *Metamorphoses* Book 6. At the centre of Ovid’s episode is ‘a contest between narrators’ – between Tereus, a king who lies about his crime, and the mute Philomela, who must silently weave her story – an unequal contest that Plath stages in her poem.²¹ Characteristic of Plath’s blackly comic streak, she bathetically transforms Ovid’s simile describing Philomela’s castrated tongue as an adder (*utque... mutilatae cauda colubrae*, ‘like the cut-off tail of an adder’, *Met.* 6.559) – implying a latent danger – to a worm, ‘pink and quiet’. At the climax of the poem, the narrator asks, ‘the tongue, / Indefatigable, purple. Must it be cut out?’ (*SPCP* 209), alluding to the ‘purple marks’ (*purpureas... notas*, *Met.* 6.577) made in the tapestry by which Philomela communicates her story. In addition to its extended appearance in *Metamorphoses*, the myth of Philomela also appears in Ovid’s *Fasti (Calendar)* on February 26th (2.629, 853-856) – the date that Plath first met Hughes. Plath herself may provocatively suggest a biographical reading of her use of Philomela to portray a spousal contest of narration.

The tone and imagery of Plath’s Philomela poem – the image of a broken record, the black disks replaying old arguments, old myths, ‘Tattooing over and over the same blue grievances’ – may inform Hughes’s deviations from the Latin in his translation of the tale of Philomela, titled ‘Tereus’. He alters Ovid’s line describing the mutilated Philomela’s inspiration to weave a message to her sister from ‘great grief / is inventive, and ingenuity is born of wretched events’ (*grande doloris / ingenium est, miserisque venit sollertia rebus*, *Met.* 6.574–5) to: ‘frustration, prolonged, begets invention. / And a vengeful anger nurses it’ (*CP* 1031). Later in *Tales from Ovid*, in the tale of Deianeira (a woman betrayed by her husband Hercules and the unwitting vehicle of his demise), Hughes may have in mind Plath’s ‘disks of outrage’ – ‘The disks revolve, they ask to be heard’ – in his decision to have Deianeira brood on ‘what it means to be jilted’, and to translate Ovid’s ‘her mind travelled various paths’ [lit.] (*in cursus animus varios abit*, *Met.* 9.152) as ‘she revolved her options’ for revenge (*CP* 972). A more extended engagement by Hughes with one of Plath’s earlier tales from Ovid can be found via her engagement with the tale of Pygmalion, to which I now turn.

²¹ Philip Hardie, *Ovid’s Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 86.

Ovid, Plath, Baskin, Hughes

In Ovid, the story of a man-made statue who comes to life is in part a story about the creation of beautiful art that has the power to move the observer and to confound fiction and reality. It is also a story about the eroticised and gendered power struggle between an artist and muse. Pygmalion's statue-woman, Galatea, informs both the eerie plaster-cast doppelgänger of 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head' and 'In Plaster', and the 'marvellous product' of the pre-packaged woman in 'The Applicant'; finally, in 'Sculptor' (on which I will focus), we see the artist at work on his perfect woman (*SPCP* 69, 158, 221; 91). Across the poems, Plath's speakers take on multiple narrative perspectives, shifting between the sculptor, the created woman herself, or a third person observing the act of artistic creation and fixity. This labile subject position between and within the poems reflects the dilemma of the female poet who is automatically aligned with Pygmalion's statue as a woman, yet as a writer is linked to the sculptor himself – a blurring of subjectivity that destabilises the myth's paradigm of male creativity (compare Plath's description of herself as a 'feminine pygmalion' [sic] (*JSP* 191)).²²

In 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', the speaker observes a created woman who both is and is-not herself. Plath had received a clay model of her own head as a gift from a Smith College room-mate who had made the sculpture in Leonard Baskin's art class.²³ Plath describes the earthenware head of the poem in her journals as 'a terrible and holy token of identity' sucking her into itself, growing in size and power as her own flesh withers, in a comic reversal of Wilde's Dorian Gray (*JSP* 332). When read alongside 'Sculptor', in which Baskin himself is cast in the role of Pygmalion, we better understand the speaker's uneasy relationship with an earthenware doppelgänger made under Pygmalion's watch. Plath composed 'Sculptor' in June 1958, shortly after meeting Esther and Leonard Baskin for the first time in May (*JSP* 379). In a July 1958 journal entry, Plath recounts a visit to Baskin's studio, describing a room littered with 'dead men, bronzes' and stone bodies, and a half-finished statue with its outline drawn on wood (his *Grieving Angel*, 1958 (*JSP* 406–7)). Hughes tells us that the rows of 'mutilated dead', the eerie half-carved bald angel, and the 'the person with the owl growing out of his shoulder' left a deep impression on Plath, resonating with her own 'pantheon' of gods.²⁴

²² Plath had also seen the 1938 film of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (*LSP*1 731).

²³ Connors and Bayley, p. 110.

²⁴ Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order', p. 189.

Before the Hugheses met the Baskins in person, Leonard Baskin appeared in Plath's journals four times, and most significantly in a dream (*JSP* 317, 347, 371):

Dreamed also I met & somehow loved the unmet and hence unloved Leonard Baskin in some strange house, his wife pale as death, her hands blackening with that terrible nameless disease. Ted says he will be, red, fat. No. Saw floating in a dream his 'Large Dead Man', fat, obscene, puffing. Stone-grey. I gushed, purple, spontaneous passages, prose-praise. Hell, Baskin, said, you read all that in a book. (*JSP* 321).

Plath's anxiety dream may have been influenced by rumours among the Smith faculty of Baskin's caustic demeanour, but it is notable for its revelation of the artistic power-struggle between literature and the visual arts that would later permeate Hughes's own artistic collaboration with Baskin (as Carrie Smith has shown).²⁵ This sense of inferiority recurs in Plath's tentative request in April 1959 to Baskin to dedicate the poem to him: 'It was written for you, but I felt you might not like the poem... I know parts of it are rank falsehood, for you claim to have no dreams' (*LSP1* 316).

In Ovid's version, stress is laid on Pygmalion's skill and craft. Plath similarly describes the sculptor at work, but rather than witnessing an act of creation she imagines that the sculptor communes with 'bodiless' spirits, who visit the sculptor and competitively 'barter endlessly / ... for bodies / Palpable as his' (*SPCP* 91). The sculptor's carving technique is hieratic ('Hands moving[,] move priestlier / Than priest's hands'), conducting the spirits into 'sure station in bronze, wood, stone' (*SPCP* 91). In the final stanza, Plath incorporates and reverses her own early dream encounter with Baskin, as the 'spirits' who 'without him, were beggared... of their bodies' possess the sculptor and 'Try entry, enter nightmares', 'Until his chisel bequeaths / Them life livelier than ours'.

Hughes's Pygmalion episode in *Tales from Ovid* is over one hundred lines longer than the Latin text's fifty-four lines.²⁶ When read alongside 'Sculptor', it becomes clear that many of the translation's additional lines are taken from Plath's Pygmalion-figure:

Yet he still dreamed of woman.
He dreamed
Unbrokenly awake as asleep
[...]
Though this dream

²⁵ Carrie Smith, 'Illustration and Ekphrasis: The Working Drafts of Ted Hughes's Cave Birds', in *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation*, eds. Carrie Smith and Lisa Stead (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 133.

²⁶ Compare A.S. Kline's English translation here:

https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Metamorph10.php#anchor_Toc64105570.

Was not so much the dream of a perfect woman
 As a spectre, sick of unbeing,
 That had taken possession of his body
 To find herself a life.

She moved into his hands,
 She took possession of his fingers
 And began to sculpt a perfect woman.
 So he watched his hands shaping a woman
 As if he were still asleep...
 [...]

So he had made a woman
 Lovelier than any living woman...
 She might have moved, he thought...
 [...]
 For this woman so palpably a woman
 Became his life. (*CP* 965–6)

At the beginning of the episode, Hughes changes Ovid's adjective *caelebs*, 'bachelor' (*Met.* 10. 245), to the epithet 'Pygmalion the sculptor' (*CP* 965). He then borrows Plath's central image of the sculptor-as-spirit-conduit in his description of a bodiless 'spectre sick of unbeing', who takes possession of the sculptor to find herself a 'life' via a night-time visitation: 'nightmare' in Plath, 'dream' in Hughes. Hughes's Pygmalion is Plath's Leonard Baskin. This is also suggested by the imagery and vocabulary of 'Sculptor' which appears in his essay on Baskin, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly', an essay which meditates on metamorphosis, transfiguration, and cycles of change. Hughes argues that Baskin's draughtsmanship is 'A passport between worlds usually kept closed to each other'; and while Baskin has no time for those who claim to commune with other realms, nevertheless, 'Other existences seem to compete for substance... He obviously feels compelled to give these *dramatis personae* their forms' (*WP* 86–7). Reading Hughes's Pygmalion through the lenses of 'Sculptor' and his essay on Baskin reveals Plath as a 'third collaborator' in their creative partnership, as Carrie Smith has termed the role of Plath's spectral absences in the Hughes-Baskin collaboration *Cave Birds*.²⁷

In Hughes's 'Pygmalion', the words 'dream', 'dreamed' and 'asleep' are each repeated twice, as are 'moved' and 'hands' (drawing directly on Plath's vocabulary) (*CP* 965). The 'palpable' physicality of the statue again borrows from Plath, and finally, the moment of creation is expressed in a formula that directly echoes

²⁷ Carrie Smith, 'Gazing at Ophelia, Veronica and Sylvia: The Manuscript Drafts of Ted Hughes's *Cave Birds*', conference paper, Sylvia Plath: Letters, Words and Fragments, Ulster University, 10 November 2017.

‘Sculptor’ (‘livelier than any life’/ ‘lovelier than any woman... his life’ (CP 295–6). Further additions to this episode borrow from elsewhere in Plath’s corpus: Pygmalion’s mad vision of the Propoetides, which transforms ‘Every woman’s uterus to a spider. / Her face, voice, gestures, hair became its web. / Her perfume was a floating horror’ (CP 965), recalls both Esther Greenwood’s impression of a woman giving birth as ‘nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach’, and the famous reworking of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ in ‘Lady Lazarus’: ‘Beware / Beware. // Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air’ (‘Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!’; *SPCP* 244).²⁸ And in Pygmalion’s prayer for his statue to come to life, which rises to Venus’s ear ‘like a great fish’ (CP 967), we hear the echo of ‘like a terrible fish’ from Plath’s ‘Mirror’ (*SPCP* 174) (in the Latin, Venus merely ‘hears’ Pygmalion’s prayer, *sensit*, *Met.* 10.277). The final word of this dream-section, ‘life’, provocatively suggests the rhyme ‘wife’, a ghostly figure whose presence here is reinforced by the paired repetitions throughout this passage which are suggestive of the double authorship of this translation. If Pygmalion’s tale in Ovid is a story about the craft of original artistic creation, Hughes’s rendering of the tale becomes an allegory for anxieties of influence and the struggle to create originally in the face of Plath’s spectral literary presence. Hughes may have experienced this as a broader struggle to create originally when confronted with the vast tradition of Ovid and his imitators; but we note that Plath’s plural genderless spirits have been transformed into a singular, female spectre. Sarah Annes Brown suggests that the female spirit is a comment on the gendered metaphors of translation – that is, translation as a passive conduit for the original text.²⁹

Tales from Ovid

Hughes’s substantial alterations to his translation of the tale of Pygmalion are coincident with the clearest evidence of Plath’s presence in *Tales from Ovid*; but her literary presence can be found throughout the collection in Hughes’s creative translations of the Latin. Some of these allusions are sustained, as in the example of the Pygmalion episode, but many are only momentary. In the tale of Erisychnon, the decision to translate his ‘pestilential hunger’ (*pestifera*, *Met.* 8.787) as ‘insatiable’ (CP 926) may be informed by Plath’s ‘insatiate’ panther in ‘Pursuit’ – a poem she wrote after first meeting Hughes and which itself may draw on the myths of Erisychnon and wolfish Lycaon (‘He eats, and still his need seeks food’ (*SPCP* 22)). Semele’s annihilation upon seeing Zeus in his true form (‘The nuclear blast / Of his naked impact’) echoes the radioactive imagery of ‘Elm’ and the ‘silhouettes’

²⁸ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 61.

²⁹ Sarah Annes Brown, ‘Classics reanimated: Ted Hughes and reflexive translation’, in Rees, p. 287.

of women blasted into ‘shadows’ on the landscape in ‘Widow’ (*SPCP* 192; 164); and the detail of a living encasement expanding to cover a woman’s eyes in Plath’s ‘In Plaster’ may shade Hughes’s alteration to his translation of the tale of Myrrha. In Hughes, the bark ‘warps upwards / Reaching for her eyes’ (*CP* 953); in Ovid, it is Myrrha who ‘buries her face in the bark’ (*mersitque suos in cortice uultus*, *Met.* 10.498).

Plath is also conspicuously absent where we might expect to find her. The omission of the tale of Daphne, for example, a myth so programmatic to the narrative and themes of *Metamorphoses* as the first instance of a lustful pursuit and the trope of woman-as-art (whether she is fleeing in terror, or metamorphosed into the landscape), is notable. This omission may be due to the fact that Plath engages so clearly with the tale of Daphne in ‘Virgin in a Tree’ and her dryad poems as a myth of the capture of the female muse by the male poet; the inclusion of the tale of Daphne would have placed their Ovidianism in direct competition. Its inclusion may also have exposed Hughes to attack: the myth of Daphne – whose laurel leaves are worn by the surviving male poet – suggests a ready model for Plath and the afterlife of her poetry. Further omissions are minor details that are biographically significant. When translating the tale of Arethusa’s flight from the pursuit of Alpheos (*Met.* 5.572-641), Hughes omits the detail provided in the Latin that she could ‘feel [her pursuer’s] breath on her hairbands’ (*crinales uittas adflabat anhelitus oris*, *Met.* 5.617) – the item Hughes is reported to have stolen from Plath at their infamous first meeting (*CP* 913; *JSP* 212). Hughes may have again omitted the detail as being too obvious and exposing him to charges of exploitation (the reason provided to Keith Sagar for omitting the Orpheus and Eurydice narrative).³⁰ A further omission can be found in the translation of the tale of Persephone and her kidnap by Dis, lord of the Underworld. In the Latin, Dis drives a chariot with ‘rust-dyed reins’ (*tinctas ferrugine habenas*, *Met.* 5.404), an adjective Hughes omits (*CP* 904). In this instance, he may be avoiding an allusion to the ‘rust’ of ‘Sheep in Fog’; but returning to ‘Sheep in Fog’ with the tale of Dis in mind – a kidnapped daughter on a frenzied chariot ride to the Underworld – may confirm Hughes’s argument that Plath’s poems reveal a mythic ride towards a kind of death (Plath is more explicitly figured as Persephone in *Birthday Letters*).

With this brief survey, I hope to have shown how Plath’s Ovidian allusions may in part help to explain some of Hughes’s curious selections and omissions in *Tales from Ovid*, from subtle translation choices for individual words to the inclusion or exclusion of entire episodes. Garrett Jacobsen (quoting Keith Sagar) has named Frank Justus Miller’s 1916 Loeb Classical Library (Harvard) bi-lingual

³⁰ Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes*, p. 84.

Latin-English edition of *Metamorphoses* as Hughes's source text for his translations for *Tales from Ovid*.³¹ The use of a Loeb edition as a crib is unusual as Hughes's preferred source texts (for Seneca and Aeschylus, among others) are Penguin Classics. Emory University, which holds Hughes's library, has not yet fully catalogued the collection, but it includes many volumes previously owned by Plath. It is tempting to speculate that Hughes's Loeb once belonged to Plath; her copies of Plato's dialogues and Quintilian, for example, are Harvard Loeb editions (if she did not inherit these from her father, who studied Latin at Harvard in the 1920s shortly after Miller's Loeb was published, then she likely acquired these while reading for the English Tripos at Newnham College, Cambridge).³² An examination of this edition's marginalia and annotations may in time reveal further interconnections between Hughes and Plath as readers and rewriters of Ovid.

Conclusions

The Pygmalion episode is the most creatively expanded tale in Hughes's translation, and this draws attention to the rearrangement of the sequence of tales within which Pygmalion's tale is embedded. In *Metamorphoses* Book 10, Pygmalion's tale is the first of a cycle of songs by the legendary bard Orpheus: Pygmalion, Myrrha, Venus and Adonis, and Atalanta (a cycle concluded by the death of Orpheus, torn apart by the ecstatic female worshippers of Dionysus). In *Tales from Ovid*, the tales are re-ordered: Actaeon (taken from *Metamorphoses* Book 3), Myrrha, Venus and Adonis (and Atalanta), Pygmalion, and Hercules and Deianeira (from *Metamorphoses* Book 9). Garrett Jacobsen and Sarah Annes Brown have both suggested that the purposeful rearrangement of the tales aligns Hughes with the storytelling poet-vates-shaman Orpheus and should be read as an attempt to mark the text as 'Hughes's Ovid'.³³ To my mind, the rearranged and bookended tales in *Tales from Ovid* also construct a biomythographical narrative that – at the very point in the translation at which Plath's literary influence rises clearly to the surface – deflects attention from the literary presence of Plath to present the myth of Plath and Hughes: two 'all-too-human' characters who 'stumble[d] out into the mythic arena'.³⁴

Hughes's amended bardic cycle begins with the tale of Actaeon from *Metamorphoses* Book 3, a story about a profane act of witnessing; its placement

³¹ Garrett Jacobsen, "A holiday in a rest home": Ted Hughes as vates in *Tales from Ovid*, in Rees, pp. 159–60, quoting Keith Sagar.

³² Hughes's library is partly available at: <https://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/hughes644>.

³³ Jacobsen, p. 171; Brown, p. 287.

³⁴ Ted Hughes, 'Introduction', *Tales from Ovid* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. x.

here opens Hughes's Orpheus cycle with the disclaimer 'Destiny, not guilt was enough [to destroy Actaeon]' (contra the admission of the earlier version: 'He looked at her' (CP 937; 558)). This fateful meeting between a goddess and the man she will destroy is followed by a tale of father-daughter incest and the failed suicide attempt of the daughter Myrrha, who is metamorphosed into a tree and gives birth to Adonis. (Note that the father-as-husband narrative that informs the mythology of *Birthday Letters* is also made explicit in *Tales from Ovid* in this episode by the addition: 'the bliss of their infancy... a wedding present' (CP 944). Myrrha's wish to die a second time is also overemphasised in the shift from Ovid's 'change me, deny me life and death' – *mutataeque mihi, Met.* 10.487 – to 'remove me / From life and from death' (CP 953).) This episode is followed (as in Ovid) by the tale of Venus and Adonis, a great passion destined to end in tragedy. This tale includes the embedded narrative of Atalanta (again, following Ovid), a woman fated by an oracle to marry only the man who is her match: a man who beats her in a running race by throwing golden apples in her path – compare Plath's 'Pursuit', in which she is Atalanta and must hurl her heart to halt the panther's pace, and her letter describing Hughes as the only man strong enough to be an equal (LSP1 1120). After Pygmalion, Hughes now adds to Ovid's sequence the tale of Hercules and Deianeira from *Metamorphoses* Book 9, a tale about a woman who wreaks vengeance on her unfaithful husband and commits suicide. By this constructed parable of Plath's life and death, we find that Hughes's rearrangement of Ovid's poetry works to embed a miniature *Birthday Letters* within *Tales from Ovid*. And a peaceful coda to this destructive narrative is revealed by the episode chosen to close the translation, Pyramus and Thisbe from *Metamorphoses* Book 4 – a tale of tragic lovers who are united in death if not in life.

The reciprocal and interrelated Ovidian allusion discussed here is one of many routes by which Plath's and Hughes's classicisms interact, but it is one of the most longstanding. Plath saw the Ovidian in Hughes from their first encounter and fixed him in poetry as an Ovidian character. This may in part explain why, at the end of his life, Plath and Ovid seemed so inextricable to Hughes as he finally moves to engage with her poetic and biographical legacy. Reading Plath more deeply into *Tales from Ovid* perhaps also finds Hughes testing these moments of metamorphosis as moments of metaphor. In his introduction to the translation, he notes his interest in those tales of Ovid which document passion *in extremis*.³⁵ In this light, his translation becomes a sequence of metaphors that attempt again and again to put into words that moment of metamorphosis upon meeting Plath (which she first captured in 'Faun'), and their sublimation into the mythic realm (captured

³⁵ Hughes, 'Introduction', p. ix.

in 'Pursuit'): for Hughes, their meeting was like bursting into a flame that scorched the sky and razed the earth; it was like hurtling in free fall, wingless, towards the ground; or, as if you were a spirit that suddenly had a body. An understanding of Plath's literary classicism adds poignancy and sympathy to Hughes's own work, and transforms his *Tales from Ovid* into an intertextual act of reinscription, as he turns not to translate Ovid *per se*, but to recall the words and works of his first wife. While *Birthday Letters* represents Hughes's explicit dialogue with Plath and her work, a comparative reading of *Tales from Ovid* reveals an implicit dialogue with Plath and her own Ovidian allusion: and the final body to metamorphose is a poetic one.

'Talismans of Power': Welsh Origins of Ted Hughes's Magical Poetry

by Katherine Robinson

Ted Hughes's interest in using poetry to make something happen spanned his career. In a 1995 *Paris Review* interview, he spoke of charming away bad reviewers shortly after the *Hawk in the Rain* (1957) was published: 'That first year, I wrote verses with three magical assonances to the line with the intention of abolishing certain critics!'³⁶ In the *Birthday Letters* poem 'The Gypsy' (1998), Hughes describes composing verses that, like those 'magical assonances', had an occult purpose. This article's subject is the protective power of poetry Hughes evokes in 'The Gypsy' and the Welsh inspirations for his belief in that power.

In 'The Gypsy', Hughes describes sitting at a café in Rheims with Plath. A 'gypsy' approaches selling religious pendants, and Plath refuses them. The woman points her finger like a 'pistol' at Plath, saying, 'Vous / Crèverez bientôt'. (You will die soon.) Seemingly undisturbed, Plath keeps writing postcards. But Hughes is unsettled: 'For days', he writes, 'I rhymed / Talismans of power, in *cynghanedd*, / To neutralise her venom' (*CP* 1118).

Cynghanedd, meaning 'harmony', is a Welsh verse system consisting of complex patterns of alliteration, consonance and internal rhyme that play out across each individual line within a given poem. Codified in the Middle Ages, *cynghanedd* grew out of the already rich, though less systematic, sonic patterns in Welsh poetry, and *cynghanedd* became ubiquitous in medieval Welsh verse. Welsh poets still compose in *cynghanedd*, and Gwyneth Lewis writes that, 'compared with free verse, the Welsh meters are an extreme sport, like kitesurfing set alongside paddling'.³⁷

Aside from gravitating to the fascination of what's difficult, why would Hughes choose to rhyme those poetic talismans in *cynghanedd*? Hughes's approach to both

³⁶ Ted Hughes, 'The Art of Poetry LXXI', *The Paris Review* Spring, 1995. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1669/ted-hughes-the-art-of-poetry-no-71-ted-hughes>.

³⁷ Gwyneth Lewis, 'Extreme Welsh Meter'. *Poetry Foundation*, 3 November 2014, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70172/extreme-welsh-meter>

poetry and occult practices was learnedly intentional, and his choosing *cynganedd* without reason is unlikely.

I will begin by tracing Hughes's discovery of *cynganedd* and his prosodic understanding of it. There are several kinds of *cynganedd*, and Hughes seems to have been most familiar with *cynganedd groes*, 'cross harmony', which is a subcategory of *cynganedd gystain* (consonantal harmony), a type of *cynganedd* that exclusively employs patterns of repeated consonants (as opposed to other forms that also or only employ internal rhyme).³⁸ Hughes probably first discovered *cynganedd* in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, which John Fisher, his Mexborough grammar school English teacher, gave him as a 'going up' present before he left Mexborough for Cambridge.³⁹ Decades later, Hughes wrote to Graves, saying that *The White Goddess* was 'the chief holy book of my poetic conscience' (*LTH* 273). In the first chapter, Graves defines *cynganedd*, but he calls it 'a burdensome obsession' in medieval Welsh poetry, so, while *The White Goddess* introduced Hughes to *cynganedd*'s technical aspects, it is unlikely to have spurred his interest in its talismanic powers.⁴⁰

A 1994 letter to Moelwyn Merchant illustrates Hughes's prosodic conception of *cynganedd*: '[i]t kept occurring to me, when I was writing about Shakespeare's verse, to argue that he deliberately adapted something of Welsh technique. Our dreadful marches to delightful measures...' (*LTH* 669). This repeated alliteration approximates *cynganedd groes*, although *cynganedd groes* is much stricter: all consonants before the caesura match all consonants after the caesura and are repeated in the same order. A phrase from a poem by the English poet William Barnes is a rare example of *cynganedd groes* in English: '...lean down low / in linden Lea'.⁴¹ In *The White Goddess*, Graves illustrates *cynganedd* with the following example:

Billet spied,
Bolt sped.
Across field
Crows fled,
Aloft, wounded,
Left one dead.⁴²

These lines nearly exactly employ *cynganedd groes*, although the consonants repeat on either side of a line break rather than on either side of a caesura. Graves

³⁸ Joseph Clancy, ed., *Medieval Welsh Lyrics* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1965), pp. 16-17.

³⁹ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2015), p. 65.

⁴⁰ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), p. 14.

⁴¹ Mererid Hopwood, *Singing in Chains: Listening to Welsh Verse* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2016), p. 85.

⁴² Graves, p. 18.

simply calls these lines '[c]ynghanedd', and the fact that when Hughes refers to 'cynghanedd' he refers to just this sort of approximated *cynghanedd groes* further suggests that *The White Goddess* was indeed his introduction to this verse technique.

But Hughes also had a more personal source of knowledge about medieval Welsh poetry. His Cambridge friend and contemporary, Daniel Huws, became the leading expert on Welsh manuscripts. Huws would go on to work for over three decades at The National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth and was the Keeper of Manuscripts and Records there for eleven years.⁴³ His much anticipated book *Repertory of Welsh Manuscripts and Scribes* (three volumes, University of Wales Press, 2019-20) is the definitive history and analysis of Welsh manuscripts and presents decades of research.

Ted Hughes and Daniel Huws shared a long interest in medieval Welsh poetry that began during their time at Cambridge when, through their friendship, Hughes's own interest in Welsh literature intensified. Daniel Huws gave Hughes Joseph Clancy's *Medieval Welsh Lyrics* (1965), which includes a detailed explanation of different types of *cynghanedd*.⁴⁴ Later Hughes and Seamus Heaney titled *The Rattle Bag: An Anthology of Poetry* (1982), which they edited together, after Clancy's translation of a Dafydd ap Gwilym poem published in this anthology, a choice that suggests that Hughes read this Welsh anthology with interest.

The story of why Daniel Huws gave Ted Hughes this anthology also suggests that Hughes would have read it with interest. Hughes had discovered the medieval Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym through reading Kenneth Jackson's *A Celtic Miscellany*, which he and Plath bought together in Cambridge in spring 1956. Referring to *A Celtic Miscellany*, Plath, who was to marry Hughes in less than three weeks, wrote to her mother, 'last night, while I peeled mushrooms to go with our dinner of sweetbreads, he read me aloud from a book of Celtic tales we just bought...' (*LSP1* 1200).⁴⁵ In autumn 1956, Plath and Hughes, newly married, lived apart, fearing that the Fulbright commission might revoke Plath's scholarship if she were married. She continued to live in Cambridge, where she began her second year of studies at Newnham, but Hughes stayed with Daniel Huws in a London flat owned by Huws's father. That London flat, 18 Rugby Street, would take on its own mythic proportions in *Birthday Letters*. In *Memories of Ted Hughes: 1952- 1963*,

⁴³ Daniel Huws's *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts* (University of Wales Press: National Library of Wales, 2000) offers the definitive attempt to date and trace the origins of the manuscripts that contain the *Mabinogi* branches.

⁴⁴ Clancy, pp. 16-19.

⁴⁵ This copy of *A Celtic Miscellany* is now in Hughes's library at Emory. Plath inscribed the flyleaf: Sylvia Plath / Cambridge / 1956'. (Emory, PB1100.J3 1958 HUGHES. Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany: Translations from the Celtic* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).

Daniel Huws recounts that ‘One day, Ted said, “You must translate Dafydd ap Gwilym”. He knew only Kenneth Jackson’s translations in his *Celtic Miscellany*’.⁴⁶ Hughes’s injunction inspired Daniel Huws, who was still a registered research student at Cambridge, to visit Heffers bookshop in Cambridge where he invested ‘35/- (a big price in those days)’ in buying himself Thomas Perry’s Welsh edition of Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poems. Huws began to write English translations of the poems.⁴⁷

When Hughes and Plath moved back to England from America in 1959, they both lived with Daniel Huws and his wife Helga at 18 Rugby Street. Huws was still translating Dafydd ap Gwilym, and Plath, admiring his translations, typed them up, and submitted them to American literary journals.⁴⁸ Huws planned to turn those translations into a book, but the ‘projected book moved slowly and was eventually forestalled’. Huws writes that he ‘abandoned it the day I picked up in a bookshop Joseph Clancy’s 1965 volume *Medieval Welsh Lyrics*’.⁴⁹ He inscribed and gave a copy of Clancy’s book to Ted Hughes, who had first inspired Huws’s own Dafydd ap Gwilym translations.⁵⁰

None of Hughes’s sources of information about *cynghanedd*, however, ascribe any occult power to it. When I asked Daniel Huws if he knew why Hughes might have associated *cynghanedd* with magical protection, he said he could think of no source in which Hughes would have found that association.⁵¹ Why, then, did Hughes consider *cynghanedd* magically protective? To answer that question, we have to look at Hughes’s familiarity with early Welsh literature itself and to the role poetry plays in early Welsh stories.

Hughes was fascinated by *The Mabinogion*, a collection of early Welsh tales, brimming with magic and shape-shifting. Graves retells some of these tales in *White Goddess*, but Hughes had already read *The Mabinogion* by the time John Fisher gave him *The White Goddess*. In a 1995 letter to Nick Gammage, Hughes wrote:

I recall my slight resentment to find [Graves] taking possession of what I considered to be my secret patch. I was familiar with all but the more arcane bits of the mythology—had known The Middle Eastern and Egyptian material since I was fifteen, plus the Mabinogion and the Irish (*LTH* 679).

⁴⁶ Daniel Huws, *Memories of Ted Hughes: 1952-1963*. Richard Hollis, 2010, pp. 40-41.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41. Thomas Parry edited a 1952 Welsh edition of Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poems. (Thomas Parry, ed., *Gwaith* (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1952).)

⁴⁸ Daniel Huws. Personal interview, 27 February, 2018. Some of these translations were eventually published in the American journal *Arion: A Journal of The Humanities and the Classics* (volume 6, Number 1. Spring, 1967).

⁴⁹ Huws, p. 41.

⁵⁰ Emory PB2369 .M435 1965 HUGHES.

⁵¹ Daniel Huws. Personal interview, 27 February, 2018.

If Hughes read *The Mabinogion* around age fifteen (as this letter seems to imply), then he would have read Charlotte Guest's nineteenth-century translation, which, in the mid 1940s, was the only published English translation of *The Mabinogion*.⁵² Hughes's library at Emory testifies to his interest in *The Mabinogion*: he owned two translations of *The Mabinogion* and four books specifically about it, ranging from a depth-psychology analysis to occult explorations of the tales.⁵³

In two stories in Guest's *Mabinogion*, poetry itself is magically protective and restorative, and these stories may have been one source of Hughes's interest in *cynghanedd*'s protective powers. In my chapter 'The Remains of Something: Ted Hughes and *The Mabinogion*' in *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture*, I argue that Hughes retells two early Welsh tales in his mythopoeic books *Crow* (1970) and *Cave Birds* (1978). These two tales, the story of Taliesin and *The Mabinogi's* Fourth Branch, have one thing in common: in both, poetry itself catalyzes magical change. Of the twelve tales in Guest's *Mabinogion* these are the only two in which poetry plays such a magical role, and these are the only two stories Hughes retells in his own poetry and criticism.

The first is 'Hanes Taliesin', 'Story of Taliesin'. Taliesin is a legendary bard, and as a baby, he is set adrift on the sea in a coracle.⁵⁴ (I will explain why that happens shortly.) He washes into prince Elphin's salmon weir, and Elphin rescues him.

As Taliesin grows up, he becomes an extraordinary bard, and Elphin, who is 'the most hapless of youths', goes to the king and boasts that Taliesin is better than all the king's bards.⁵⁵ The king is irked; he shackles Elphin and throws him in a dungeon. Taliesin hurries to court to rescue his hapless rescuer. He recites a poem about the wind, and a storm suddenly shakes the castle. Frightened by Taliesin's poetic conjuring, the king orders Elphin brought up from the dungeon. Taliesin

⁵² For more details about the contents and structure of Guest's *Mabinogion* see my chapter 'The Remains of Something: Ted Hughes and The Mabinogion' in Terry Gifford, Neil Roberts and Mark Wormald, ed., *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 161-163.)

⁵³ Hughes owned a 1949 edition of a translation by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: J.M. Dent) as well as a 1902 reprint of Lady Charlotte Guest's translation (Long Acre London: D. Nutt). He also owned *Mabon and the Mysteries of Britain: An Exploration of the Mabinogion* by Caitlin Matthews (London: ARKANA, 1987), *A Celtic Quest: Sexuality and Soul in Individuation, a Depth-Psychology Study of the Mabinogion Legend of Culhwch and Olwen* by John Layard and Anne Bosch (Zurich: Spring Publications, 1975), and *The Mabin of The Mabinogion* by Morien (London: Research into Lost Knowledge Organization, 1984).

⁵⁴ Taliesin was both a fictional character in 'Hanes Taliesin' and a historical poet, or group of poets, writing under that name. The fourteenth-century *Book of Taliesin*, is a collection of Taliesin's poems.

⁵⁵ Lady Charlotte Guest, translator. *The Mabinogion*. Jones Jones Cardiff Ltd., 1977, p. 473.

sings a verse, and the chains magically fall away from Elphin's feet. Poetry, in this story, magically liberates someone.

How well did Hughes know the story of Taliesin? Three pieces of evidence, from different stages of his career, illustrate his knowledge of it and his ongoing engagement with it. First, in his edition of *The White Goddess*, Hughes underlined Graves's retelling of this story.⁵⁶ Second, in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes retells the story in a footnote, focusing on the magical nature of Taliesin's poetry. 'Carried to a weir and rescued', Hughes writes, 'he was called Taliesin...and immediately began to recite magical poetry' (*SGC* 458). The most elaborate and best evidence is Hughes's own retelling of this story in one of his own poems, 'Crow Goes Hunting'.

A complicated set of circumstances explains why Taliesin wound up in a coracle in a salmon weir reciting magical poetry. Ceridwen, a sorceress, gives birth to a son, Morfran, who is the 'most ill-favoured man in the world'.⁵⁷ He is also called 'Afangddu', meaning 'utter darkness'. Guest's translation states that Ceridwen had two sons, Morfran and Afangddu, and Graves claims they should be 'identified' with each other, both being sons of Ceridwen and both having the 'same supreme ugliness'.⁵⁸ To compensate for his ugliness, Ceridwen decides to make her son the wisest man alive. She boils herbs that will distill into three drops of *awen*, poetic inspiration, containing all the world's knowledge. She hires a boy, Gwion Bach, to tend the cauldron, but when it finishes boiling, those three drops leap up and scald his thumb. He sucks his thumb and ingests the inspiration meant for the ugly son. Furious, Ceridwen tries to kill Gwion, but he, knowing everything now, turns into a hare and flees. She becomes a greyhound and gives chase. He becomes a fish; she becomes an otter. He becomes a wren, and she becomes a hawk. He turns, finally, into a grain of wheat and hides in a heap of winnowed grain, but Ceridian becomes a hen and swallows the grain. Thinking she has killed him, she, instead, becomes pregnant and gives birth to Taliesin. She had intended to kill the baby, but she cannot bring herself to do so. She lays him in a coracle and sets it adrift on the sea. In 'Crow Goes Hunting', we see imagistic progressions mirroring this chase, filled, as it is, with rapid-fire shape-shifting. Hughes is responding directly to this part of Taliesin's story, and, in this part, poetry has a different magical role: *awen*, poetic inspiration, instigates magical shape-shifting.

⁵⁶ Emory, PR6013.R35W58 1948 HUGHES.

⁵⁷ Guest, p. 472.

⁵⁸ Graves, p. 92.

Robert Graves translates ‘Morfran’ as ‘sea raven’.⁵⁹ In a letter, Hughes writes that one of his inspirations for *Crow* was ‘Crow in early Celtic literature’, and Morfran, ‘sea raven’, seems to have been one of those early Celtic corvid inspirations. In ‘Crow Goes Hunting,’ Crow decides to ‘try words’. He imagines a ‘lovely pack’ of words, ‘clear-eyed’ and ‘well-trained’ with ‘strong teeth’. When he points to the hare, the words race after it, ‘resounding’. The hare, however, turns into a ‘concrete bunker’, so Crow turns the pack of words into ‘bombs’ that destroy the bunker. The rubble of the bunker rises up and becomes a ‘flock of starlings’. Crow turns the words into guns that gun down the birds. The birds, falling, turn into a ‘cloudburst’. The words become a ‘reservoir’ and catch the falling rain, and then the cloudburst turns into an ‘earthquake, swallowing the reservoir’. That earthquake turns back into a hare and leaps ‘for the hill / Having eaten Crow’s words’. Crow stares after the ‘bounding hare / Speechless with admiration’ (*CP* 236).

Hughes’s hare echoes the hare Gwion Bach becomes. The circling ‘pack’ of words evokes the greyhound Ceridwen becomes in order to chase him. Like the hare in the Taliesin story, Hughes’s hare transforms in order to escape; it becomes a ‘concrete bunker’. Bombed, the bunker shatters into rubble that becomes starlings, just as Taliesin change from a fish to a bird. Gunned down, the birds become a ‘cloudburst’, and a raindrop’s shape resembles the grain, falling from the sky and down into a heap of winnowed wheat, that Taliesin becomes. The words, which once circled like greyhounds, become a reservoir, and this dark reservoir, swallowing the rain, perhaps echoes the black hen Ceridwen becomes in order to swallow the grain of wheat. It echoes, also, Ceridwen’s womb where Gwion Bach spends nine months, floating in a tiny contained world before drifting, in his coracle, on the open sea. At the end of Hughes’s poem, the earthquake which began as the fleeing hare turns back into a hare and ‘leaped for the hill / Having eaten Crow’s words’. That transformation parallels what happens in the Taliesin story: a hare—who was once the boy, Gwion Bach— leaps for the hills, having eaten the *awen*, poetic inspiration, meant for a crow figure, meant for Morfran, ‘sea raven’.

So Hughes knew the story of Taliesin intimately. He retold it in both his poetry and criticism, and what Hughes calls Taliesin’s ‘magical poetry’ may have been one inspiration for Hughes’s interest in *cynghanedd*’s talismanic powers.

The other early Welsh tale Hughes poetically retold is *The Mabinogi*’s Fourth Branch, a story in which poetry also has magically restorative powers. In this story,

⁵⁹ Graves, p. 87. *Morfran* means ‘cormorant’, but *mor* is ‘sea’, and ‘fran’ is a lenition of ‘bran’, which means ‘crow’ or ‘raven’. Etymologically, cormorants are the sea’s corvids, and Graves follows etymology.

a man named Llew Llaw Gyffes is cursed by his mother; he will never get a wife unless she gives him one, which she will not. His foster father, Gwydion, however, moulds a wife for Llew out of flowers and names her Blodeuedd, meaning blossoms. Once married to Llew, Blodeuedd, however, falls in love with a hunter. The feeling is mutual, and the hunter and Blodeuedd kill Llew. The hunter throws the fatal spear, and it hits Llew. He screams, rises up and turns into an eagle. When Gwydion learns that a strange hunter is now ruling Llew's lands, he goes looking for Llew, who is missing, and finds an eagle miserably perched in an oak, shedding rotten flesh. Gwydion recites three *englynion*, three short stanzas. Llew flies down, lands on Gwydion's knee, and becomes human again. Gwydion then curses Blodeuedd for her crime, turning her into an owl, condemned to fly only at night, mobbed by other birds.

In the *Fourth Branch*, we again see poetry undo disaster; it allows a man to return to his original human form. Hughes knew this tale just as intricately as he knew 'Hanes Taliein'. Both *Mabinogion* translations he owned (Guest and Jones and Jones) include it. More strikingly, Robert Graves devotes two chapters in *The White Goddess* to retelling and analyzing *The Mabinogi's* Fourth Branch.⁶⁰ The story of Llew's treacherous bride, Blodeuedd, is one inspiration for Graves's figure of the White Goddess who destroys her victims before they can be reborn.

The story of Llew and Blodeuedd is also the second and only other *Mabinogion* story that Hughes retells in his own poetry. The last two poems in *Cave Birds* evoke Blodeuedd and Llew. Ann Skea has argued that the penultimate poem 'Owl Flower', in which botanical and avian imagery meld, evokes Blodeuedd who is moulded from flowers and becomes an owl.⁶¹ The final poem, 'The Risen', I argue, evokes the unusual circumstances of Llew's death and rebirth.

Llew has a charmed life, and he can only be killed in a very specific way. Blodeuedd, perhaps suspecting that murdering her husband will not be straightforward, pretends that she is afraid for Llew, afraid he will die. He reassures her, telling her it is nearly impossible to kill him: he can only be killed beneath a thatched frame, while standing with one foot on a bathtub and one foot on a billy goat, and he can only be killed with a spear that has been carved for a year but only on Sundays while everyone else is at Mass.

After her lover has spent a year of Sundays carving, Blodeuedd asks Llew to demonstrate this odd stance, and he, naively, does so. She and her lover kill him.

⁶⁰ Graves, pp. 300-339.

⁶¹ Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale, NSW: University of New England Press, 1994), pp. 81, pp. 129-130.

But instead of dying, of course, he becomes an eagle and perches in an oak, shedding rotten flesh.

‘The Risen’ recreates these images, and the fact that it comes after ‘Owl Flower’ ties the poem even more convincingly to the story of Llew and Blodeuedd:

‘The Risen’ begins:

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

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

In Hughes’s poem, the doorway recalls the thatched frame beneath which Llew is killed, and the shell of earth evokes, perhaps, a bathtub. What most powerfully ties this poem to Llew, however, is the offal falling from the protagonist as he rises up and becomes a bird. That mess of offal evokes the rotten flesh falling from Llew.

Thus, the two Welsh tales Hughes retells in his own poetry are the only two in Guest’s *Mabinogion* in which poetry itself is protective and restorative. In ‘The Gypsy’, Hughes perhaps chose to rhyme those talismans of power, verses to undo a curse, in *cynghanedd* because he associated it with Welsh stories in which poetry is curative and emancipating.

One question remains: is the verse in these tales in *cynghanedd*? It is, in fact, not exactly in *cynghanedd*, but, as I will argue, Hughes probably thought that it was. The lines of this *englyn* which Gwydion recites to Llew employ alliteration, consonance, and internal rhyme that approximate and anticipate *cynghanedd*:

Dar a dyf y rwng deu lenn	An oak grows between two lakes
Goduwrych awyr a glenn	There’s a gloomy sky and valley
Ony dewydaf i eu	Unless I tell a lie
O ulodeu Llew ban yn hynn ⁶²	These are from the flowers of Llew ⁶³

As we have seen, however, *Cynghanedd groes*, requires that all consonants repeat in the same order on either side of the caesura, and, in these verses, they do not. Neither are these lines in any other type of *cynghanedd*. This *englyn*, instead, is filled with rich sonic patterns, typical of fourteenth-century Welsh poetry; *cynghanedd* developed out of precisely these sorts of patterns. The poems Taliesin recites are likewise richly alliterative but are not in *cynghanedd*.

⁶² Ian Hughes, ed., *Math uab Mathonwy* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2013), p. 101.

⁶³ Crafted from flowers, Blodeuedd’s name contains her origin: *blodeu* is ‘flowers’. *Ulodeu* is a lenition of *blodeu*, and Gwydion implies that Llew’s falling, rotten flesh comes from his flowers, an image of wounds that also evokes the origin of those wounds, his flower-wife.

Nonetheless, based on his reading about the prosody of medieval Welsh poetry, Hughes would most likely have thought that some or all the poems in these Welsh stories were composed in *cynghanedd*. Clancy's introduction to *Medieval Welsh Lyrics* likewise states that medieval Welsh verse employed *cynghanedd*.⁶⁴ The Dafydd ap Gwilym poems that caught Hughes's attention in *A Celtic Miscellany*, are, in the original Welsh, composed in *cynghanedd*, although neither Jackson's, Clancy's, nor Huws's translations preserve the original *cynghanedd*, which is nearly impossible to render in English. In *The White Goddess* Graves also claims that, by the tenth century, Welsh poets were writing in *cynghanedd*.⁶⁵

Even if Hughes did learn that Taliesin's and Gwydion's verses were not, actually, in *cynghanedd*, *cynghanedd* is nonetheless, I would argue, the verse form Hughes associated most closely with early Welsh poetry. There are a variety of medieval Welsh poetic forms (and many of these forms require *cynghanedd*), but Hughes does not refer to these forms in his letters as he does to *cynghanedd*, and Graves and Clancy do not describe and illustrate them in as much detail as they do *cynghanedd*. While Graves calls *cynghanedd* a 'burdensome obsession' in *The White Goddess*, in a 1970 interview for *The Listener*, he was more enthusiastic: '...if asked what was the most important technical influence on my verse I'd say the Welsh. It started with *cynghanedd*'.⁶⁶ Hughes also learned about the sonic patterns of *cynghanedd* from poets such as Robert Graves whose English poetry was influenced by *cynghanedd*.

Thus, *cynghanedd* is the form Hughes would most likely have chosen if he had wanted to evoke those early Welsh tales in which poetry is not just a way of happening; it makes something happen. It undoes disaster. The idea that poetry can make something happen is central to Hughes's devotion to his own poetic craft and is an idea we see playing out in the Welsh stories that compelled him and to which his work is indebted.

⁶⁴ Clancy, p. 19. Clancy writes, 'while the fourteenth-century bards felt free to use [*cynghanedd*] heavily or sparingly, its use became compulsory in the following century'. While the *Mabinogi* manuscripts date from the fourteenth century, the earliest 'Hanes Taliesin' manuscript dates from the sixteenth century.

⁶⁵ Graves, p. 18.

⁶⁶ Hopwood, pp. 85-86. See Hopwood's book for a comprehensive explanation of the different kinds of *cynghanedd* as well as for a discussion of the use of *cynghanedd* in contemporary Welsh poetry.

'The Sound of Dante's Language': An Alternative Medieval Tradition for Ted Hughes

by James Robinson

From a certain point of view, the most important figure in twentieth-century English-language poetry could be Dante Alighieri. For John Ruskin, Dante had famously been 'the central man of all the world', and for all the disruptions and disjunctions between Victorian and twentieth-century literature, the shaping influence of the fourteenth-century Florentine poet reveals a profound continuity.⁶⁷ No other writer represents such a lasting and vital presence within the work of so diverse a range of twentieth-century poets, and any account of the medieval poet's 'modern afterlife' would need to address his effect upon such figures as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Robert Lowell, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney.⁶⁸ One voice not often heard in the ever-growing conversation around Dante's modern reception is that of Ted Hughes.

Indeed, although now widely acknowledged as one of the central figures of twentieth-century English poetry, Hughes has yet to figure much in critical discussions of the modern reception of medieval literature. And when he has, the emphasis of most readers has been placed not on Dante but on the perceived heritage of Hughes's work in the Middle English poetry of the fourteenth century.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. 2 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1903), p. 187. For the best discussion of the continuity of Dante's influence on English literature between the Victorian and Modernist periods see Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 202-239.

⁶⁸ For examples of these kinds of considerations see Steve Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to T.S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 140-170, 210-243; Steve Ellis, 'Dante and Louis MacNeice: A Sequel to the *Commedia*', in Nick Havelly (ed.), *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 128-139; Mark Balfour, 'The Place of the Poet: Dante in Walcott's Narrative Poetry', in Nick Havelly (ed.), *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 223-241; and Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Dante's Versatility and Seamus Heaney's Modernism', in Nick Havelly (ed.), *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 242-260.

⁶⁹ For an overview of Hughes's medieval engagements see my 'Hughes and the Middle Ages' in Terry Gifford (ed.), *Ted Hughes in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 209-218.

In comparison to such poets as Heaney or Walcott there is certainly no Dantean translation project or so significantly Dantean a work as *Omeros* or 'Station Island' to be found in Hughes's oeuvre. However, a view of Hughes's medievalism which overly privileges the English aspects of his work and reading runs the risk of belying the true scale and international range of Hughes's poetic achievement, and of obscuring one of the more unusual of all twentieth-century poetic engagements with Dante.

In order to stake Hughes's claim for inclusion within the twentieth-century Dantean tradition, and build a case for seeing Hughes as just as substantial and engaged a reader of Dante as his contemporaries, we will need to explore how Hughes inherited a model of Dante from the 'highest' of the High Modernist poets and yet came to read the medieval poet in a very different way. Indeed, Hughes advanced a view of the Florentine poet unique amongst twentieth-century poets, and one which would arguably anticipate some current developments within Dante Studies. In this respect, our focus will firstly be upon the circumstances and contexts of Hughes's earliest attested reading of Dante, before then considering the somewhat idiosyncratic view of Dante and medieval mysticism which arose from this reading and found its clearest expression within Hughes's critical writings. Finally, it will be possible to draw out one example of the emergence of Dante into Hughes's own lyric poetry by looking towards the *Birthday Letters* project.

From Cambridge to Yaddo: Hughes Reads Dante

Unlike such medieval English poets as Chaucer, Langland and the *Gawain*-poet – all of whom there is documentary evidence to show that he was reading closely whilst at Cambridge – Hughes does not seem to have properly encountered Dante until after university.⁷⁰ In 1957, Hughes wrote to Daniel Huws, claiming that his friend's translation of Dante's sestina 'Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra' had shaped his 'whole idea' of Dante's work (*LTH* 111). Even accounting for Hughes's devoted enthusiasm for the work of his friends, it thus seems likely that by October 1957 he was not yet familiar with Dante's *Commedia* – either in the original Italian or, perhaps, even in one of the '[democratic]' translations which he criticises in that letter to Huws.⁷¹

⁷⁰ On Hughes's reading of fourteenth-century poetry at Cambridge see my "Our Chaucer": Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the Politics of Medieval Reading', in Neil Roberts, Mark Wormald, and Terry Gifford (eds.), *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), pp. 143-160.

⁷¹ At the recent 8th International Ted Hughes Conference, 'Poetry in the Making', Daniel Huws was kind enough to confirm to me in person that the translation referred to by Hughes in this letter was the extent of his engagement with the poet at that time.

However, between the 9th September and the 19th November 1959, this state of unfamiliarity changed. For these two and a half months Hughes and Sylvia Plath stayed at the Yaddo Artists Colony in New York State. This time at Yaddo has long been seen as a determining moment in Plath's poetic career, but it was also the point at which Hughes embarked on a sustained reading of Dante's *Commedia*.⁷² This was an experience the details of which he was able to vividly recall when writing to their son Nicholas nearly forty years later:

Each day, we went to a separate cabin in the woods, with a packed lunch and wrote all day. [...] For about an hour each day I would read Dante's Divine Comedy to myself—aloud, in the Italian. The sound of Dante's language is unique, and ties his words together in the most powerful and incisive way. His whole mentality is wonderful to sink yourself into. Anyway, after I finished the Paradiso—the 3rd of the 3 parts— I had a dream. I was in a vast quarry, like the Grand Canyon (which we'd visited earlier that summer). I was suddenly aware of something moving in the depths of the quarry, then saw it was a colossal ape, coming up towards me at great speed. (*LTH* 708-9)

The reading experience recounted here is remarkable. In reading the *Commedia* aloud, with an emphasis on empathic receptivity to the 'sound of Dante's language', Hughes demonstrated an invocatory engagement with the poem quite different from any other twentieth-century poet. Whilst Seamus Heaney's own attempts to read the *Commedia* in Italian were ultimately frustrated by 'the little particles strewn around the big nouns and verbs', Hughes's vocative absorption in the phonic levels of the vernacular text apparently carried him all the way through the poem – an achievement made even more remarkable, as we will see, by the fact that Hughes's grasp of Italian was no stronger than Heaney's.⁷³

Certainly, in undertaking a reading which emphasised the close connection between the sounded poetic effect of Dante's language and his 'mentality', Hughes contrasted starkly with perhaps the most influential poetic reader of Dante in the twentieth-century. T.S. Eliot's reading of Dante sought to emphasise the perspicacity and universalism of Dante's vernacular language; for Eliot, Dante was 'the most *universal* of poets in the modern languages', and the author – in the *Commedia* – of a 'vast metaphor' which embraced all aspects of the intellectual and linguistic climate of a medieval Europe 'mentally more united than we can now

⁷² For a discussion of the importance of this time at Yaddo to the development of Sylvia Plath's poetry see Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 154-155.

⁷³ On Heaney's particular frustration see Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 425.

conceive.⁷⁴ Indeed, Eliot so extended the particularity of Dante's speech that he came to represent it as a lingua franca equivalent to medieval Latin. As Seamus Heaney put it, for Eliot, Dante 'walks in the aura of cultural history and representativeness'.⁷⁵

However, the apparent linguistic contrast between Hughes's reading of 'the sound of Dante's language' and Eliot's emphasis on its universalist representation masks a fundamental assonance between their approaches. In a lecture given in 1950, Eliot recalled the procedure of his own early reading of Dante:

I read Dante only with a prose translation beside the text. Forty years ago I began to puzzle out the Divine Comedy in this way and when I thought I had grasped the meaning of a passage which especially delighted me, I committed it to memory; so that, for some years, I was able to recite a large part of one canto or another to myself, lying in bed or on a railway journey. Heaven knows what it would have sounded like, had I recited it aloud; but it was by this means that I steeped myself in Dante's poetry.⁷⁶

In this account of Eliot's hesitant reading – puzzling his way through select passages of the *Commedia* only with the support of the facing-page English prose translation of the Temple Classics edition, and unable to risk vocalising his reading – we seem to find a strong contrast with Hughes's confident, invocatory engagement with Dante's language.⁷⁷ Yet, in actuality, Eliot's account aligns closely with the material traces of Hughes's own reading experience.

Hughes's copy of the *Commedia* survives in the collection of his library currently held at Emory University, and it is the very same Temple Classics three-volume edition used by T.S. Eliot.⁷⁸ This in itself is not that remarkable – the Temple Classics was the cheapest and most easily available text of the *Commedia* in both Italian and English in the first half of the twentieth century, and Hughes's use of the same edition need not necessarily suggest any similarity in reading

⁷⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Dante* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), pp. 9, 17,11; for discussion of Eliot's critical engagement with Dante in this essay of 1929, see Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, pp. 210-214; and Dominic Manganiello, *T.S. Eliot and Dante*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 11-16.

⁷⁵ Seamus Heaney, 'Envious and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', *Irish University Review* 15 (1985): p. 14.

⁷⁶ T.S. Eliot, 'What Dante Means to Me', *To Criticize the Critic: and Other Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 125.

⁷⁷ On Eliot's use of the Temple Classics edition of Dante's works (published 1899-1903 by J.M. Dent) see Nick Havely, *Dante's British Public: Readers & Texts, from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 270-271.

⁷⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, ed. H. Oelsner (London: J.M. Dent, 1946); Dante Alighieri, *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, ed. H. Oelsner (London: J.M. Dent, 1933); Dante Alighieri, *The Paradiso of Dante Alighieri*, ed. H. Oelsner (London: J.M. Dent, 1908). Hughes's copies of the Temple Classics edition are held in the Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts and Rare Books Library, Emory University under the shelf-marks PQ4305.A1 1946 HUGHES, PQ4306.A1 1933 HUGHES and PQ4307.A1 1908 HUGHES respectively.

process.⁷⁹ Indeed, in Hughes's copies of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* it is the Italian text that has been worked over – with passages and single lines consistently marked and underlined. However, Hughes's extensive marginal glossing of vocabulary somewhat complicates his later emphasis on the phonic value of Dante's language, and demonstrates his careful consideration of the semantics of the text. Indeed, Hughes's glossing of such relatively simple words within *Inferno* 31 as 'strano' and 'scura' reveal his reading strategy to have been essentially the same as Eliot's. Just as Eliot had done, Hughes appears to have been simply parsing the English translation on the facing page and making a note of those words in the Italian to which he could not easily assign a meaning within the sentence structure of the English text. For in truth, Ted Hughes had no more knowledge of Italian than did T.S. Eliot or, later, Seamus Heaney.⁸⁰ Furthermore, such was Hughes's deep familiarity with all aspects of Eliot's poetic and critical work, that it seems very likely indeed that it was Eliot's writings which directed Hughes to the Temple Classics edition and shaped his hermeneutic practice there.⁸¹

Of course, it is possible that the notes in Hughes's copies of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* represent a later stage in his reading of Dante, after his invocatory first encounter with Dante's language, and where, in a linguistic reversal of Eliot's strategy, Hughes went back to try and properly 'work out' those passages from the English which had struck him through their sound and texture in the Italian. However, there is further evidence that Hughes's reading at Yaddo in 1959 was more systematic than his later 'mythos' suggested. The British Library holds a 'desk diary' for 1959 used by Hughes during this year, and later re-used at various intervals.⁸² Hughes was never a diligent diarist, but he was remarkably penurious with his writing materials, and would often return to unused pages of diaries and notebooks for later drafting and note-taking. In this diary, on the page covering the 20th and 21st August (at which point Hughes was in the middle of a road-trip across

⁷⁹ There is a strong case to be made that the Temple Classics edition has had the single greatest influence on English poetry of any version of Dante, having shaped the reading of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Louis MacNeice and, as we will now see, Ted Hughes; on Pound and Eliot's use of this edition see Havelly, *Dante's British Public*, pp. 270-271; on MacNeice see Ellis, 'Dante and Louis MacNeice', p. 128.

⁸⁰ Hughes's lack of Italian is certainly borne out by the account of the working relationship Gaia Servadio gives in her note to the 'translations' of the poetry of Lorenzo de' Medici which Hughes prepared in 1992, and for which Servadio provided him with literal, interlinear English translations of every poem and then – interestingly, given his emphasis on 'the sound of Dante's language' in his Yaddo reading – read the poems to him in Italian; see Gaia Servadio, 'Appendix 11: Lorenzo de' Medici', in Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), pp. 217-219.

⁸¹ For an account of Hughes's engagement with Eliot see Ronald Schuchard, 'Hughes and Eliot', in Terry Gifford (ed.), *Ted Hughes in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 23-32.

⁸² BL Add MS 88918/129/1(5).

the United States with Sylvia Plath) he has recorded a list of careful notes on the *Inferno*.⁸³ Given the combination of his proclivity to use every square inch of available paper, the unlikelihood of his having made notes on the *Commedia* in a tent in the middle of Yellowstone National Park, and his own memory of reading Dante after arriving at Yaddo, it seems very likely that these notes in the 1959 desk diary represent material evidence of Hughes's Yaddo reading of Dante in Autumn 1959.

In which case, we can again note the disparity between Hughes's memory of his invocatory reading, and its material traces. The page of notes carefully outlines the main events of each canto of the *Inferno*, relating these to the structure of Dante's Hell: 'Canto XVIII: 8th, 1st fosse. Panders & seducers, scourged by demons. In 2nd/flatterers, immersed in ordure'.⁸⁴ The character of the notes strongly suggests that they were written with a memorative purpose, indicating Hughes's early awareness of the implication of Dante's poem within the theory of medieval memory systems. Indeed, from his time at Cambridge onwards, Hughes had a vital interest in medieval systems of memory storage and recall, and in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* he clarified his association of these systems with Dante's poem:

Frances Yates suggests that Dante's *Commedia* is virtually a memory map of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, furnished with a sequence of charged images, historically defined figures and self-evident, graphic episodes which become the mnemonic symbols and the lexicon, of the poet's vision, encompassing his entire intellectual and spiritual universe. (*SGCB* 20)

As we can see, the Yaddo notes reveal that this kind of topographical medievalism was patterning Hughes's reading of Dante from the very start.

Thus whilst not as clear-cut as he would later remember it, the central difference between Hughes's early reading of Dante and that of Eliot's remains his emphasis on invocation and the 'sound of Dante's language'. Whereas Eliot would not risk vocalising an Italian he could not truly understand and thus soaked himself in a poetry which remained fundamentally an intellectual abstraction, Ted Hughes could not resist it. Chiming with his sense of the poet's shamanic vocation, Hughes's lifelong belief in the inherent poetic virtue of vocalised reading – whilst influenced by conflicting advice from an earlier, more-confident T.S. Eliot – derived ultimately from his sense of medieval reading practices, as expressed in a 1956 letter to Sylvia Plath:

⁸³ BL Add MS 88919/129/1(5) f. 58r.

⁸⁴ BL Add MS 88919/129/1(5) f. 58r.

Up to the inventing of Caxton's press, and for most people long after all reading was done aloud. Most people were incapable of reading silently. And Eliot says that the best thing a poet can do is read aloud poetry as much as he can. (*LTH* 50)

In which case we can see that Hughes's dedication to 'the sound of Dante's language' in his reading at Yaddo – his determination to live up to the advice that Eliot failed himself to follow – just as with his hermeneutic approach to the dual-language text of his *Commedia* and his memorative notes, represents an attempt to both 'read through' Eliot's approach to Dante and to encounter the poet within what Hughes conceived of as a 'medieval' context.

'The Sufi-poet saints of Islam': Hughes, Dante and Islamic Mysticism

Other aspects of Hughes's experience at Yaddo would also help to determine his continuing approach to reading Dante and his developing sense of the poet's place within the medieval world. Another guest at the colony during Hughes's stay was the Chinese-American composer Chou Wen-Chung, who initiated a collaboration which would form a focus of Hughes's work for the next two years: an unfinished libretto for an opera adaptation of the *Bardo Thodol*.⁸⁵ Thus, whilst encountering Dante through a reading strategy both patterned by – but in tension with – that of T.S. Eliot, Hughes's simultaneous immersion in a non-Christian mystical tradition encouraged an approach to Dante which was quite at odds with Eliot's sense of Dante's European representativeness, and instead stressed cross-cultural influences on the poet.

Another sheet of detailed, memorative or recapitulative notes on the final three canti of *Inferno* can be post-dated to 1961, and shows that Hughes's reading of Dante continued during the period in London when he worked on the *Bardo*.⁸⁶ However, the shaping influence on Hughes's conception of Dante's place within wider literary traditions was not exerted by Buddhist but rather by Islamic mysticism. Hughes's interest in Sufism and other medieval Islamic mystical traditions was profound, and his engagement with Persian medieval poetry was particularly substantial.⁸⁷ Indeed it is a Persian poem which best demonstrates Hughes's developing conceptions about Dante and the *Commedia*:

⁸⁵ For an account of the genesis of this project and a fragment of the surviving text, see *Selected Translations*, pp. 1-13.

⁸⁶ Emory MSS 644 Box 85 Folder 38, unpaginated.

⁸⁷ See Hughes's 1964 review of *Sufis* by Idries Shah, reprinted as 'Regenerations' in *Winter Pollen* (*WP* 56-59); for a nuanced discussion of Hughes's review and its place in his idiosyncratic understanding of shamanism, see Gregory Leadbetter, 'Hughes and Shamanism', in Terry Gifford, *Ted Hughes in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 189-190.

This latest project [...] is based on a great Persian Sufi classic poem, called *The Conference of the Birds*. All the birds are gathered by the hoopoe—and they undertake a journey to enlightenment. It is a remote original of Dante's *Divine Comedy* & many other Western works. (*LTH* 331)

The project Hughes mentions here in his letter to Aurelia Plath of 1972 – his involvement with Peter Brook's experimental theatrical adaptation of Farid Ud-Din Attar's twelfth-century poem – is fascinating in itself, but it's obviously his notion of Attar's work as 'a remote original' of the *Commedia* which catches the eye. As a Cambridge anthropologist, Hughes had a proclivity for seeing aetiological links and structural parallels between divergent literary and mythical traditions; a proclivity which seems to have been particularly pronounced when he was dealing with medieval traditions. But this characterisation of the relationship between *The Conference of the Birds* and the *Commedia* was a substantive one for Hughes, and was borne out in his developing reading of Dante.

Hughes's sense of Dante as participating in a visionary discourse which embraced both Christian and Islamic sources reached its most cogent public expression in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, throughout which work Hughes offers his most extensive critical discussion of Dante:

This same Great Goddess – female sexuality as a symbol of the Mother of Creation – in a Christianized form opened to Dante the ultimate vision of his *Paradiso*. To assert that his vision descended on Dante exclusively from Catholic iconography and religious feeling would be as mistaken as to argue that he nursed it into being solely from the erotic impact of Beatrice on the nine-year-old nervous system of a motherless boy. Both extremes are inseparably active, and the continuum between them is the subjective life of Dante. (*SGCB* 4)

However, Hughes clarified that he saw the form of this mythopoeic tradition which Dante received as descending not from Christianity – or even Neo-Platonism – directly but from a mediating Islamic context:

When the mystical ecstatic adoration of the Divine Beloved streamed into eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe from the Sufi poet-saints of Islam, it was appropriated, as a matter of course, for Mary who had become the beneficiary of all the innate Goddess worship of the masses that had survived into the Christianized world. (*SGCB* 10-11)

And it is within this tradition of mysticism – as identified by Hughes through Attar's journey to 'enlightenment' – that Hughes ultimately came to see Dante and the *Commedia*:

The whole work serves as a complete Catholic meditation, formulated like a liturgy, raising Dante (or the reader) from a commonplace, profane condition (the worldly fear of the call) to ecstatic contemplation of the Divine Source. (SGCB 20)

It's difficult to know what to make of Hughes's 'Sufi' version of Dante's mysticism. On one hand, it's obviously easy to deride this sort of thinking as a prime example of the reductive syncretism encouraged by mid-twentieth-century anthropological approaches to cultural and intellectual history, in which every development is seen as a source or model for each subsequent generation, regardless of historical circumstance or connective discourse.⁸⁸ On the other hand, perhaps Hughes's 'shamanic' approach to the experience of the *Commedia* and the 'sound of Dante's language' left him open to seeing resonances between Dante and medieval Persian poets which indicate the kind of cross-cultural influences on Dante's work that scholars today are increasingly coming to recognise and take seriously.⁸⁹

'The Map of Your Commedia': Dante in the "Birthday Letters" Project

There is one further path which can be profitably traced out of those influential months which Hughes and Plath spent at Yaddo in the Autumn of 1959. As we saw earlier, Hughes's account of his reading there placed a culminating emphasis on the *Paradiso*. However, as will be noticed, the only notes on Dante I've so far been able to discover in the Hughes archives have related to the *Inferno*, and in Hughes's copies of the *Commedia* only the text of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* bears any marking or annotations: his *Paradiso* remains depressingly clean. Which might suggest that we need to include Ted Hughes in the long list of *Commedia*-casualties who – following the line of Byron over Shelley – gave up on the *Paradiso*.⁹⁰ Or perhaps we should take Hughes at his word, and wonder whether the absence of annotation indicates that by the time he reached the *Paradiso*, Hughes really was reading for 'the sound of Dante's language' alone? And yet, the end of the *Paradiso* seems to have been perhaps the most important passage of the whole *Commedia* for Hughes. He draws on it multiple times in his own works, such as when aligning

⁸⁸ Gregory Leadbetter has eloquently explored this tendency in Hughes's thought through a discussion of 'romantic refraction' of his a-historical conception of 'shamanism' from any observable 'ethnographic exemplars'. See 'Hughes and Shamanism', p. 194.

⁸⁹ Study of Dante's engagement with Islam has, in recent years, finally started to recover from the blow dealt it in 1978 by Edward Said's influentially reductive reading of the *Commedia* in his *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 68-70. For examples of scholarship now flourishing in this area see Jan M. Ziolkowski (ed.), *Dante and Islam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

⁹⁰ For a discussion of Byron's teasing and influential proclamation to Shelley that the *Commedia* 'is so obscure, tiresome, and insupportable that no one can read it for half an hour [...] and the hundred times I have made the attempt to read it, I have lost', see Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, p. 38.

the end of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* with the final lines of *Paradiso* 33:

[The] vital protagonist of Shakespeare's entire dramatic, tragic, transcendental, poetic creation [...] can be translated, word for word, like the last lines of Dante's *Paradiso*:

Already my Desire and Will were rolled –
Even as a wheel that moveth equally –
By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.⁹¹
(*SGCB* 504)

However, it is perhaps the *Commedia*'s presence within the *Birthday Letters* project which is Dante's most significant and substantial legacy for Hughes. In the extended sequence of drafts which Hughes wrote in 1986 during the libel trial in which *The Bell Jar* film adaptation had embroiled him, Hughes recalled the publication of Sylvia Plath's novel, and built a substantial connection between Dante's poem and Plath's oeuvre:

As you sat there holding the Bell Jar published just that day—
I did not know we shared the curtain scene.
Did not know that what you held was the map
Of your *Commedia* —⁹²

In a characteristically blurred extension of the metaphor of *Commedia* as map, Hughes then sees *The Bell Jar* as being 'the map/Simple but Germanically thorough—'of the 'topography, the history, the people' of Plath's life and mythos.⁹³ And in a final turn reflecting Hughes's relative indifference to Plath's prose work, it is the *Ariel* poems which are affirmed as not the map but the territory of Plath's 'Commedia':

Nor did I know
That your *Commedia* itself was written,
All the poems completed, the total song:
Inferno, Purgatorio & Paradiso.⁹⁴

⁹¹ It should be noted that the slightly ungainly translation that Hughes chooses to use here and place in such a prominent position as the end of his critical magnum opus is indeed the version by Philip Wicksteed published in 1899 as the first volume in the Temple Classics series, of which, as we saw earlier, Hughes owned a 1908 reprint.

⁹² BL Add MS 88993/1/1(2) f. 1v. For an account of the legal proceedings surrounding the film of *The Bell Jar* and the pivotal role Hughes's experience of them played in shaping the extended *Birthday Letters* project see Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*, 2nd edition (London: William Collins, 2016), pp. 1-11.

⁹³ BL Add MS 88993/1/1(2) f. 2r.

⁹⁴ BL Add MS 88993/1/1(2) f. 2r.

In this respect, through the notion of a Whitmanian ‘total song’ Hughes here seems to personalize Eliot’s sense of the *Commedia* as universal poem, figuring it as a unitary model for his belief in the totality of Plath’s poetry.

Whilst this sense of the *Commedia* as providing a structural pattern through which to read Plath’s life and work is largely missing, Dante’s presence in the published *Birthday Letters* sequence is equally potent. For instance, Hughes identified the poem ‘Karlsbad Caverns’ as playing an important role within the structure of imagery for the book.⁹⁵ The poem recalls Hughes and Plath’s visit to the Karlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico in the course of their cross-country road-trip through the summer of 1959, and, as it opens, the chthonic resonance of the journey into the cavern is sounded by Hughes through a cluster of markedly Dantean notes:

We had seen the bats in the Karlsbad caves.
Thick as shaggy soot in chimneys
Bigger than cathedrals. We’d made ourselves dots

On the horizon of their complete world
And their exclusive lives.
Presumably the whole lot were happy—

So happy they didn’t know they were happy,
They were so busy with it, so full of it,
Clinging upside down in their stone heavens.
(*CP* 1106-1107)

In this moment, Hughes plays with the ecclesiastical resonances of subterranean space, embraces some of the Eliotic sense of universality through the notion of the bats and their ‘complete world’, and echoes the upturned figure of Satan in *Inferno* 34. As Hughes and Plath watch the bats then swarm out of the caverns for their regular evening flight, the sense of an interconnected Dantean cosmos underscoring the poem strengthens:

The bats were part of the sun’s machinery,
Connected to the machinery of the flowers
By the machinery of insects. The bats’ meaning

Oiled the unfailing logic of the earth. (*CP* 1107)

However, with the sudden onset of a summer storm, the bats return, breaking this clockwork model of an harmonious cosmos – an interruption in their determined

⁹⁵ In a letter to Olwyn Hughes dated 2nd October 1997, Hughes observed that whilst ‘the one about the Bats might or might not be a bit peripheral’ to the larger scheme of arrangement for *Birthday Letters*, he felt it provided an important ‘comment on the bats and stars that crop up elsewhere’ in the imagery of the book; Emory MSS 980 Box 1 Folder 27 f. 1v.

behaviour which Hughes contrasts retrospectively with his and Plath's disastrous inability to avoid their fate:

Those bats had their eyes open. Unlike us,
They knew how, and when, to detach themselves
From the love that moves the sun and the other stars. (*CP* 1108)

Here then is Dante and the famous last line of *Paradiso* 33 – 'L'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle' – put to the work of underscoring not the hope of redemption and mystical renewal, but the implacability of fate and the disaster wrought by broken, disabling – unmoving – love. In his poetry, Hughes thus seems to question the very instrumental mysticism which, as we saw earlier, had characterised his critical reading of Dante. The encounter with the Carlsbad bats in the summer of 1959 stayed with Hughes for forty years and when he and Plath left the cavern and drove east out of New Mexico, they were, of course, heading ultimately for Yaddo and the great turning point in Plath's writing.⁹⁶ And, as is apparent having now traced the contours of Hughes's reading of Dante, they were also heading towards one of the more unusual engagements between a twentieth-century poet and medieval literature, towards the encounter of Ted Hughes with 'the sound of Dante's language'.

⁹⁶ A postcard to Olwyn Hughes is preserved at Emory which gives a far more quotidian account of the episode captured in the poem: 'We walked all round this cave – about 14 ½ acres of it just the one chamber. At dusk we watched ¼ of a million bats fly out – then all fly back in out of a thunderstorm.' Emory MSS 890 Box 1 Folder 8 f. 1v.

Hughes and Larkin: A Rapprochement?

by Neil Roberts

In 2015 a podcast was published on the *Spectator* website titled ‘Ted Hughes vs Philip Larkin – whose team are you on?’¹ This epitomises a tendency, over more than half a century now, to represent the two most popular English poets of the age as not merely contrasting but incompatible. In the popular imagination they are almost defined in opposition to each other: Hughes the shamanic poet, the Lawrentian thought-adventurer, the inheritor of Eliot and Yeats, the explorer of psychic and natural energies, against Larkin the poet of restricted horizons, narrow and insular taste, and a ‘plain man’, philistine vision of the world; or alternatively Larkin the poet of humanity, inheritor of Hardy and Edward Thomas, author of exquisitely wrought but accessible verse against Hughes the overblown, anti-human apostle of violence and cheap appropriator of world mythology. There is certainly a sense in which Larkin is, as Jonathan Bate called him, ‘Hughes’s mighty opposite’, but I want to challenge the lazy assumption that they are somehow mutually exclusive, appealing to opposing literary temperaments and pursuing mutually antagonistic poetic projects.²

An early example, if not the origin, of this trope is A. Alvarez’s famous essay, ‘The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle’, published as an Introduction to his anthology *The New Poetry* in 1962. This essay includes perhaps the most influential characterisation of Movement poetry as poetry of ‘gentility’, which Alvarez defines as ‘a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good.’³ Such poetry, according to Alvarez, is inadequate to a world of psychoanalysis and extermination camps. The centrepiece of Alvarez’s essay is a comparison of Larkin’s ‘At Grass’ and Hughes’s ‘A Dream of Horses’, erecting Larkin as the epitome of gentility and Hughes as its opposite. Perhaps irritation at being cast as the poet of gentility was one of the motives that led Larkin to open poems in his last collection *High Windows* with

¹ <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2015/10/ted-hughes-vs-philip-larkin-whose-team-are-you-on/>

² Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), p. 14.

³ A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1962, Revised Edition 1966), p. 25.

lines such as ‘Groping back to bed after a piss’ and ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad’.⁴

For students of Hughes the influence of ‘Beyond the Gentility Principle’ is reinforced by Hughes’s own characterisation of the typical poet in *New Lines*, the canonical Movement anthology, in an interview with Ekbert Faas:

One of the things those poets had in common I think was the post-war mood of having had enough... enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the id, enough of the Angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new worlds. They’d seen it all turn into death camps and atomic bombs. All they wanted was to get back into civvies and get home to the wife and kids and for the rest of their lives not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park.⁵

(Hughes’ rhetoric in this passage, ‘enough... enough’ interestingly echoes Alvarez’s ‘more or less... more or less’.) Larkin was of course sceptical about the dark gods and the Angelic powers, but Hughes’s caricature of the domesticated post-war poet is so strikingly unlike the isolated and alienated persona of Larkin’s poems, such as ‘Dockery and Son’ and ‘Mr Bleaney’, (and the poet himself) that I find it hard to believe he had Larkin in mind when he made this characterisation.

In late 1961 Hughes wrote to Alvarez about his poem ‘The Road to Easington’ and complained, ‘bugger me if Larkin doesn’t publish a poem about the same road.’⁶ Larkin’s poem was ‘Here’, first published in *The New Statesman* on 8 October 1961. Why should Hughes be concerned that he and Larkin had written poems about the same road – a trivial coincidence, surely? ‘Here’ is in my opinion one of Larkin’s two or three greatest poems. It is certainly a better poem than ‘The Road to Easington’, which Hughes never collected. Hughes who, as we shall see, was far from unappreciative of Larkin’s best work, is likely to have been aware of this. His poem was first published in the *Listener* in August 1962. This version included the lines, ‘And its depth calling to the road. Here/ The sea’s sound sluices everywhere – a grubby scrap-iron’ (*CP* 1246). A year later the poem was reprinted in Robert Conquest’s *New Lines 2*. In this version ‘Here/ The sea’s sound sluices everywhere’ is omitted. This seems to me rather a good line, certainly as good as anything else in this poem. Could Hughes have made this deletion because of the prominence of the title and keyword of Larkin’s poem, isolated for emphasis at the line-end?

⁴ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), pp. 169, 180.

⁵ Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 201.

⁶ Hughes to A. Alvarez, BL deposit 8878. Undated, but refers to Sylvia Plath being in her ninth month.

Especially in the sequel to *New Lines*, in the company of all the prominent Movement poets – Larkin himself, Kingsley Amis, Elizabeth Jennings, D.J. Enright, Thom Gunn, Donald Davie, John Wain – Hughes would not have wanted to invite comparisons with Larkin’s masterpiece.

Publication in *New Lines 2* draws attention to the fact that it is not only setting that the two poems have in common. Each follows the dead-end road east of Hull on the Spurn peninsula, and each concludes with a sense of absence and emptiness. Larkin’s poem ends:

And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.⁷

Hughes’s begins, ‘Is there anything along this road, are there answers at the road’s end?’ and concludes:

People are the road’s parasites and it does not attend.
The road is not interested in them and their way,

The road carries them its way, or they get off it, it is going to the end.
(*CP* 102)

‘The Road to Easington’ is written in rhyming quatrains: it formally resembles a ‘Movement’ poem more than most that Hughes was writing in the early sixties; it also resembles a Larkin poem in its unusual emphasis on quotidian and metonymic imagery. The road is ‘a craftsman/ Proud of its job and of the traditions of its job’; the poem follows it literally:

Here come grim walls –
The road narrows.[...]

Then fields flatten back in flight again.
A remote spire wilts off.[...]

Till the last roofs gleam gun-grey...

The road does not care
That they need to be made happy, that they wait only for the road to bring
them envelopes,
That they need it to leave them as they are. (*CP* 102)

⁷ Larkin, *Collected Poems*, pp. 136-37.

These lines are more reminiscent of Larkin poems such as ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ and ‘Ambulances’ than of anything else by Hughes.

The fact that Hughes wrote a poem with ‘Movement’ characteristics is not in itself particularly startling. He himself noted that his early success ‘Six Young Men’ had become ‘the example of what that whole Movement genre, with inspiration, could be capable of’ (*LTH* 205). Jonathan Bate rightly pairs it with Larkin’s ‘MCMXIV’ as ‘one of the two best retrospectives on the “never such innocence again” motif of the beginning of the Great War.’⁸ In this case, not only was Hughes’s poem written much earlier, it is at least as good as Larkin’s. The real interest of ‘The Road to Easington’ is Hughes’s anxiety and sense of rivalry about the resemblance. It is easy, from the published comments of the poets on each other, to construct a narrative of mutual hostility. Hughes was exasperated by the reviews of Larkin’s 1983 prose collection *Required Writing* which ‘prostrated themselves and finally deified him’ (*LTH* 474). Though he found some of the pieces ‘awfully good and persuasive’ (*LTH* 476) his dominant feeling was of ‘outrageous propaganda for his own tastes & limitations & prejudices’ which he labelled ‘philistinism’ (*LTH* 477). When Larkin’s *Selected Letters* were published in 1992 Hughes was (not surprisingly given Larkin’s comments on himself) even more hostile: ‘Faber ought to be paying compensation to all their other authors.... Trying to kill everything, basically, that shares the same plot & bit of light. All that self-loathing, at full spurt, bubble, ooze & drip’ (*LTH* 614). However, none of this hostility is directed at Larkin’s poetry. In 1958 he described Larkin as a ‘very good gentle poet’ (*LTH* 125). In the *Poetry in the Making* chapter ‘Writing About People’ he discussed three poems: Keith Douglas’s ‘Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea-Garden’, his own ‘Her Husband’ and Larkin’s ‘Mr Bleaney’, about which he wrote,

Looking through the lens of this poem, it seems we could see every detail of any situation this man could ever get into. Finally we move into the man’s head and look out through his eyes, and become aware of his emptiness, his dilemma, his resignation. (*PM* 48)

Most notably, Hughes told Larkin that he had written, but never sent, a ‘fan letter’ inspired by Larkin’s late poem ‘Aubade’, which he called ‘a really great poem – an event. I can’t get it out of my mind’ (*LTH* 404). To dispel any doubt about the sincerity of this praise, he had been scheduled to make a rare TV appearance reading the poem, and was only prevented by an accident. He told Keith Sagar that ‘Aubade’ was Larkin’s ‘best poem – by some way’ (*PC* 152). ‘Aubade’ begins:

I work all day and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.

⁸ Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*, p. 137.

In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
 Till then I see what's really always there:
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
 Making all thought impossible but how
 And where and when I shall myself die.
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread
 Of dying, and being dead,
 Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.⁹

This contrasts bleakly with the belief of Alvarez's 'genteel' poet 'that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good' or Hughes's own characterisation of the Movement poet who has had 'enough of the dark' and for whom 'not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park.' It is, in fact, much more reminiscent of the criterion for judging East European poets that Hughes attributes to Czesław Miłosz: 'most poetry is not equipped for life in a world where people actually do die. But some is' (*WP* 221).

Moreover, in private Hughes's response to Larkin's personality was extraordinarily nuanced and sensitive. The time when probably they were most thrown into each other's company was in the judging of the first Arvon Foundation poetry competition in 1981. Hughes took the opportunity to study Larkin closely and recorded his impressions in his diary. He detected 'two Philips'. The first, and most evident, was 'the public one, rather ponderous, metaphorically as well as actually deaf, the All Souls high table manner, – owlish, with many testy livid service departments behind his plate glass peepholes, his cultivated stodginess, his slightly unwieldy remarks.' Even this Larkin Hughes judged to be 'a big personality, with serious weight, the eyelids & brows... dragging down & outward with serious consideration, & ready, very present.' The other Larkin, whom Hughes glimpsed only twice, was more surprising and clearly more to his taste: 'where he's beaming into the Camera with very intense joyful gladness & affection a jet of some sort of intense brightness, a flash – when his eyes & face flash out the expression of a joyful passionate goblin.' Hughes was frustrated, in the context of judging a poetry competition, by Larkin's 'uncanny lack of interest in anything but what touches his own vein of poetry', but his final judgement is generously affirmative: 'Philip is an adult in most visible aspects, & that is saying a great deal, among writers. He has managed to grow up.' This diary entry tells us as much about Hughes as about Larkin: his intent observation of people and shrewd but generous complexity of

⁹ Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 208.

judgement. Reading it without knowing the author one might guess it was the work of a novelist.¹⁰

It is much more difficult to extract a positive narrative from Larkin's comments on Hughes. He did admit in one letter that he could 'just about stomach' Hughes's poetry, unlike that of anyone born later, but this faint praise is overshadowed by his assertion to Kingsley Amis, 'No, of course Ted's no good at all. Not at all. Not a single solitary bit of good' and to Robert Conquest, 'At Ilkley literature festival a woman shrieked and vomited during a Ted Hughes reading. I must say I've never felt like shrieking'.¹¹ As Jonathan Locke Hart has pointed out, the letter to Amis is in response to his friend's request for confirmation that both Hughes and Plath are 'ABSOLUTELY DEVOID OF ANY MERIT WHATSOEVER' and Larkin demurs in the case of Plath, whom he thought 'extraordinary', but not Hughes.¹² Even so, one might argue that Larkin protests too much, and that Hughes's severest critic wouldn't claim that he was 'Not a single solitary bit of good.' There is evidence that, just as it was the personality projected in Larkin's essays and letters that Hughes disliked, so it was Hughes's persona that Larkin objected to. He especially disliked Hughes's public readings. Certainly the contrast between them in this respect was an irresistible source of humour to a man of Larkin's temper: of a reading by Hughes in Hull he wrote: 'He filled the hall and got a great reception. I was in the chair, providing a sophisticated, insincere, effete, and gold-watch-chained alternative to his primitive forthright virile leather-jacketed *persona*.'¹³ There is nearly always an element of performance in Larkin's comments on Hughes. However, in a different context, where he is exercising a professional responsibility, a possibly more genuine response to Hughes's poetry emerges. As is well known from his essay 'A Neglected Responsibility' Larkin was an active campaigner for the collection and preservation of modern literary manuscripts.¹⁴ He was instrumental in setting up the National Manuscript Collection of Contemporary Writers for the Arts Council, and in this capacity he was asked to comment on *Cave Birds*. He begins in a vein familiar from his published letters to friends such as Amis and Conquest: 'I think the introductory comments [not included in the published text] are frequently hilarious, and I doubt whether they make the subsequent poems any easier to understand.' He goes on to say that the poems are 'not the sort of thing I

¹⁰ BL ADD Ms 88981/128/3 ff65-6. Many thanks to Yvonne Reddick for sharing this with me.

¹¹ Philip Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 1992) pp. 396, 526.

¹² Jonathan Locke Hart, 'Hughes and His Contemporaries', Terry Gifford, ed., *Ted Hughes in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p. 5.

¹³ Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 525.

¹⁴ Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), pp. 98-108.

should wish to read or write myself', and that he 'tremble[s] to think of its influence on contemporary English poetry,' but adds that 'there is a distinction about the work itself that points to talent of a higher order', and that 'we are unlikely to be offered another collection of equal coherence and substance by a living poet for a long time.'¹⁵

After John Betjeman's death in 1984 Hughes and Larkin were the leading candidates for the Poet Laureateship. There was a trial run for this in 1977, when Faber asked each of them to compose a quatrain in celebration of the Queen's silver jubilee, to be engraved outside their offices. When the drafts were submitted, Charles Monteith wrote to Hughes that he thought his offering was too sophisticated, and sent him Larkin's as an example. I haven't been able to find Hughes's original but, far from resenting being asked to learn from his rival, Hughes meekly complied and sent the poem, 'A nation's a soul', which met with Monteith's approval. Hughes thought that Larkin's appointment as Laureate would have 'seemed like too obvious an unfurling of the banner over the far right' – an interesting perception, in advance of the general revelation of Larkin's right-wing politics and racism in his *Selected Letters* (*LTH* 530). Larkin was less explicit in his thoughts about Hughes's suitability for the role, though the *Schadenfreude* in his comment, 'Ted for the L[aureate]ship, don't you think? That'll put paid to him' is a strong hint.¹⁶ But their conceptions of the role, and of the relation between poetry and monarchy, were strikingly similar. Hughes believed that monarchy was 'extruded by [an] instinctive, primitive need' (*LTH* 530) and wrote that he had a 'far more primitive sense of the meaning of the Laureateship than people who thought it was merely a 'trophy'.¹⁷ Larkin wrote in almost identical terms, 'Poetry and sovereignty are very primitive things. I like to think of their being united this way [by the Laureateship], in England.'¹⁸ When Hughes published his first Laureate poem, 'Rain-Charm for the Duchy', he subtitled it 'A Blessed, Devout Drench for the Christening of His Royal Highness Prince Harry'. That phrase 'devout drench' is a clear and gracious acknowledgement of the rival who had turned the post down: in his poem 'Water' Larkin wrote that if he 'were called in/ To construct a religion' his liturgy would include 'A furious devout drench'.¹⁹ I like the fact that this phrase is less genteel, more 'Hughesian', than Hughes's 'Blessed, Devout Drench.' When Hughes reprinted his poem in *New Selected Poems*, two years after the publication

¹⁵ Philip Larkin to Josephine Falk, 23 July 1975; University of Hull UDPL 2/3/51/27. I'm very grateful to James Underwood for drawing my attention to this letter.

¹⁶ Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, p. 717.

¹⁷ Hughes to Grey Gowrie (draft), 6 February 1985, 'Correspondence', Manuscript Collection 644. Ted Hughes Papers, Box 53, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript and Rare Books Library, Emory University.

¹⁸ Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 75.

¹⁹ Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 93.

of *Rain-Charm for the Duchy* and Anthony Thwaite's edition of Larkin's letters, he dropped the subtitle, perhaps feeling less gracious towards Larkin after reading the letters.

The publication of *Birthday Letters* in 1998 prompted a reassessment of Hughes's aesthetic. Primarily this concerned the reversal of his earlier disdain for 'confessionalism' and resistance to being personally identified with the protagonists of his poetry. At the same time, in a number of the most interesting poems, Hughes adopted a strategy reminiscent of some of Larkin's most characteristic work. In some of his best poems Larkin employs a distinctive move from a narrative, metonymic mode, often constructing a self-deprecating persona, to an intense and distinctive lyricism. It is the move from

So it happens that I lie
Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags
In the same saucer-souvenir

to

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
Tousling the clouds

or from

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her

to

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.²⁰

Something like this move also structures 'Church-Going', 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'Dockery and Son', 'Here', 'This Be the Verse' and 'Money' – a large proportion of Larkin's best poems. Such poems typically open with a display of the 'philistine' persona that Hughes disliked but that the critic Barbara Everett praised for aligning Larkin with a tradition that 'has for centuries refused to avail itself of the self-indulgent securities of "Art"'.²¹ They often conclude, as in 'High Windows' and 'Here', with what David Lodge called 'a kind of eclipse of meaning, speculation fading out in the face of the void.'²²

²⁰ Larkin, *Collected Poems*, pp. 102, 165.

²¹ Barbara Everett, 'Art and Larkin' in Dale Salwak, (ed.), *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 129-39.

²² David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 219.

Larkin's poems are always carefully crafted, even when apparently casual, as in the opening of 'High Windows'. Hughes by contrast wrote that *Birthday Letters* were 'so raw, so vulnerable, so unprocessed, so naïve, so self-exposing & unguarded, so without any of the niceties that any poetry workshop student could have helped me to' (*LTH* 720). This needs to be taken with a grain of salt: as anyone who has looked at the archive knows, the poems went through numerous drafts. However, a casual prosaic style, unlike anything to be found in his earlier verse, is characteristic of *Birthday Letters*, and is often associated with a similarly unprecedented self-deprecating persona. Take for example 'The Machine', about Hughes's failure to visit Plath when he returned to Cambridge after the 'St Botolph's' meeting, when she 'tried/ To will me up the stair' while he

Most likely was just sitting,
Maybe with Lucas, no more purpose in me
Than in my own dog
That I did not have. (*CP* 1058)

Or 'Visit', where Hughes and Myers drunkenly throw earth at a college residence window, mistakenly thinking it is hers:

I was sitting
Youth away in an office near Slough,
Morning and evening between Slough and Holborn...
Weekends I recidived
Into Alma Mater. (*CP* 1047)

Both these poems perform a shift in poetic intensity, not unlike that of the Larkin poems I have mentioned. 'The Machine' ends:

And my life
Forever trying to climb the steps now stone
Towards the door now red
Which you, in your own likeness, would open
With still time to talk. (*CP* 1058)

And 'Visit', after narrating Hughes's reading Plath's account of this incident in her journal:

I look up – as if to meet your voice
With all its urgent future
That has burst in on me. Then look back
At the book of the printed words.
You are ten years dead. It is only a story.
Your story. My story. (*CP* 1049)

In both these cases, and in the conclusions of a number of other poems such as 'The Blue Flannel Suit' and 'Drawing', there is a strange temporality – a temporality of

mourning – in which the time of Plath’s death (‘The Machine’) or the time of writing (‘Visit’) is superimposed on or displaces the empirical time of the preceding narrative.²³ They enact the mourning – or more accurately melancholic – subject’s persistent failure to come to terms with the death of the lost person, and are among the most moving moments in *Birthday Letters*. Their emotional meaning is different from the ‘eclipse of meaning’ at the end of the Larkin poems I have discussed, but in both cases a similar structural device is used to cancel the previously dominant empirical time.

Shortly before Larkin’s death, knowing that he was ill but not how seriously, Hughes wrote to him recommending a local healer, Ted Cornish. He knew how sceptical Larkin would be, but said ‘the impulse to tell you this has been recurring more and more strongly’ (*LTH* 503). Larkin was in fact in hospital being treated for cancer of the oesophagus and died eleven days later. When Hughes learned this he was distressed, and wrote to Larkin’s partner Monica Jones, hoping that he had not read the letter, which now seemed ‘cruelly ill-timed.’ He ended the letter saying, ‘I had constantly imagined what he would go on to write. He’d reached the point, over this last few years, where the possibilities seemed awesome. Even so, he’s accomplished great things.’²⁴ A letter of condolence is the last place in which to look for rigorous critical judgement, but the sentiment in these words is supported by his consistent attitude to Larkin’s poetry over a quarter of a century.

²³ My thinking about temporality in *Birthday Letters* is indebted to the chapter ‘Apostrophe’ in Jonathan Culler’s *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) and Anne Whitehead’s essay ‘Refiguring Orpheus: The Possession of the Past in Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*’, *Textual Practice* 13 (2), 1999, pp. 227-41.

²⁴ Hughes to Monica Jones (draft), 8 December 1985, ‘Correspondence’, Manuscript Collection 644. Ted Hughes Papers, Box 53, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript and Rare Books Library, Emory University.

Ted Hughes: Etiquette of the Uncanny

by Martin Shaw

He is a little caught by black magic...he wants someone to bring him out of that...but there is no one that far in, so nobody can help him. I see him as a suffering mammal, a great suffering mammal.

Robert Bly on Ted Hughes¹

I bought you to Devon. I brought you into my dreamland.
I sleepwalked you
Into my land of totems. Never-never land:
The orchard in the West.

Ted Hughes, 'Error' (*CP* 1121)

The Man Over the Hill

There was this man, lived over the hill: that's what I heard as a kid in the seventies, growing up in Devon.

Way past the peeling paint hotels of Torquay and the cider-breathed Stannery towns of Ashburton, Tavistock, Chagford and Plympton. On the bleak end of the moor.

That he was of high degree: could decipher the tanglements of ancient poems, could coax salmon to his rod. That was the gossip. Like he had walked clear out of another age. Had spook but also kindness. That he could freeze you with words if he wished.

But he wouldn't always have wished. They say the man over the hill valued privacy, and understood the interior of any powerful wording always contained a spell.

'Over the hill' is a way of describing the north moor. Dartmoor to those that know it is divided into two, with a rough concrete snake of road that divides them. The south moor is a little more coy than north, a little more Arcadian. The north is

¹ Robert Bly, *Talking All Morning*. (Chicago: The University of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 254.

a different proposition: austere, regal in its bleakness, changeable weather, severe in its considerable beauty. It is the north where I think of Ted.

But let's be clear. This is a Ted that is a dream figure to me, soaked in imaginalia, not the Ted paraded around, poked and prodded into today's press. This is a Ted that lives for me as a Magus Laureate of Dartmoor. He is still doing his work. So this paper is an occulted rumination — I must flag that up from the beginning.

It was the summer of 1961 when Hughes and Sylvia Plath trundled the Devon lanes in their Morris Traveller looking for a home. They found it, Court Green in North Tawton. North Tawton is a characterful little town, but moneyed it is not. Hardly the English Rivera of Devon's south coast, beloved by both Rudolph Steiner and Max Bygraves, it was a tough, properly Devonian confluence of working people, animals, weather. The difference between Tawton and London or Cambridge would have been acute.

But, already aware that his daemon was pushing his star into ascendance, Hughes elected to settle in this damp and distant tump of old England. And that was that: he would live there his whole life.

Despite dreams of Australia, or Ireland or even North West Canada, it remained an axis mundi. There must have been something of a preservative in the decision, a gnostic incentive.

Even his immediate relationship was sequestered into the imagistic power of Devonian folklore. A friend, Elizabeth Sigmund, claimed, "Ted's belief in shamanism would lead him to think of [Plath] as a being like a hare — magic and mysterious and very powerful."² Dartmoor stories are frequent in their association between women and hares, and a very specific type of woman, a witch.

To Be Of, Not From, A Place

So how does Hughes become not from, but of a place? And what do I mean by that? I have lost count of the Devonians who have found their inner relationship to the county most eloquently expressed in Hughes's work. A Yorkshireman. I recently stood with a member of the Forestry Commission (and lifetime entrenched Devon man) and we both wondered at his ability to invoke the pungent sensual range of the place. And this from someone who could, uncharitably, be referred to as a "blow in".

² Joy Lanzendorfer, "Tight Wires Between Us: on "Difficulties of a Bridegroom" by Ted Hughes', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6.10.2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/tight-wires-between-us-on-difficulties-of-a-bridegroom-by-ted-hughes/>

But his greatest Devonian poems seem to grow not from a casual glance, but the deep interior of the land.

Here are a few lines from “Last Load”, a poem in *Moortown* about racing to load bales of hay, each ‘like a hard loaf’, onto a trailer pulled behind a tractor before the rain comes:

Then fast as you dare, watching the sky
And watching the load, and feeling the air darken
With wet electricity,
The load foaming through leaves, and wallowing
Like a tug-bog meeting the open sea –
The tractor’s front wheels rearing up, as you race [...]

And a tobacco reek breaks in your nostrils
As the rain begins
Softly and vertically silver, the whole sky softly
Falling into the stubble all round you. (*CP* 529)

This is the Devon of my youth. It was even possible to see kids occasionally gathered up on those great bales as the tractor trundled, dipping and grinning as they scraped under those leaves. Alive, alive in the greenness of things.

Moortown is not just a wordsmith turning a casual eye to his latest subject, this is someone moving the full range of their intelligence out of and into corrugated iron sheds, rabbits and white banks of snow on distant tors. He makes these things psychoactive. He sings them back to themselves.

So we are getting a little closer to being ‘of’ a place. You can be ‘from’ a place your whole life and hold all kinds of ignorance close, but to be ‘of’ a place is when the place itself has claimed you. It’s not an issue of borders – you could come from the other side of the country – but some kind of tacit echo location is established. There are moments when his poems are the eyes of a place looking back on itself when it is pleased with itself.

Of course, there is no tribal betrayal of Yorkshire here. Hughes carried the intricate burrs of his origination directly in the way he spoke, but if you can’t hear the love letters secreted in his Devon poems, then your ear is out of tune.

In the bardic schools of Ireland and Wales (in their later stages at least), the apprentice bard would be required to scrub all vernacular from their speech in favour of a wider house style. Though the nearest thing we could imagine to such a character, there is no chameleon in Ted’s speech and we are the better for it, as are the recordings he made of his poems.³

³ For an extended discussion of the bardic tradition, see Martin Shaw, *Snowy Tower: Parzival and the Wet, Black Branch of Language*, (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2014).

There is an etiquette of the uncanny that Devon contains, an oddness, that Hughes understands implicitly as a way of speaking in his “land of totems” (*CP* 1121). It’s this speaking-into-the-weirdness, this across-species-dialogue, that qualifies him as a proper storyteller, what the Celts called a Seannachai — *a cultural historian of place*. He revels in the gossip of the hedgerows.

Of course, one of his own poetical mentors had already done a stint there. It was over the war years that Robert Graves, holed up on the outskirts of Brixham, drummed out his first draft of *The White Goddess*, back when it was *The Roebuck in the Thicket*. The very text that Hughes would receive as a gift from his English teacher John Fisher and confirm so many of his own passions in myth and anthropology was whittled into existence on the south coast of the very county he would ultimately bed into. Two tall men are talking to each other across the decades. So what I’m doing here is referring the compass of his achievement into a position of love and listening to the far west. To echoes of Dumnonia. As Ted himself wrote in the Preface to *Moortown Diary*, of the ‘old Devonians who still lived, in the early 1970s, ‘in a time of their own’, ‘I could believe they were still that Celtic tribe the Romans had known as the Dumnoni, “the people of the deep valleys”, a confederacy of petty kings, hidden in their strongholds what were only just beginning to emerge out of the old oak forest.’ (*CP* 1203) Every time the whip of his rod touched Dartmoor waters he was drawing into himself not just spray and ripple but a blood tributary of history and sensation.

Hughes’s Devonian experience is a kind of electrifying phenomenology of the soul. The infusion of love in the *Moortown* poems tells us something of the pragmatic devotion to living in immediate, murderous, wonderful proximity to the natural world. Here are the last lines of “Last Load”:

Like singing heard across evening water
The tall loads are swaying towards their barns
Down the deep lanes. (*CP* 529)

It feels like he’s singing to Dylan Thomas across the Bristol Channel there, just for a moment.

I also wonder if Hughes didn’t claim Devon, so much as it claimed him. Something of this is writ large in “After Moonless Midnight”:

I waded, deepening, and the
Fish listened for me. [...]

“We’ve got him,” [the river] whispered, “We’ve got him.”
(*CP* 659-60)

The hunter becomes the hunted, and the about turn of this archaic move leads to the poetics not of a landowner but a servant.

Black Mouth Language

This is why Robert Bly's comment in the interview I quoted as my epigraph – though he meant it supportively – is not entirely accurate.

Black magic is too heavily freighted a term; it conjures something laced with malice and misrule rather than an innate pagan energy coursing between the land, its folklore and Hughes's pen. As we just witnessed in "After Moonless Moonlight" we see not a sorcerer manipulating creation for his own ends, but the shaman who bends his head to the disclosures of the river.

For Robert Bly, as a second generation Norwegian learning how to live in an American landscape, the distinction may not have been clear from a distance. Bly's work has an extraordinary relationship to landscape, but he does not possess as a lived experience the multigenerational embedded-ness that Hughes often worked from. But the British landscape always holds its poets tightly if such relationship is truly brokered. If we start to take the notion of bardic vocation seriously, we see that historically the price is high for un-common seeing.

But Bly's image of a poet so deep that no one else can swim there remains telling. I wrote earlier of the rarity of not just Hughes's position but his gifts. There is a lonesomeness in them all. Hughes has to figure his own libations, his own nimble rituals to pull on a rope of image with which to grab and finally surface. He's down with Sedna, Inuit goddess of the sea, combing the lice from her hair.

In a Mongolian tale, a sick boy travels in spirit to the Underworld and is offered a gift to return with. He asks for all the myths and stories of his people. The Khan of the Underworld warns him the cost will be immediate. The boy will not be persuaded. Immediately two crows sweep into the tent of the sleeping boy and peck his eyes out. And a Homer is born.⁴

This is not to stir superstitions around Hughes – there's more than enough of that already – but let's stay with the spook awhile. Stay with the black. Archaeology tells us that black is the place to go. It's long been known in England that any place name with the word black in it – Black Meadow, Black Woods, Blackingstone Rocks – is a place worthy of digging. The reason? The darker-coloured soil will indicate an old settlement – generations of fire ash, food remains, and general use. To a crafty eye, black means to dig deeper. To a Hughesian eye, it offers reward.

⁴ Hilary Roe Metternich, *Mongolian Folktales* (Boulder, Colorado: Avery Press, 1996), p. 33.

As a poet Hughes's paws unearth remnants of tribal fires, but it is a nourishing darkness he locates, not a miserable quadrant where despair rules the house. The rationalist wants daylight thinking; Hughes wants the darkness luminous, the alchemists' black sun. It's dangerous as all quests are, but it's not Luciferic. Not a black magic. We remember Seamus Heaney on Ted's ethical proclivities: "He was more mythic than civic. When it came to remedying the ills of society, he was liable to think of the shaman rather than the senate."⁵

Does this animistic compulsion place Hughes in the Romantic tradition? I think both yes and no. And then again, what strand of Romanticism are we referring to? Novalis wrote in 1800, "*people see in poems and fairy tales the true history of the world.*"⁶ Hughes would have got behind that, surely. In his sustained energy and sympathy towards the irrational, the myths, the nourishing darkness, was he part of a psychic road that Hölderlin, Novalis and Goethe understood, a road that leads in part to ancient Greece and a world ensouled?

I would not labour the word "tradition", but I think we do catch glimpses of a kind – not essentially rooted in the work of European poets from the 18/19th century – but actually in the rich loam of their essential inspiration.

If, as Harold Bloom suggests, Romanticism is an interiorisation of the Quest – either Odyssean or Arthurian ⁷ – then there is a continuance of that thrust in Hughes. And no matter what the openings of grief and despair encountered on a quest, the final quality of such journeying is redemptive. In some way the world remakes itself in the struggle. It's not just what occurs in life's caravan, but how you react to it, what it makes of you. He touches on this in the essay *Crow on the Beach*: "It is like the difference between two laughs: one bitter and destructive, the other defiant and creative, attending to what seems to be the same calamity." (*WP* 240.)

With his belief in a restorative ending, we see the both the storyteller and the Romantic in Hughes again. Defiant and creative, not bitter and destructive. Unflinching in his handling of dark materials, but finally life-giving not life denying, wild but not savage.

Quixotically, I think there is a kind of Romanticism that Hughes is in touch with which is decidedly non-European, but could be found in the myth cycles of the Haida, or the Copper Inuit. It has wonder, magic, realism and a hallucinatory quality of images not entirely human-crafted. This is not a strand connected to puffing opium, or the early death of a doomed genius, but openness to the intelligent and terrible roar of the universe. Closer to home you could find it in the

⁵ Dennis O'Driscoll and Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 298.

⁶ Bly, *Talking all Morning*, p. 42.

⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Ringers In the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p.26.

Welsh story of *Pwyll and Rhiannon*, or *Blodeuwedd of the Flowers*. Hughes tends to have me reaching for the *Mabinogion* not Wordsworth.

As Keith Sagar has commented, Coleridge, Keats and even Yeats attempted to construct a “state of art in opposition to the state of nature”.⁸ I don’t think we detect this overtly in Hughes. He’s up to his knees in the magical muck of the world.

Of course there’s some other phrase that could be dreamed up, something easier and universal, but I’d rather lean into the trouble of calling it a kind of Romanticism, even if it’s a form we haven’t quite witnessed yet. A form that is not us waxing floridly about the earth, but moments where the earth itself rears up and speaks *through* the words. Prophetic not pastoral. I am aware of the largeness of this notion, and all sorts of problems that it may contain, but there we have it.

I want to propose that there could still be a maturation of the word that is not infantile theatre, but a steady comprehension that reveals something more marvellous than any fevered fantasy. That the best of the romantic stream is an attempt to rehydrate some contemporary constellation of a very old arrangement. To make Owen Barfield’s move from the *original participation* of the Palaeolithic to the *final participation* of where we could, with a great deal of luck, be headed.⁹ I titled this paper “*Etiquette of the Uncanny*”, and here’s why. If you procure an etymological dictionary you will find the word “uncanny” is of a Scots/Anglo-Saxon lineage. In the various tussles of definition we find that the most common settling of the phrase is “outside the ken” – away from common knowledge. But it is not a knowledge that is utterly unfamiliar. Part of its chill is that it actually recognizable to some buried strand of our character, our being, our memory. We flinch because we may remember.

Bone Memory and the Old Arrangement

So how do we get near the old arrangement? As a writer, I have been speculating that we have at least three types of memory: skin, flesh, bone. Skin is the stuff we put on the C.V., flesh marks the big emotional pressure points – the marriages, successes, depression – and finally bone memory, which is when knowledge from “outside the ken” is activated. This is the deepest currency of myth. We can’t claim it as ours exactly, but we know it because what Jung called “the lament of the dead”

⁸ Keith Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: Terror and Exultation* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2009), p.24.

⁹ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (London: Barfield Press, 1957).

is present.¹⁰ It is bone-memory that I feel is the great aliveness in a possible romanticism - in Barfield's words, that could "come of age"¹¹

Hughes's work has bone memory writ large all the way though. From an aboriginal point of view, his work is to witness an ancestor-in-training, the way he is able to craft excavation of the depths into a shuddering of gifts for others. That's where the etiquette comes in. He is not agape at the occult, but addresses the mysteries beautifully. His is a poetics that faces both ways, not just to the human community. Many of his mythologies enjoy decentralised power positions — like Coyote their power doesn't necessarily originate in the chest, but in the nose and tail. Like a drummer, he plays in different psychic time signatures and we find ourselves looking at the world from utterly different perspectives. Again, this is about skill and etiquette. To repeat an image I have used before, he reminds the village about the forest. He is not seduced by his own wounds, does not jab his pen endlessly in his own injuries, but pays attention to where they may be leading him.

This is just one of the reasons we need his work so acutely today. Its pathos, magic and ecological savvy. This is just one of the reasons you can read Hughes round a fire with the Dine, or Miwok, or Seneca, and they quietly nod in recognition.

I suggest this may be a kind of Romanticism we haven't quite seen before. Something bigger than just a European tradition. A Romanticism as activism. When a Yorkshireman walks into Devon and crafts relationship like he did, becomes an advocate for it and a teller of its tales, in our time of rapid migrations and enforced nomadism, it is more than a sign of poetic ability, it is a symbol of hope.

¹⁰ See James Hillman and Sonu Shamdasani, *The Lament of the Dead: Psychology after Jung's Red Book* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013).

¹¹ Simon Blaxland-De-Lange, *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Comes of Age – a Biography* (East Sussex: Temple Lodge Books, 2006), p. xv.

Ted Hughes and 'Astrological Conundrums'

by Ann Skea

Those supernatural seeming dreams, full of conflict and authority and unearthly states of feeling, were projections of man's inner and outer world.

(‘Myth and Education’, *WP* 138)

Myths, Hughes wrote, are stories which ‘attract and light up everything relevant in our experience’. Every story ‘is an acquisition, a kind of wealth’ and if it becomes familiar ‘any fragment of the story serves as a “word” by which the whole story’s electric circuit is switched into consciousness, and all the light and power brought to bear’ (*WP* 139-141). For centuries, we humans have woven stories around the planets, stars and constellations of stars in our skies. For the earliest peoples, the appearance in the northern skies of the prominent constellation they identified as ‘Taurus, The Bull’ heralded the beginning of spring, renewal and regeneration. In the southern hemisphere, the Australian Aborigines identify the dark nebulae clouds of the Milky Way as a dark emu, and its movement across the sky is their guide for the hunting out and eating of emu eggs.¹ Around the world, the stars have always been used for navigation on sea and on land, and the stories associated with them have been used as mnemonics for recognizing their shapes and importance.

There is a long-standing belief, too, that the images and symbols associated with the stars, especially those linked to gods, will, as with religious icons, connect us with divine creative/destructive energies.² All this, I believe, lies beneath the puzzles of Hughes’s poem ‘Astrological Conundrums’, and the clue lies in the astrological notation which Hughes inscribed at the end of the poem when he gave it, in an advance copy of the first American edition of *Wolfwatching*, to his friend Roy Davids at Christmas 1990.³

¹ Australian Aboriginal man, Ben Flick, tells a campfire story of the traditional importance to his people of The Dark Emu: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFYFutiwoA>

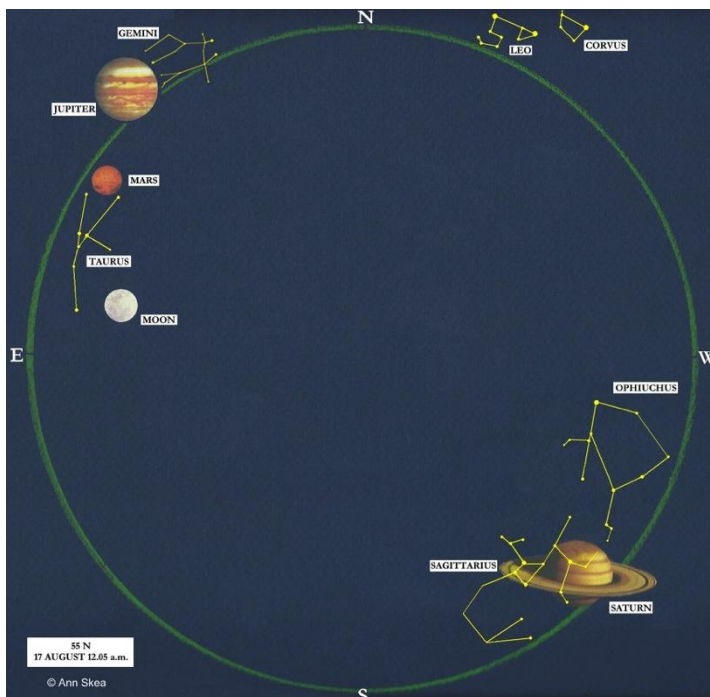
² See my discussion of the importance of images and symbol in ‘Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition’ (*Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Vol. VI Issue I, 2017). Also available at [http://ann.skea.com/TH and British Occult Tradition.html](http://ann.skea.com/TH%20and%20British%20Occult%20Tradition.html)

³ This inscribed copy of *Wolfwatching* is held at Pembroke College, Cambridge University. My thanks to Pembroke College and to Carol Hughes for permission to reproduce this image.

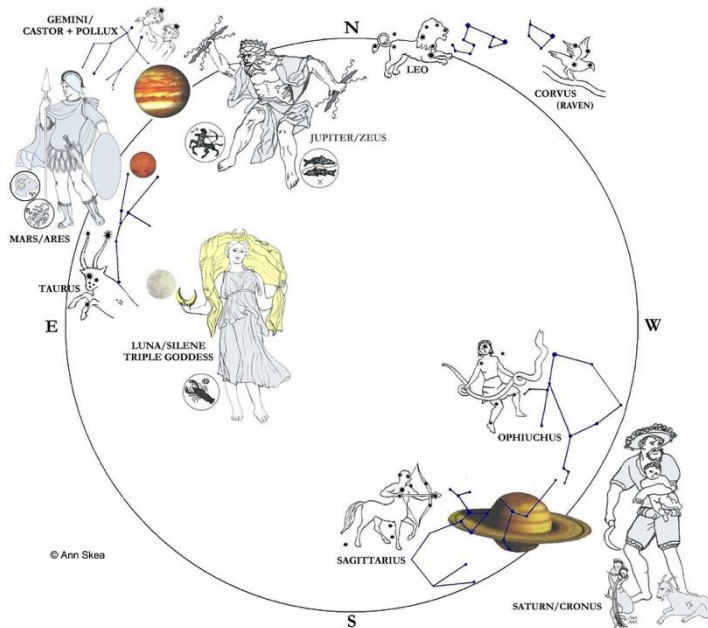
This is what Hughes wrote at the end of the poem:

Asc. of ♄♃♁ opp ♃

These astrological symbols say that Jupiter is in conjunction with Mars and opposed to Saturn. The sky chart below shows that this is the position of those planets in the sky over Mytholmroyd on Sunday 17 August 1930 at 1 a.m., the exact time of Hughes's birth (I will return to my proof of this time later). It also shows the position of the Moon and of some of the other constellations which were in the sky above Mytholmroyd at that time.



The second sky-map shows the mythological figures whose stories we, in the northern hemisphere, have traditionally associated with those planets and with the Moon and those other constellations.



The Moon is high in the sky and she, with Jupiter and Mars, oppose their powerful energies to those of Saturn, who ruled the sky before being deposed by his son, Jupiter. Saturn, in the poem Hughes wrote for the christening of Prince William in 1982, is always the dispenser of firm judgment. For him, ‘balance’ is the ‘true dance’ of the solar system. Although Jupiter now ‘occupies heaven’s throne’, he still acknowledges his ‘wise father’, but the ‘old enmity’ which exists between them, and their opposition in Hughes’s birth-chart, are astrologically significant for events in Hughes’s life.⁴ Significant, too, is the fact that in astrology Jupiter is ruler of the constellations of Pisces the fish which for Hughes were so important – and of Sagittarius, the centaur, who, before the discovery of the planet Chiron in 1977, was believed to have shamanic powers and was known to astrologers as the ‘wounded healer’.

The Moon, (‘throned Queen’ of the sky) would be regarded by astrologers as ruler of Hughes’s birth-chart. She is the goddess whose destructive/creative powers pervade Hughes’s work and whose animals – cats, great and small – are the tigers, jaguars, lion, and puma of which Hughes wrote, as well as the ‘foxy-furry’ tailed kitten and the battered ‘tabby tom’ of his poem ‘Pets’ (CP 351).

Here she is as the ancient Mesopotamian goddess, Inana, riding her lion; and as Roman Juno with her cat at her feet:

⁴ Ted Hughes, ‘A Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown’, in George Mackay Brown, (ed.) *Four Poets for St. Magnus* (Stromness, Orkney: Breckness Press 1987), n.p. This poem describes Prince William’s horoscope in detail and takes the form of a Court Masque in which the Prince’s astrological “high godparents” gather round his cradle and each speaks according to their particular mythological and astrological character, offering advice and gifts. I discuss the poem in detail at <<http://ann.skea.com/Zodiacpoem.htm>>



All these cats are present in Hughes's poems and there is a tiger in his story 'The Guardian' which is created by God's witch-mother from the crescent moon.⁵ There is also a young boy's dream tiger, into which the boy seems slowly to turn, in Hughes's children's story *The Tiger Boy*.⁶ But the tiger and the mountain lion which featured in one of Hughes's own dreams, and which he recorded in his dream diary, are especially pertinent to the first poem of 'Astrological Conundrums'.

'Distance from Dream is Distance from the real operation', Hughes wrote in this dream diary.⁷ Four years later, on December 28th 1988, he recorded 'horrible dreams. Hideous and Horror' in which he 'shot through the letter box, a tiger that was peering in – turned out I had killed a big female mountain lion. My guide.' Here is one of the creatures – 'my beasts' as he sometimes calls them in this dream diary – which he regarded as his shamanic guides.⁸

The first poem of 'Astrological Conundrums', 'The Fool's Evil Dream', draws directly on such dreams, such beasts. It is very much a shamanic poem in which the fool, like the imbecile innocent in *Cave Birds* ('The Scream' CP 419 and 'In These Fading Moments' CP 423-4), is 'just walking about' in the gloom that represents his unenlightened state, when 'a glowing beast – a tigress' smelling of nature's beauties, accosts him (CP 747). The tigress then offers him a Faustian bargain: feed himself to her and he will become 'The never-dying god' (CP 748). Here is the shamanic call. For the shaman, dying (becoming the skeleton), flying to the otherworld and being reborn, is part of the ritual journey which endows him or her with god-like healing

⁵ Ted Hughes, *Tales of the Early World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 26.

⁶ Ted Hughes, *The Tiger Boy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).

⁷ British Library, Add. Ms 88918/29/10, Diary entry for April 16, 1984.

⁸ British Library, Add. Ms 88918/29/10, 'my beasts' appears in a dream on November 4 1983.

powers. In the poem, the fool does fly with the tigress, is dissolved in ‘the internal powers of tiger’, and is reborn, but his ‘sudden cry of terror’, an ‘infant’s cry’, suggests not only his rebirth but also that he is not yet mature or courageous enough to ‘feed himself to her’ completely, as did the ‘very holy man’ she had described to him. So, the ‘bright spirit’ (the tigress) ‘went away weeping’.

The Goddess is fickle and cruel and demands complete submission. In his Vacana notebook, Hughes wrote of his Lady of the Hill: ‘your punishments are scars / The signature / of your ownership’. He also wrote ‘before I shaved myself / you carried me / through womb after womb’.⁹ The path to becoming a shaman who has the maturity and strength to channel the healing energies of the Goddess requires many rebirths.

The second poem of ‘Astrological Conundrums’, ‘Nearly Awake’, is, I suggest, another step on that path. It did not appear in the original publication of *Wolfwatching*,¹⁰ but the change from the personal pronoun ‘I’ of ‘The Fool’s Evil Dream’ and the third poem, ‘Tell’ to ‘you’ in this poem makes the protagonist, Hughes and us part of the ‘Universe’ that ‘flies dark’ all around (CP 748). All share the unawakened, ‘twilight’ state of the protagonist at the beginning of the poem. All ‘lie, face-bedded, vegetable’, ‘helpless as grass’, with ‘prayer / Petrified into the earth’s globe’ in ‘Nearly Awake’. But the potential for prayer, the divine spark which allows for dawning self-awareness, although ‘unstirring’, is embedded within us ready for the bulls to arouse it.

As you can see in Hughes’s birth-chart, the constellation of Taurus The Bull is closely aligned with Mars, Jupiter and the Moon. In ‘Nearly Awake’, the ‘wild bulls of your mother’ are Taurean bulls of regeneration and rebirth (CP 749). They are creatures of ‘blood, sperm, saliva’, full of the Goddess’s ‘storms and moon-terrors’, and their connection to Mother Earth explains why their hooves are ‘cleft roots’ (CP 748). Having found you newly born among ‘starry rocks’ but still ‘vegetable’, ‘helpless’, your ‘headbone’ ‘a frozen stone’, they now ‘Rasp you alive’ and ‘towel you awake with their tongues’. There are echoes here of ‘Awake!’ in *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, which describes the attempts of Nature (animals and plants) to make

⁹ The notebook is in my personal possession. For a fuller discussion, see Ann Skea, ‘Ted Hughes’s Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom’, <<http://ann.skea.com/THVacanas.html>>

¹⁰ The first two editions of *Wolfwatching* were published in London in 1989 and in America in 1991. Both editions contained ‘Two Astrological Conundrums’ comprising ‘I: The Fool’s Evil Dream’ and ‘II: Tell’. The third poem, ‘Nearly Awake’, first appeared in *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), where the sequence was renumbered ‘I: The Fool’s Evil Dream’, ‘II: Nearly Awake’, ‘III: Tell’.

Adam move, and which, as Hughes wrote to Sagar, is about the ‘alchemising of a phoenix out of a serpent. An awakening life out of an unawakened’ (*LTH* 431-2).¹¹ The awakening in ‘Alchemical Conundrums’ also has some relationship, although far less bloody, to the Orphic/Mithraic initiation ritual in *Gaudete* after the Reverend Lumb is abducted by ‘elemental spirits’ (*G* 9). Both are terrifying and both achieve an awakening into the real world. But in ‘Nearly Awake’, in these moments of petrifying fear, ‘the cry you dare not cry’ and which ‘lasts you a lifetime’ (*CP* 749), is also Adam’s cry of ‘sun grief’, which battered itself ‘Against the memorial stone of globe’ (*CP* 444): the cry of the suddenly awakened Self for the state of the Earth. And it is this cry for ‘the injured Earth’ (which, in his essay for *Your World*, Hughes portrayed as ‘a half-dark, many breasted precarious miracle’) that fuelled Hughes’s lifelong attempts to achieve awareness, healing and renewal through his work and through his environmental activism.¹² Here, in ‘Astrological Conundrums’ it is the cry of the newly awakened shaman.

The final poem, ambiguously titled ‘Tell’, is the dream of that shaman. The protagonist of this poem is closely linked to Hughes himself, who was a half-blue in archery at Cambridge University. He dreams that he is suddenly armed with his ‘old steel bow’ (*CP* 749). And his description of the bow as ‘a harp frame / So perfectly strung it seemed weightless’ suggests not just its perfection as a bow but also a connection with the magical lyre of Orpheus whose music, in Hughes’s play of that title, is the music of ‘the root of the earth and the leaf in the light / The muse of birth and death’ (*CPC* 105). Neil Roberts links the poet’s interpretation of the Orpheus myth closely with ‘Hughes’s own writing career’, and this third ‘Astrological Conundrums’ poem suggests a similar link between this bow / lyre and Hughes’s poetry.¹³ The Raven at which the archer aims is the astrological constellation of the Raven, which sits in ‘the sky river’ (*CP* 749) of the Milky Way and which is ‘at the crest of the globe’ in Hughes’s birth-chart, close to his astrological birth sign of Leo. Just as Hughes’s Crow poems flow like a banner through his work and were sometimes worked on and sometimes not, the Raven’s eye, ‘that star’ in his birth-chart, here watches him ‘through the slitted fabric of the skyflow’ as the constellations rotate in their annual cycle. The paronomasia of ‘eye’ and ‘I’ also suggests how closely Raven and Crow are connected to Hughes.

As an archer and an awakened shaman, the protagonist is astrologically associated with the constellation of Sagittarius/Chiron, which although ruled by Jupiter sat, in Hughes’s birth-chart, close to Saturn. There it is influenced by

¹¹ ‘Awake!’ is discussed in detail in Ann Skea, ‘*Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama*’, at <<http://ann.skea.com/Adam1.html>>

¹² Ted Hughes’s essay ‘Your World’ in *The Observer Magazine*, 29 November 1992, p. 39.

¹³ Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). p. 173.

Saturn's energies and Saturn can keep watch on the bow-wielding centaur whose own considerable powers are described in the *Astonomicon* of the first-century poet Manilius:

His bow full drawn implies, his Rings impart
Strength to the Limbs, and *Vigor* to the Heart
 Quick active Motions, full of warmth and heat,
 Still pressing on, unknowing to retreat.¹⁴

Interpreting the poem in these terms, the story suggests that with Jupiter, Mars and the Moon energizing him and urging him on, the protagonist/shaman/Hughes sinks his 'aim / Deeper into the star that had grown / To fill the Universe'. But Saturn is there to keep the balance and it is he who whispers "Be careful, I'm here. Don't forget me." The final line of the poem plays on the double meaning of 'might' with all its might, as well as the protagonist's, to encompass the strength of the archer, the powerful urge to release his arrow, and the element of choice which allows him to hesitate.

The question of what this story meant to Hughes's own life is answered by the paronomasia of 'eye' and 'I' and the identity of Raven as Crow. Writing the Crow poems, as he told Faas, was like 'putting [himself] through a process' (UU 207);¹⁵ and Crow was the 'dirty scabby little foal' he required for his own quest for an enlightened shamanic Self. As Hughes told Gifford and Roberts, Crow is 'exploring his own mind and the human mind in general'.¹⁶ In this respect, Crow's quest is another episode in 'The Difficulties of a Bridegroom', a title which had particular relevance for Hughes.¹⁷ To kill Crow might, therefore, have had dangerous personal repercussions in Hughes's life. He was wise to hesitate.

This element of close personal danger is also suggested in the title 'Tell', which brings to mind the legendary Swiss archer, William Tell. In the cause of individual and political freedom, Tell was condemned, with his son, to die unless he shot an apple off his son's head with a single arrow. He, too, must have hesitated with all his might.

¹⁴ Marcus Manilius, *Astonomicon*, Book 4, Page 14. This translation by Thomas Creech (1659-1700) is available at

<<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A51767.0001.001/1:10?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>>

¹⁵ Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Black Sparrow Press: Santa Barbara, 1980), p. 207.

¹⁶ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 256.

¹⁷ Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes's Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom' at <<http://ann.skea.com/THVacanas.html>>



Yet another meaning of ‘Tell’ is linked with the death of Sylvia Plath and the eventual publication of *Birthday Letters*. We know that some of these ‘letters’ to Sylvia were written as early as 1972, the bulk of them much later; and we know of Hughes’s longstanding antipathy to autobiographical writing. In a letter to Sagar after the publication of *Birthday Letters*, he wrote that publishing the poems was something he ‘always thought unthinkable – so raw, so vulnerable, so unprocessed, so naïve, so self-exposing & unguarded’ (PC 270-1). Here is the ‘T’ of Crow exposed and vulnerable, and here, too is the hesitation to tell.

Both Hughes’s unfinished Crow epic and his *Birthday Letters* poems were part of his quest for healing and wholeness. There is evidence on a fragment of paper amongst Hughes’s dream diary manuscripts that he intended to complete the Crow story using, as in *Birthday Letters*, a Cabbalistic framework. On a scrap of paper, in large black letters, is written ‘Seek Shekinah’ and, underlined, ‘plot the whole sequence’. At the side of the sheet is written, and starred, ‘Tithonus and his bride / Crow meets God as a cicada / Chokmah and song for a phallus’.¹⁸ Also mentioned are the fool, the guide, and the guardian who ‘sends him signs’. Commenting on a dream on 15 November 15 1983, Hughes wrote ‘I’m writing the complete Crow’. He then noted: ‘two weeks ago I started, and every time I move to anything else ... my beasts begin to agitate and protest’.

On the walls and battens of Hughes’s writing hut when he died, with their exact position carefully noted by Carol Hughes, were sheets of notes and lists charting a Crow epic which begins with his birth and ends (possibly) with ‘Stone egg hatching’ a ‘human baby inside’.¹⁹

¹⁸ Shekinah, in Cabbala, is the ‘quasi-independent’, exiled, female aspect of God and ‘the sphere of Shekina [is] the dwelling place of the soul’. She is the primordial mother, linked with the moon, and her exile due to human sin is ‘sometimes represented as the banishment of the queen or of the king’s daughter by her husband or father’. The task of the Cabbalist is to work to expiate that sin, end her exile, and seal this with a sacred marriage which reunites the female and male aspects of God. These quotations are from Gershom Scholem’s detailed discussion of Shekinah in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1996). pp. 135-157. Chokmah, otherwise known as ‘Wisdom’ and ‘The All Father’, is Sephira 2 on the Cabbalists’ Tree of Life where it represents one of the aspects of Divine energy manifest in our world.

¹⁹ British Library, Add. Mss 88918/12/9.

Two other aspects of Hughes's birth-chart, although unrelated to 'Astrological Conundrums', should be mentioned.

The first is the presence, close enough to Saturn to share his energies, of the constellation of Ophiuchus, the double-natured snake which is endlessly wrestled by Asclepius, the god of healing, whose father was Apollo, and who was taught by the shamanic centaur, Chiron. Ophiuchus would turn up in Hughes's life whenever he seemed to be making progress. He wrote to Sagar in 1973 of the 'months and years in which he had yielded to it' and how 'it always appeared, to the day, when I had at last managed to take a real step' (*LTH* 338). And to William Scammell twenty years later he wrote of the 'perverse interruptions, the difficulties, tempting diversions and sheet obstacular accidents' cause by this 'Great Snake' (*LTH* 648-9). In his poem, 'Ophiuchos' (*CP* 574), he links it with images of horror, although, as he told Sagar, 'he wasn't always ugly' (*LTH* 338).

The second significant constellation in Hughes's birth-sky is the constellation of Gemini – The Twins. Closely linked in the sky with Mars and Jupiter, this was a constellation of which Hughes was particularly aware. The story of the Gemini twins, Castor and Polydeuces, as Robert Graves tells it, is closely linked with their ongoing wars with another set of twins over the daughters of King Leukippus.²⁰ In a rare moment of reconciliation, the four men mount a cattle raid on Arcadia (the Paradisal place of harmony with Nature) but in a quarrel over the division of spoils Castor, the mortal Gemini twin, was killed. Polydeuces, the immortal twin, was distraught and pleaded with his father Zeus to make him mortal so that he might also die and never be parted from his brother. In reward for their brotherly love, Zeus set their images among the stars as the constellation of Gemini. In Hughes's dream diary and in his work he writes frequently of his 'other', of ghostly doubles and of rival brothers. In 'The Gulkana' he 'felt hunted' by something he explains to himself as 'one inside me, / A bodiless twin, some unloving doppelgänger / Disinherited other, unloving / Ever-living' (*CP* 666-7). But in 'Two' (*RE* 80) the astrological link with Gemini is particularly startling. There Hughes and his brother are the Two who 'stepped down from the morning star', which is Jupiter in early mythologies. Coming 'with long shadows / Between the dawn's fingers', they 'dropped from the woods that hung in the sky' with their booty of poached animals 'robbed of their jewels'. Then 'war opened' and one 'flew up from the pathway // The other stood still'. In a letter to me, Hughes wrote: "'Two" is simply about my brother and myself. He was ten years older than me and made my early life a kind of paradise [...] which was ended abruptly by the war. He joined the

²⁰ Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Cassell, 1981), pp. 72-3.

RAF, and after the war he came to Australia [...] The closing of Paradise is a big event.”²¹

To return to the exact nature of Hughes’s birth-chart and the time of his birth:

In 2017 I spent days at the British Library looking through Hughes’s dream diary and other manuscripts for the dream he describes in ‘Astrological Conundrums’. There were dreams of his shamanic guides, his beasts, his ‘keeper’, and one starred dream of ‘going for a walk with some other’ and having a ‘large beautiful wolf’ – a great ‘golden wolf’ – which gambols around his feet then walks behind him with its paws on his shoulders. Hughes comments that ‘He has never been so close or so generous with himself’. There are also magnificent dreams of fish and fishing. And there was one dream in which he slept with the Queen. But I didn’t find the dream about aiming an arrow at the Raven’s eye. As I packed up my manuscript tray at 4.30 p.m. on my last day at the library, I riffled through an old desk diary which I had examined earlier and which Hughes had begun to recycle for notes. Amongst what had appeared to be a large block of blank pages in the middle of the book, I found Hughes’s own account of the night of his birth.

‘I was born within a few minutes of one a.m. – of the clock striking one in the morning’,²² Hughes wrote. And he described how on 17th August 1930, ‘a Sunday’, his father had gone on his bike to fetch the midwife. As he returned across the river just below their house, the ‘Wesleyan clock’ had struck one in the morning and when he got home Hughes was just born. At the time of his birth his mother had been watching a bright star through the window which Hughes identified as the planet ‘Jupiter rising in 11 Cancer’. He then recorded the exact position in the sky of ‘Mars in 22nd Gemini’, the Moon ‘above again in 17 Taurus’ and that ‘she could not see Saturn sitting opposite in the West’.

He also wrote that his mother had told him that when she was carrying him ‘she repeatedly had the sensation of meeting someone as she went through doorways’. So strong was this sensation that ‘she frequently stopped in her tracks’.²³

So, we know exactly what the sky looked like above Mytholmroyd at the moment of Hughes’s birth, and it is clear that the energies of the mythological

²¹Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale: UNE Press, 1994), p. 200.

²² When constructing a birth-chart, astrologers adjust the time of birth to accord with Universal Time. ‘A few minutes after one a.m.’, for Hughes’s birth date, therefore becomes approximately 12.05 a.m. which in a letter to Ben Sonnenberg, quoted by Diane Middlebrook in *Her Husband* (N.Y. Viking 2003) p. 51, Hughes called ‘solar midnight’. In a letter to Olwyn 23 February 1957 (*LTH* 94) he also notes the time and the positions of Jupiter ‘on the cusp of the fifth’, ‘near my Moon’ and ‘Moon opposite my ascendant’.

²³ British Library Add.Mss. 88918/10/17. 1970 Collins Desk Diary. These notes are written upside-down on the pages for December 22-31.

figures which appeared there were, over a lifetime, channeled into his work. Perhaps, too, his mother's story about feeling an attendant, invisible presence during her pregnancy with him was the source of his interest in twins and ghostly doubles.

Ted Hughes's 'unacknowledged debt' to 'The Pike' by Amy Lowell?

by Terry Gifford

'Myths, Legends, and Apparitional Lesbians: Amy Lowell's Haunting Modernism' by Hannah Roche appeared in *Modernist Cultures* 13.4 (2018), pp. 568–589. This was picked up by the journalist Alison Flood who produced a full page article, 'Hughes accused of fishy business in ode to pike' in *The Guardian* 30 November 2018. In her abstract Roche writes: 'By drawing attention to the weighty impact of Lowell's poetry on Lawrence – and, later, on Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath – I provide compelling reasons not only to revisit Lowell but also to reassess those texts that are haunted by her presence' (568). Roche quotes Amy Lowell's poem 'The Pike' in full before offering an analysis of the 'incredible' evidence for textual debt.

In the brown water,
Thick and silver-sheened in the sunshine,
Liquid and cool in the shade of the reeds,
A pike dozed.
Lost among the shadows of stems
He lay unnoticed.
Suddenly he flicked his tail,
And a green-and-copper brightness
Ran under the water.
Out from under the reeds
Came the olive-green light,
And orange flashed up
Through the sun-thickened water.
So the fish passed across the pool,
Green and copper,
A darkness and a gleam,
And the blurred reflections of the willows on the opposite bank
Received it.

If it is surprising that readers have not yet picked up on Lawrence's debt to 'In a Garden', then it is nothing short of incredible that Ted Hughes's 'Pike' (1959) has not been considered in its close relation to 'The Pike'. In Lowell's poem, 'shadows', 'green-and-copper', 'under the reeds', and 'orange' appear in sequence; in almost the same pattern, Hughes's poem gives us 'green tigering the gold' (2),

‘silhouette’ (6), ‘under the heat-struck lily pads’ (9), and an ‘amber cavern’ (12). In an echo of the antepenultimate line of ‘The Pike’, the final line of Hughes’s poem reads ‘Darkness beneath night’s darkness had freed’ (43). Readers would be forgiven for mistaking Lowell’s poem for a shorter draft of ‘Pike’, or for suggesting that Hughes confidently fished out the most appealing imagery from the earlier work. The pike as weapon also recalls Lowell’s preoccupation with knightly themes and the *Sword Blades* in her collection’s title. (578-9)

Is it surprising that two poems about a pike should share references to reeds, darkness, or greenness? Is it really being suggested that Hughes’s ‘under the heat-struck lily pads’ is actually derived from Lowell’s prosaic ‘under the reeds’, or that Hughes’s ‘silhouette’ must be borrowed from Lowell’s ‘shadows’, or that Lowell’s repeated ‘green and copper’ is the source of Hughes’s brilliant ‘green tigering the gold’? ‘Almost the same pattern’ of references to different elements of the fish’s behaviour and habitat is so tenuous as to be special pleading (579). But Roche is adamant, referring to ‘The Pike’ as ‘the source material for “Pike”’ (581). The desperation for this scoop is revealed by Roche’s language: ‘Astoundingly (or not), Hughes wrote “Pike” in Lowell’s native Massachusetts’ (579).

Roche goes on to explore Sylvia Plath’s supposed debt in her poem ‘Mirror’ not only to Lowell’s ‘The Pike’ but also to Lowell’s poem ‘Patterns’. Here the evidence is even more tenuous: ‘Echoes of Lowell can be heard in the pink and silver, the lake, and the fish; yet her voice has been effectively drowned out by that of Plath’s husband’ (580). How many poems could be produced to ‘echo’ Lowell by mentioning pink and silver, a lake and a fish? The latter suggestion reveals Roche’s agenda: Hughes is somehow responsible for ‘drowning out’ what have now been reduced to the ‘echoes’ of Lowell’s supposed influence upon the poem. The final lines of ‘Mirror’, which Roche tells us is ‘now often read as married to’ Hughes’s poem, are ‘understood to be a direct response to the ending of “Pike”’ (579). The footnote directs us to a single article to represent this apparently widespread understanding: ‘See Dianne M. Hunter, “Family Phantoms: Fish, Watery Realms and Death in Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes”, *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies*, 2 (Summer 2009), 103–34. So now Roche has her ducks in a row: ‘Lowell’s “The Pike”, Hughes’s “Pike”, and Plath’s “Mirror” can be positioned as connected points on a one-way line, with each poem informed by that or those before it’ (580). Only one small problem remains. What is Roche’s evidence that Hughes read Amy Lowell’s poem “The Pike”?

I have asked Hannah Roche this question. She has no evidence that he did read this poem. In *The Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* (1954), which

Hughes says in his *Paris Review* interview that he had read,¹ there is one poem by Lowell: 'Meeting-House Hill'. I can confirm that neither of the anthologies edited by Oscar Williams mentioned by Gillian Groszewski in her chapter 'Hughes and America' in *Ted Hughes in Context* (155) has 'The Pike'. So, by the standard of evidence produced by Roche, Hughes's 'Pike' could equally have been 'inspired' by two poems mentioned by Dianne Hunter, Marianne Moore's 1921 poem 'The Fish', or Elizabeth Bishop's 1946 poem of the same title. Or any other poem about a fish written before 1957. The 'weighty impact of Lowell's poetry' on Hughes remains an embarrassing claim (568). The 'compelling reasons' for seeing Lowell's poem as 'inspiration' for 'Pike' remain less than compelling (568). This is poor scholarship, but great publicity, although that, too, might yet rebound upon its author.

¹ *The Paris Review*, No 134, 'The Art of Poetry LXXI: Ted Hughes', p. 84.

The Ted Hughes Memorial Lectures at 'Ways With Words', Dartington

by Christopher North

The 'Ways With Words' literary festival was launched some twenty-seven years ago at Dartington Hall Estate. Perched above a wooded bend in the River Dart in the 'South Hams', Dartington is a spectacular venue steeped in history lying in the heart of South Devon which in turn is south of Dartmoor, that great near-wilderness centring the county and dividing its character.

Ted Hughes lived in Ravilious country – to the North of Dartmoor. This is an altogether harsher landscape than south Devon, but rather softer than the gritstone Calder Valley. This was possibly a factor in Hughes's decision to centre his life at Court Green, the house he bought in North Tawton with Sylvia Plath in 1960. He worked and wrote about Moortown Farm in this dour countryside; he fished the salmon rivers there; established the Arvon Foundation's Centre at Totleigh Barton; fought to save the rivers from pollution and, of course, wrote many poems exploring the essential character of the land and the local wild life.

However, Ted Hughes is undoubtedly an abiding spirit in all of Devon. The Festival Director of 'Ways With Words', Kay Dunbar, who lives in a farmhouse in the South Hams, programmed the first Ted Hughes Memorial lecture in the 1999 festival together with its sponsor, Carol Hughes, and invited the poet Tom Paulin to deliver it. There have been nine lectures since, each one delivered by a different poet or writer.

I keep a diary notebook and am anyway a compulsive note-taker. My entries below were taken at each of these lectures.

The notes are far from scholarly and are largely raw and unedited. They are brief in the earlier lectures, but some observations might be of interest. Later entries chart my growing fascination with Ted Hughes. I emphasise that all these are diary extracts and originally not intended for publication.

1999: Tom Paulin

The Hall was crowded. Paulin's approach was somewhat academic. He found the 'Thistles' poem central. As did Heaney. He also quoted 'The Windhover' showing

the link. The 'dry gutturals of dialect'. The final reference to Prometheus was dignified and appropriate.

Kay Dunbar had quoted an excellent passage from *Poetry in the Making* in her address opening the festival.

2001: Michael Morpurgo

Chief memories are of his describing fishing with Hughes and the effect of Hughes's children's books.

2003: Simon Armitage

He believed Ted Hughes the most important poet in the last 100 years. He particularly placed the poems of *Remains of Elmet* very high. The recordings of Hughes reading the *Elmet* poems magnificent.

2005: Alice Oswald

I see her as the natural successor to Hughes so found this session riveting. She started by saying that viewing nature can produce a sort of homesickness, a nostalgia – seeing it as the 'just vanished'. However there is no nostalgia in Ted Hughes's sense of place. He had imaginative grasp of the present, of getting through to the animate, the nerve in every second – a quivering of the momentary, a 'sheer present'.

'Horses' the first Ted Hughes poem she read. She recognised immediately the brilliant counterpoint.

Hughes put great value on children's language. In adults, preconceptions close natural perceptions out. *Season Songs* for children she finds the most surprising. *Season Songs* and *Moortown* were both written after his return to Devon; they are clay based poems after his earlier millstone grit. 1972-76 journal notes made up the *Moortown* poems, the notes barely edited. Concentration has to be white hot to do a notebook poem. He talked of *Moortown* as being 'improvised verse'.

The edge of humour is what sells Ted Hughes to Alice Oswald. 'The Cormorant' in *River*, for example, a space-suit analogy seated in conventional imagery.

Crow is her favourite collection.

2007: Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney gave the Ted Hughes Lecture, the first event in a packed Great Hall. In the audience I spotted Christopher Reid, Carol Hughes, Elaine Feinstein, Alice Oswald, Matthew Sweeney, Terry Gifford and an army of local poets.

I remember a Cambridge poet telling me that she'd encountered Seamus Heaney in a Dublin Art Gallery and was awe-struck, unable to speak. This was slightly the same. He was slighter, much slighter than the massive presence my imagination created, indeed he was looking a little frail. I heard him at the Ted Hughes memorial service but from my seat in the transept, I couldn't see him.

His lecture this afternoon was basically honouring an old friend. He played a mild trick on the audience by opening with brief biographies of Dante and Virgil – either could have been the life of Hughes.

Hughes had 'A care for the land and language and what might be called the ur-life of England'. *Moortown* was the Ted Hughes equivalent of the Virgil *Georgics*.

The Plath hinterland was the dark matter of his material.

His conclusion: Ted Hughes was 'a poet who abides'.

2009: Andrew Motion

He delivered the Ted Hughes Lecture asking the question: what made Ted Hughes a life-force event? He and Philip Larkin were the two tallest trees in the forest since the war. Larkin orthodox and reactionary, says, on the whole, 'no' – whereas Hughes, heir to Vasco Popa etc., says 'yes'.

Hughes however includes Edward Thomas and Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney' in his *Poetry in the Making*. There is an admirable violence in Ted Hughes's poetry completely lacking in the 'Movement' poets – a continual sense of physical contact.

Modern poetry needs de-mystifying. People are frightened of it.

At some later point – in my conversation with him after the reading – he talked of Hughes telling him he should 'like to be a rock on the path of Laureateship'.

2011: Blake Morrison

His main theme: Hughes's feeling that he avoided writing about 'the real thing' i.e. the idea that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat. He reckoned that Plath found it in *Ariel*. Animals always live with the real thing.

For Hughes prose proved the killer; he saw poetry as healing.

During questions Morrison advised writers: 'Don't write your autobiography – but regard your life and experiences as your working capital'.

2013: Christopher Reid

Christopher Reid delivered the Ted Hughes Memorial Lecture and talked partly about the letters. Odd to think I had chatted with him the day before he went to North Tawton to open the file with Carol Hughes. He sees Hughes as one of literature's giants.

He views Hughes's poems as 'Units of imagination' – little factories of understanding. Hughes's 'Myth and Education' now reads like a cry from the wilderness.

He introduced a poem I didn't know: 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning'. It has extraordinary presence. Reading it you feel somehow that you are accompanying him, indeed almost actually experiencing stepping into the river.

At one point he commented that children are bright until they're 11 and then by 14 they're stupid.

Chatted with Christopher about Hughes afterwards. A likely lad joined us having bought CR's book. He claimed he met Ted Hughes on a train to London. He asked him if he'd ever been to Southend to which Ted, all friendly-like, replied, 'No, I haven't'.

2015: Paul Keegan and Alice Oswald

The first event in Great Hall was **Alice Oswald** and **Paul Keegan** talking on Ted Hughes, and his 'Bestiary'. The recorded voice of Hughes reading 'October Salmon' opened. Alice Oswald commented that this presented to the reader a view of 'creature-time', an understanding of time quite unlike the human. Animals register time as now and now and now – they live in a continuous present. Hughes found a

metre that is a tune to whistle an animal into existence. The base of his language is the hexameter – a strange metre used by Virgil, it tends to dance and trip to the end. You could regard Hughes as a fundamental pagan. His poems are anthropomorphic, as if it's the animal that is looking at you not the other way round. Read 'The Thought-Fox' very slowly and the fox comes alive.

They referred to his poem 'Skylarks', a brief piece written shortly after Plath's death. It was originally titled: 'Ode to Distance'.

Hughes was engaged in growing the language. Poetry has to be an investment in the intellect.

The *Bestiary* anthology Alice Oswald has put together is a stock of animal life that has its own divinity. Hopkins also operated within the cathedral of the natural world.

It is in the letters that you get the best commentary from Hughes on his own work. There is a high stress on diction – a Shakespearian or even Jacobean fragrance in the language. He internalized Shakespeare and Hopkins early on.

2017: Jonathan Bate

Hughes wrote at breakneck speed, powered by the tragedies and sorrows of his life. *Tarka the Otter* and the rivers of Devon were always important to him. He saw forces beyond the human that form our lives.

Wonderful diary writer: 'Fagin and Fagin' were the literary agents.

Made a plank of elm for Plath to write on. 'The Moon in the Yew Tree' – Alvarez saw this as the turning point – it was coffin elm.

*

Crow and anti-God – came out of creation myth.

A poet should be like a force of nature

He developed a respect for Margaret Thatcher.

Birthday Letters started in the 60s.

‘The Black Coat’.

The obsessive-compulsive writers e.g. Hughes, Wordsworth.

Hughes wrote all the time. There are some bad poems.

Crow was veiled autobiography.

2018: Robert McCrum

Robert McCrum delivered the Ted Hughes Lecture chaired by **Jane Feaver**.

Jane was Poetry Editor when McCrum was Editorial Director at Faber & Faber. Later he was Managing Director: 1990 to 1996. As he remarked, ‘Jane knows where the bodies are buried’.

Jane commented in her introduction that McCrum oversaw a golden age of fiction, bringing in to the limelight Ishiguro, Carey and Llosa, amongst others. He had a massive stroke in 1995 prompting his memoir *My Year Off*. He was visited by Ted and Carol Hughes. Ted Hughes was very much his friend.

He commented that literature is in many ways a commune with the dead – an eaves-dropping. All artists commune with the dead – Wordsworth, Coleridge.

In Hughes’s case it was Shakespeare above all. Like Hughes a poet of nature – and later an obsession with ‘The Court’.

Hughes read the whole of Shakespeare early – would read a whole play immediately he got up. In 1969 he prepared an anthology of Shakespeare’s shorter poems under instruction of Charles Monteith. The result, *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, which was actually commissioned when the Wevill relationship was breaking up. In a way his most important book of poetry.

The Wevill suicide coincided with the death of his mother. His delivery of the manuscript was possibly (as) an act of redemption. He saw Shakespeare as a holy writ. He thought he’d discovered the skeleton key.

Mysterious Shakespeare – a great but tragic power-house reflecting the contemporary conflict of Puritans and Christians – the loss of ‘Arden’, a wave of Catholicism. Hughes saw the symbolic fable at the heart of Shakespeare’s project.

Crow (Hughes's Sergeant Pepper) is Shakespearian. But almost anything can be projected onto Shakespeare. Hughes believed Shakespeare's language was more vital than anything written today. He saw him as the consummate professional.

The Tempest is never far from Hughes's poems, though as a play, it doesn't really work. The Shakespearian concern drove Hughes to working with Peter Brooks – and to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. He was initially optimistic with this book, he'd discovered the skeleton key. He saw the whole Shakespeare *oeuvre* as a single titanic work.

The book was an extraordinary, one-off work. It's best consumed via an audio book – rather like *Finnegan's Wake*. It's a strange, therapeutic autobiography – an attempt to out-Graves Robert Graves. It was a five to six year obsession.

It's best read for the prose. It's 'Something so buckled it gives you a headache', said Craig Raine.

At Faber there's an enormous file just on the cover choice.

It had a disastrous launch: 'Exeunt pursued by a boar' was Anthony Burgess's comment. Marina Warner and Tom Paulin praised it, though the latter referred to it as 'an insurmountable mountain of moving screens'.

The bad reception and the actual process of writing it almost killed Hughes. His following work was *Birthday Letters*.

During questions a comment was made that it was a massive therapy. There are passages in capital letters. It is a great work – an example of fail again but fail better. Ted Hughes was a giant in the Faber universe, but when writers become successful they often tank by taking on some baggy project.

Faber published writers, not books.

Reviews

The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume II: 1956–1963, by Sylvia Plath, edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil, London, Faber and Faber, 2018, li + 1025 pp., £35.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780571339204

The build-up to the publication of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume II: 1956–1963*, has been dominated by the 14 letters written by Plath to her former psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher. This correspondence was offered for sale at auction as part of the Harriet Rosenstein archive, and was eventually acquired by Smith College after a legal battle. These 14 letters also dominate Frieda Hughes's moving, and careful, Foreword to the volume. Hughes details her shock of the existence of these letters, writing that she 'felt excluded from my own mother's personal feelings, feelings that other people – strangers – had already pored over' (xv). She also points out that 'neither I nor anyone else should have known those letters between a patient and her psychiatrist existed' (*LSP2* xv), mirroring the controversy that greeted Diane Middlebrook's inclusion of Anne Sexton's recorded psychiatric sessions with Dr Martin Orne, in her *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. Middlebrook defended this decision, emphasising Sexton's generosity, and her belief that 'if suffering like hers had any use [...] it was not to the sufferer'.¹ Frieda Hughes struggles with the publicity generated by the images of some of these letters posted online; at this point, she had not even read the letters. On receiving them, she 'wept over the contents' (*LSP2* xvii) and 'felt to be taking part in a breath-taking – albeit one-sided – race through the evolution and collapse of a powerful love affair' (*LSP2* xx). Hughes concludes that 'if this book were to be published without my mother's letters to Dr Beuscher, I would forever feel that it was unfinished' (*LSP2* xxv). It is to Hughes's credit that she allowed the inclusion of these letters, since they add a richness, and an alternative perspective, to this volume.

The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume II: 1956–1963, meticulously edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil, opens the day after Plath's 24th birthday, neatly beginning where Volume I ended. Steinberg and Kukil's introduction details the dizzying narrative of the letters, through Plath's married life with Ted Hughes,

¹ Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, (New York, Vintage, 1992), xxiii.

their burgeoning writing careers, and a series of moves from Cambridge to America, to London, Devon and finally back to London. Steinberg and Kukil emphasise how illustrious and hard-working Plath was, with particular regard to furthering Hughes's career, and the importance of their partnership. They punctuate their introduction with quotations from the letters, but there perhaps needed to be more acknowledgement that the letters do not necessarily represent the whole story – as noted in Frieda Hughes's quotation above. Following Hughes's desertion of Plath in Ireland, the editors add in parentheses the information that Hughes had gone 'to join Wevill for a secret holiday in Spain' (*LSP2* xli), although Plath's apparent knowledge of this does not appear until much later in the letters. In an article in this journal, Mark Wormald has recently shown that Hughes left Plath to go fishing with Barrie Cooke in County Clare.² This had been read as a 'cover story' for the trip with Wevill, but Wormald has proved that Hughes definitely did visit Cooke, and in fairness to the editors, they acknowledge this trip in a note to Plath's letter to Buescher on 22 September 1962. This does demonstrate the difficulty of the editors' task in compiling the introduction – do they put the narrative together solely from the letters and therefore with information only Plath knew; or do they contextualise for the reader? This tension is not wholly resolved here.

In the opening letters, Plath is relieved that her Fulbright scholarship and Cambridge place are assured, despite her recent marriage. She writes to Aurelia Plath that she has been concerned about 'the ingrained English maxim that a woman cannot cook and think at the same time' (*LSP2* 14), in one of her many amused but frustrated comments about the position of women. Her determination to combine a career with being a wife is reiterated to Marcia B. Stern in 1957, when she writes that she is a 'triple-threat woman: wife, writer & teacher (to be swapped later for motherhood, I hope)' (*LSP2* 110).

By Plath's own admission, though, she has a fourth role, as she writes that she is Hughes's 'secretary & his American agent' (*LSP2* 35) and later tells her mother that she 'guaranteed 15 poems sold in a year if he let me be his agent' (*LSP2* 133), which she achieves with excess. She has also increased her own acceptance rate, writing that she'd sold 'twice as many as I'd sold in the 5 years before meeting Ted' (*LSP2* 133). Her effort to further Hughes's writing career is astonishing. On 16 February 1957, she explains to Aurelia that they had 'sent off two big manuscripts [...], which meant a lot of typing' (*LSP2* 69). Her later comment that she had been 'ripping through the corrasable bond' (*LSP2* 69) suggests that it was Plath who had completed much of this typing.

² Mark Wormald, 'Irishwards: Ted Hughes, Freedom and Flow'. *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* 6.2 (2018), pp. 58–77.

However, in these early letters, Plath seems to genuinely revel in promoting Hughes's work. She writes that she is 'convinced [Hughes] will be the best poet since Yeats and Dylan Thomas' (*LSP2* 38) and that she 'must always fight to give him [...] time and space to write' (*LSP2* 439). Their symbiotic writing partnership is demonstrated by Plath's frequent use of 'we' and 'our', and her thrill at *The Hawk In The Rain* winning the Poetry Center First Publication prize. She reports to Aurelia: 'I am more happy than if it was my book published! [...] There is no question of rivalry, but only mutual joy & a sense of us doubling our prize-winning & creative output' (*LSP2* 72). Later, Plath explains that both she and Hughes 'know' they have writing talent: 'both of us are dedicated to deepening our imaginations & work, work, work' (*LSP2* 122). Volume I of Plath's letters featured correspondence between Plath and Hughes, thus emphasising the support and inspiration from each other on their writing. Since Plath and Hughes are almost always together between October 1956 and October 1962, this volume necessarily lacks that level of documentation, although Plath writes to her brother Warren to say that 'we are extremely critical of each other, & won't let poems pass without questioning every work [sic], rhythm & image' (*LSP2* 251). Instead, we witness more of the business of their writing: Plath's consistent distribution of their work to various publications, and careful monitoring of their earnings. All this is fascinatingly detailed in her letters, and well-supported in footnotes by the editors.

In addition to their writing, the letters are also very useful in tracing Plath and Hughes's geographical locations. In March 1957, Plath writes that 'there is not a question of our living in England' (*LSP2* 100) and insists that 'Ted is daily getting more of an America-lover' (*LSP2* 140). There are mentions that Ted might consider taking American citizenship, but by the end of their first year in America, Plath reports of his isolation in Northampton, where she is teaching at Smith College (*LSP2* 198). Plath's experience at Smith College is recognisable to any academic who has taught in a university; she is 'exhausted', 'frustrated' and 'slaving over correcting, private interviews, the next week's preparation' (*LSP2* 181). She writes, though, that she and Hughes are 'natural teachers' (*LSP2* 211), but that it is impossible to maintain an academic and writing career. By January 1959, Hughes is 'set on living in England' (*LSP2* 291), although Plath's views are slightly less clear, from the letters at least. The move to Chalcot Square is a happy one, and Plath describes the apartment in great detail to Aurelia, and also to Ruth Beuscher in February 1960, the first letter to her psychiatrist in this collection. The reader is given an extraordinary glimpse into their writing and family lives in this period, and their joy in the birth of Frieda. There are signs, though, that their close relationship in the tiny flat (which Frieda Hughes writes about in her Foreword), does feel

strained at times as she writes to Beuscher: ‘We’re together so much that it’s probably a good thing for us to explore London separately’ (*LSP2* 540). Later, to Aurelia: ‘I realize how crowded we are here when I am alone for a bit, enjoying every minute of it, feeling inclined to do little secret things I like’ (*LSP2* 546).

Such is the fragmentary style of the narrative, that the purchase of Court Green comes as something as a surprise. The majority of the letters in this collection are addressed to Aurelia (*LSP2* 230), so whenever Plath is with her mother, there is a marked decrease in correspondence. Her letters from Court Green are often full of hope and excitement, particularly those from Christmas 1961: ‘our Christmas was the happiest and fullest I have ever known’ (*LSP2* 706). However, through the cheery letters, the reader gets the sense that Plath was desperate for visitors to their country home. She writes to Ruth Fainlight that she is ‘very happy [...] but mad for someone to talk to’ (*LSP2* 737) and to Paul and Clarissa Roche: ‘We are so stuck, with this new infant, and very broke with piles of necessary house repairs’ (*LSP2* 740). Here, as elsewhere in the letters, Plath often adds a reply on to Hughes’s letters to his family members, and vice versa. The Hughes Estate has not given permission for Hughes’s contribution to these letters to be transcribed, but the editors helpfully point out if the letter is available in *Letters of Ted Hughes* (*LSP2* 771 for one example), or paraphrase if necessary.

Following the breakdown of the marriage, Plath’s letters oscillate between fury, determination, pride, and despair. Plath draws strength from her writing at this time, which is documented to a number of correspondents; to Aurelia: ‘I am writing from 5–8 a.m. daily. An immense tonic’ (*LSP2* 845), ‘All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me’ (*LSP2* 856), ‘I am up at 5 writing the best poems of my life’ (*LSP2* 861); to Richard Murphy: ‘I am writing for the first time in years, a real self, long smothered’ (*LSP2* 846); to Olive Prouty: ‘I have never been so happy in my life as writing as my huge desk in the blue dawns’ (*LSP2* 891). Plath’s efforts at publication do not cease either – she sends the poems that would become part of *Ariel* to *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Observer* and *The London Magazine*. Steinberg and Kukil do an excellent job here of keeping track of Plath’s output, reminding us of the poems she had written up to that particular point in her letters. This helps to give the sense of just how much she produced in this short period of time, and gives needed context, since Plath writes little detail about the poems themselves.

The last letters are difficult to read, as Plath’s strength begins to fade. Even despite this, she manages to retain the dark humour that can be seen in poems such as ‘Daddy’ and ‘The Applicant’. She writes to Elizabeth Sigmund (Compton) that she is ‘dying to read’ David Compton’s new crime novel: ‘it looks just the thing to

cheer me up, all about murder' (*LSP2* 820), and describes Hughes as 'a kind of apocalyptic Santa Claus' on his visits to the children (*LSP2* 965). The final letter, seen in this volume for the first time, is to Ruth Beuscher, and it is here that Plath finally reveals the extent of her mental torment. She writes: 'What appals me is the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst ---cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies' (*LSP2* 967). Plath's illness seems to engulf her in this letter: 'I am incapable of being myself & loving myself' (*LSP2* 969). This letter to Beuscher is placed last in the volume and is one of four dated 4 February 1963. I was curious as to how Steinberg and Kukil had decided upon the placement of each letter, since the probable final two Plath poems, 'Balloons' and 'Edge', both written on 5 February, are reproduced in the *Collected Poems*, with 'Edge' placed last, thus cementing its position as Plath's final word. Steinberg was kind enough to explain that the letters were placed in alphabetical order by the first name of correspondent, meaning Beuscher was last by default. It is interesting to note that the Beuscher letter was postmarked 8 February, as indicated in the image of the envelope (*LSP2* 716), although we cannot know if this has any particular significance.

The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume II: 1956–1963 is a remarkable achievement. The editors are to be much commended for their work in transcribing, locating, researching, and annotating Plath's voluminous correspondence. Scholars of Plath and Hughes owe a great debt to their work and it is exciting to look forward to new scholarship that will be produced from both volumes.

Nicola Presley
 Bath Spa University
 n.presley@bathspa.ac.uk
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Ted Hughes in Context, edited by Terry Gifford, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, xxvii + 404 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 108 42555 1

Ted Hughes wrote in a wide range of modes which were informed by an even wider range of contexts to which a lifetime's reading, interests and experiences gave him access. (*THIC* i)

In May 1974, Hughes wrote to Keith Sagar that 'poems belong to readers – just as houses belong to those who live in them & not to the builders' (*LTH* 349). This is true. But it is also true that some builders create masterpieces of beauty and mystery whilst others build ugly shacks which few would wish to inhabit. The variety, depth and scope of the essays in *Ted Hughes in Context* clearly demonstrate that Hughes was a master builder whose work, like that of the skilled and knowledgeable creators of the great gothic cathedrals, inspires the imagination.

I read this book over a period of three to four weeks. The chapters are closely argued and carefully referenced and at times my energies flagged. However, the brevity of some of my notes is no reflection on the quality of the chapters, all of which are informative, closely based on Hughes's life and work, and are written by people who are expert in the topics on which they write. Clearly I responded to some essays more strongly than others: every reader will do the same, depending on their background, interests and needs. Overall this book provides excellent, informed, contextually organised resources for scholars and others interested in Hughes's work.

Sadly, this is an expensive book (£75 hardback) and it seems likely that, in spite of its value to Hughes scholarship, only libraries, educational establishments and dedicated Hughes scholars will choose to buy a copy. This is a pity, if only because the photograph of Hughes reproduced on the dust-jacket is magnificent and well worth contemplating. Hughes always avoided being photographed. He was reluctant to give evil-wishers an image on which to focus their malign energies rather in the way ill-wishers might stick pins into an effigy of their enemy. So, in most posed photographs and video recordings he is seen in profile, with no eye contact, or half-turned away from the camera. In Tony Othen's photograph Hughes is, unusually, shown full-frontal, but what attracted my attention was not just his powerful, challenging gaze but the un-natural way in which he is holding his hands. Here, I realized, was a perfect example of a *mano fico*, an ancient, traditional, obscene gesture designed to attract the evil eye. Mark Wormald's article about the poetry-recording session with Craig Raine at which this photograph was taken can be read in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal* (Vol. V Issue 2, pp. 86-8). It records Hughes's initial reluctance to be photographed and it contains more of Othen's

images, in one of which Hughes is gleefully extending his arms towards the camera with his hands facing down and fingers spread in a gesture which could well have been made by one of the witches in *Macbeth* conjuring magic from the cauldron. Hands for Hughes, were an important means of transmitting energies, and not just through his pen.

The notes below are necessarily my brief, subjective response to each chapter, but they offer a broad outline of the contents. The few errors which I noticed are documented in my 'Endnotes'.

*

Jonathan Locke Hart writes of the way in which poets, like Philip Larkin, Tom Gunn and Seamus Heaney, viewed Hughes and responded to him and his work. He notes the close friendship between Hughes and Heaney; Gunn's comments on knowing Hughes; and Hughes's generosity and largeness of spirit in his communications with Larkin, who unfailingly made antagonistic and sarcastic remarks about him. In a second chapter he examines Hughes's extensive work as a playwright and notes the surprising number of plays he wrote in between 1960 and 1971, some as money-making exercises, some for BBC school radio programmes. He notes the way in which fragments of some plays survive only as poems and the way Hughes's drama became an essential part of his attempts to put 'reader and audience' back in touch with the 'primal' healing energies by using 'myth, ritual and linguistic power'.

Heather Clark takes a different approach to literary influences by offering a brief overview of the lives of Hughes and Plath, of their influence on each other as writers and their shared aesthetic vision, and of Plath's role in fostering Hughes's early publishing success. She ends with the comment that the admiration each had for the work of the other survived the end of their marriage and its 'legacy reverberates still in the cadences of post-war poetry'. Ronald Schuchard, too, covers this topic and charts T.S. Eliot's surprisingly strong formative influence on Hughes's work. He sees this not just in Eliot's early encouragement and support of Hughes but especially in Hughes's own perceptive readings of Eliot's poetry and his 'discovery' of Eliot's shamanic calling. Because of this, suggests Schuchard, Eliot became for Hughes 'the model for his own 'indeflectable' movement through the spirit world'.

Fiona Sampson considers Hughes's literary legacy by looking at the variety of ways in which other poets have been influenced by Hughes's work. Examining the work, the poetic practices and the methods of a number of poets whose work reflects that of Hughes, she concludes that his influence resembles 'not so much a

wake of wholesale imitators' as 'a ripple form of concentric circles of different manners and degrees of influence'.

Lissa Paul begins by recording a time when writing for children was a 'fringe field' – considered by scholarly presses as 'slightly disreputable genre, like pornography or detective fiction'. She notes how this attitude has changed and how Hughes's own writing for children helped to change it. And she demonstrates the way in which Hughes's sensitivity to 'the inner core of childhood experience' was the wellspring of his work, and how his poems 'slip and slide' between 'adult' and 'childhood' genres, always 'affirming Hughes's faith in the ability of young readers to 'meet the real coin' of poetry'.

In his wide-ranging essay on Hughes as literary critic, Alex Davis effectively demonstrates the way Hughes's reviews, essays, prose and poetry all express his belief that imagination is what brings together the inner and outer world. Looking especially at Hughes's expositions of the theme underlying the works of Shakespeare, Eliot and Yeats, he shows that a similar theme – that of the desacralising and 'suppression of the Great Goddess' and the shamanic/poetic healing of this through the creative arts – underlies Hughes's own work. He also discusses the associated problem Hughes expressed as 'the makeshift quality of poetic language' and his reasons for adopting extempore and unrefined methods of translation.

Tara Bergin jumps into the long-standing argument about methods of translating poetry from one language to another. 'Is it appropriate', she asks, 'to refer to Hughes as a translator?' Can 'someone who has little or no knowledge of the source language translate anything'? Tracing the way Hughes's methods of translation changed over his lifetime, she concludes that 'the qualities Hughes recognized and responded to strongly' in texts translated by others 'were precisely those qualities he strove towards in his own writing'. This, she believes, reinforced his own striving for a simple, spontaneous, universally understood language and resulted in the development of his method of retranslating, reinterpreting and reimagining a narrative, all of which is evident in Hughes's *Tales from Ovid*. In a second chapter, Bergin continues this theme of Hughes's involvement with translated poetry and addresses Hughes's involvement with, and promotion of, the work of Eastern European 'survivor' poets.

Roger Rees also raises the issue of 'linguistic competence' as he looks at Hughes's close engagement with the cultures of Classical Greece and Rome. Rees suggests that through poems like 'The Minotaur' (in which Hughes subverts Greek myth), translations of part of Homer's *Odyssey*, dramatic versions of the *Oresteia*, *Oedipus*, *Phaedra* and *Alcestis*, and his version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hughes

became a 'leading figure in twentieth-century English-language engagement with Greco-Roman literature'. He suggests that Hughes's 'punchy unpredictable style', and his propensity for a personal relationship with the dramas, was an expression of his desire to bring dramatic life to the canonical texts and open them to a new audience.

Joanny Moulin's argument for the literary value of Hughes's letters is initially undermined by some false statements about the editorial policies of Reid and Sagar in their collections (see Endnote 1). This, however, is not the focus of Moulin's essay and his discussion of the ways in which Hughes's letters reflect his personality and the way this is represented, too, in his work, is persuasive. He adduces certain personality traits in Hughes from particular letters and, assuming that many of the letters were written in an unguarded and extempore manner, very credibly finds these traits also demonstrated in Hughes's poetry and prose. He concludes that 'the best and the worst of Hughes come out in his letters'.

Carrie Smith writes of the great importance which both Hughes and Plath attached to reading poetry aloud. She traces the historical development of recording poetry readings from phonographs up to the BBC's early and deliberate policy of including poetry in their radio programs. And she discusses the influence of recordings, in particular those of readings by Eliot and Yeats, on Hughes's own approach to readings and the development of his distinctive poetic voice. She refers, too, to the ongoing discussions about 'poetry, voice and personality' which have appeared in various journals from at least 1896.

Sam Perry's essay on Hughes and surrealism demonstrates that 'Hughes's relationship with surreal art, both literary and visual' was extensive and can be felt throughout his oeuvre. Perry refers to Hughes's interest in the unconscious and he sees Hughes's belief in the importance of primordial experiences and a 'return to the primordial base for language' expressed in *Crow*, *Wodwo*, *Capriccio* and other poetry and, especially, in Hughes's work for children. He also looks at the influence on Hughes's work of traditions of surrealism as seen in the work of Dali, Popa, Lorca and, (perhaps surprisingly) Dylan Thomas.

For those, like me, who cringed at parts of some of Hughes's Laureate poems (corgis, a bursting Ape's brow, magic wands sprouting from the Kaiser's fontanelle, etc.), Neil Roberts provides a brief survey of the way many of the earliest Laureates were subject to ridicule and contempt by, for example, such masters of satire as Dryden and Pope. Shadwell, according to Dryden, was 'mature in dullness for his tender years' but never 'deviated into sense'. Considering Hughes's Laureate poems, Roberts writes approvingly of some but is critical of those in which Hughes 'chose to ape his predecessors in the use of formal rhyme and metre'. Roberts also considers

Hughes's view of the Crown as essential to the spiritual health of the nation and his use of his privileged position as Laureate to draw attention to ecological issues and to foster environmental causes.

Hughes's many collaborations with artists demonstrate the importance Hughes attached to the visual arts. Lorraine Kerslake discusses only those collaborations which resulted in published volumes, including Hughes's earliest works for children, and she notes 'the risky business of offering [Hughes's] readers more than his texts' (see Endnote 2). Mark Hinchliffe, in a chapter later in the book, covers a similar topic but focuses on Hughes's 'passions and interests rather than a strictly linear history'. Whilst mentioning the number and diversity of Hughes's collaborations with artists, he focuses on his extensive work with visual artists Baskin and Lloyd, seeing Hughes's empathy with these two artists and the different character of their work – the darkness of Baskin's images and the bright, colourful nature of Lloyd's – as echoing Hughes's own poetic battle with 'the war between vitality and death'. Hinchliffe comments on Hughes's involvement with the Rainbow Press and the Morrighu Press, and includes many examples of annotations Hughes made to books which he gave to family, colleagues and friends. His collection of Hughes's own art work, limited-edition books and illustrated broadsheets informs this chapter.

Tracing Hughes's interest in American poetry to long before he met Sylvia Plath, Gillian Groszewski takes issue with Neil Roberts's claim that *Lupercal* showed no influence of what Hughes describes as his American 'exile': she examines the changes that America had on both the style and content of that book.

Steve Ely claims that although Hughes was never one of those 'professional Yorkshiremen' who affects 'an exaggerated embodiment of certain imputed Yorkshire characteristics': 'at core', as Hughes's close, lifelong friend Lucas Myers said, 'he remained a Yorkshireman'. Hughes's early childhood experiences, his closeness to the land and his ongoing relationship with Yorkshire through family, friends, artists, writer and poets is evident in his work. Ely also discusses Hughes's long correspondence with Barnsley poet, Jack Brown, through which he maintained an interest in the political and social issues of that region.

Mark Wormald charts Hughes's 'long and fertile' relationship with Ireland through its myths and folklore, through his friendships with Richard Murphy and Barrie Cooke, and through his passion for fishing. He sets many of Hughes's poems into place in the Irish landscape and shows how Ireland fed into Hughes's work so that he, like the mayflies he wrote of in 'Saint's Island', dances 'to an old but timelessly vital tune: 'a reel unending and Irish''. In a second chapter, Wormald, writes of Hughes's passion for fishing. As a fisherman himself, he recognises the

'bodily excitement', the 'sense of identity', and the 'ancient kind of excitement' of the hunt, which underlie the fish-imagery in many of Hughes's poems; and he sees the intensity and precision of detailed observation which feeds into them. He refers to Hughes's fishing diaries; to the totemic significance fish had for Hughes; and to the ambivalence Hughes felt about hunting animals with which he empathized so closely. He also notes Hughes's practical involvement in ecological issues related to the widespread pollution of river waters.

Examining historical contexts, David Troupes discusses Hughes's paradoxical relationship with religion. Hughes's ability to use its ideas, imagery and stories whilst 'remaining unfettered by religious pieties' is the substance of this chapter. James Robinson argues very effectively that Hughes's poetic vision 'was always far wider and more open than a single culture or nation could contain' and he refers to the Gawain poet, and to Hughes's long and close reading of Chaucer and Dante. And Helen Melody examines the way Hughes 'explored both the personal and public faces of war through his poetry and his literary criticism' using published and archival material held by the British Library. She challenges the view that Hughes expressed little of the personal effects of war on himself, his family and 'the community in which he grew up'. Daniel O'Connor's claims that Hughes, were it not for the innovations of his poetry, 'could well be regarded as an [historical] anachronism'. His first account of Hughes's view of history is humorous but perceptive and he goes on to examine Hughes's belief that human history is an account of 'the mind exiled from Nature'. As such, O'Connor sees Hughes's attitudes to cultural and religious situations, current and historical, as problematic.

Like religion and shamanism, the occult is essentially connected to the inner life. Ann Henning Jocelyn deplores the condescending, negative attitudes generally expressed towards it. She suggests that Hughes first experienced the 'hidden' through his immersion in the natural world, and she follows the development of his attraction to and use of astrology. She discusses his birth chart and horoscope and the apparently 'ominous' aspects of Plath's birth chart, and she suggests Hughes's possible apprehension at characteristics shown in the tentative birth chart of Assia Wevill and the 'sinister' and most unusual birth chart of Shura (see Endnote 3). Jocelyn's conclusions are, as she makes clear, personal but her belief in the importance to Hughes of occult knowledge as a means of accessing his 'rich inner landscapes' is demonstrably correct.

Reviewing the historical development of shamanism, Gregory Leadbetter finds it to be 'a contentious matrix of ideas' and he suggests that Hughes, drawing from myth, folklore, esoteric and literary sources, developed his own analogy between shamanism and poetry which became fundamental to his work. He refers

to critical appraisal of the shamanic aspects of some of Hughes's work but questions the genuine nature of the shamanic patterns discerned. Nevertheless, he sees 'a romantic refraction' of 'ethnographic exemplars' in the Western imagination and situates Hughes amongst those contemporary poets who pursue 'the shamanic streak' in the poetic temperament.

Whilst the chapters in 'Environmental Contexts' contain common information, they each have a new perspective to offer. Terry Gifford sets out to chart 'the greening of Ted Hughes' using letters, articles, actions and poetry to show Hughes's deep concern for the environment. He quotes from his own correspondence with Hughes over the contradictions involved in the poet's love of hunting and fishing in spite of his empathy with the suffering of the hunted animals. This is a powerful, heartfelt essay by someone who shares the dominant question which drove Hughes's environmental activities: 'how to get us interested in our own annihilation'. He charts the many ways Hughes attempted to do this. Jack Thacker tackles Hughes's great interest in agriculture: his early perspective of an animal-lover viewing the desecrated landscape around him, then later, as a farmer who initially thought writing and farming were incompatible (like 'motor engines and gelignite') but discovered otherwise. Thacker sees this change reflected in *Moortown Diary*, which Hughes claimed to be 'rough' and improvised' observations of farming life but which show not only Hughes's artistry but also his environmental awareness. And he mentions Hughes's personal involvement in the Countryside Alliance and Farms for City Children (see Endnote 5). Yvonne Reddick effectively lists Hughes's frequent involvement in environmental campaigns, some of which is previously undocumented. She notes the influence of Hughes's early reading of Rachel Carson's books, and 'increasingly active' efforts to promote 'the arts as a means to help environmental causes' as exemplified in his support for the Sacred Earth Drama Trust and Arts for Nature (see Endnote 6).

Laura Blomvall and Janne Stigen Drangsholt tackle the thorny issues of feminism, masculinity and gender identity, as reflected in Hughes's work. Blomvall offers an overview of the historical and current Feminist responses to Hughes's work. She includes the new perspectives of inclusive feminism, which take gender, ethnicity and social aspects into account, and demonstrates how these might be applied to Hughes's work, in particular to *Birthday Letters* and *Capriccio* (see Endnote 4). She also notes that the ways in which Hughes helped and promoted women in their creative work has been little discussed, but might provide a 'more sophisticated' and 'nuanced approach to the ideological assumptions about gender underlying Hughes's work'. Drangsholt acknowledges that the 'persona' of Hughes's poems and letters probably reflects Hughes's own views on 'selfhood and identity',

‘the conflict between the masculine consciousness and something other’ and, in a complex philosophical argument referencing a number of postmodern texts on gender and identity, she focuses on the male figures in Hughes’s work and the way they are seen to relate to the female (the ‘other’). She suggests that whilst Hughes worked towards the unity of male and female (as in the alchemical ‘conjunction’ of *Cave Birds*), his male beings ‘irrevocably remain the active and transcendental subject ... while the female continues to associate with passivity and as immanence, often as the goddess in her many modes’. Only in the figure of Athene in the *Oresteia* does she see Hughes finding heterogeneity.

Hugh Dunkerley asks: ‘To what extent did Hughes have an influence on the teaching and practice of creative writing [...]?’ He decides that in spite of Hughes’s sarcastic comments on his own teaching of the ‘subject’, his broadcasts and book, *Poetry in the Making*, have been valuable and influential. Hughes, he concludes, was uninterested in ‘craft’ but committed to technique, and to the central role of imagination in accessing our inner experiences in order to develop this. He goes on to discuss Hughes’s involvement with The Arvon Foundation; in judging children’s poetry competitions; and his political intervention when the Northern Examination Board dropped creative writing from A-Level English Literature. David Whitley comments that Hughes’s work as an anthropologist is rarely discussed, yet his anthologies for children, especially those in which he collaborated with Seamus Heaney, reflect his strong views on the value of fostering geographical, historical and cultural memory. Whitley sees the structure of these anthologies, the ‘anarchical patterning’, the diversity of origins and authors of the poems, the humour and the musical affinities of language in them, as reflecting Hughes’s and Heaney’s belief in the importance of memory in learning. This is also reflected in Hughes’s *By Heart*, which teaches the oral and visual techniques which connect each individual to their own rich inner life.

Three essays deal with the controversial area of Hughes’s biography. Hughes himself always decreed ‘No biography!’, regarding the ‘creative demon’ which he believed drove biographers with suspicion (TH to Sagar, 10.6.88, *PC* 168). Amanda Golden avoids the creative demon by providing an overview of each of the major collections of Hughes’s manuscripts. She also notes material which can be found in the Plath collection at Smith College, in several other American archives and in a few English holdings. Her purpose is to suggest how archival research can reveal Hughes’s ‘engagement with language’ and she notes how the major archives have been used as a ‘hub’ for the collection of ‘smaller related collections’ of material from family, friends and other authors with whom Hughes exchanged books and letters (see Endnote 7). Claire Heaney writes that concerns about audacity,

voyeurism and ‘the sensationalism of the plot’ have made biographies of Hughes controversial. She comments on the vilification Hughes has attracted; on the memoirs written by family and close friends; on the efforts of his family to protect their privacy; and on the extent to which Hughes ‘self-fashioned his public persona’, ‘documenting his life’ by preparing the archive sold to Emory University; preserving quantities of manuscripts, letters, journals etc.; and creating a fictionalised poetic persona in his work. However, she quotes and agrees with Neil Roberts’s statement that ‘everything Hughes wrote was to some degree a report from [his] inner life’. And she notes the impact of Plath’s legacy on Jonathan Bate’s biography and on Diane Middlebrook’s *Her Husband*; comments on Elaine Feinstein’s biography which was rushed into print after Hughes’s death; and records the controversies over Olwyn Hughes’s involvement with several other biographies (see Endnote 8). Daniel O’Connor approaches Hughes’s biography from a different perspective, taking the mythological theme which Hughes divined in Shakespeare’s work as reflecting a shared myth. He examines Hughes’s stated belief that ‘the poetic self is a manifestation of the true self’ and argues that, although this self changes over time, its fundamental ‘modes of thinking and patterns of life’ recur ‘frequently enough’ to be significant. He, like Heaney, also explores the way Hughes approached ‘being a poet’, his creation of a ‘poetic self’, and how the careful shaping of his early collections helped to establish this persona. How closely the mythic self represented or reflected the real Hughes is left unexplored. Biography is myth. Or as O’Connor would have it, biographies of Hughes are interpretations of, or elaboration on, the myth of Ted Hughes.

Endnotes

1. Joanny Moulin states that Christopher Reid, in his *Letters of Ted Hughes*, chose ‘to leave out parts of some letters without saying so’. In fact, in his ‘Editor’s Introduction’, Reid states that ‘the editor’s job had involved certain liberties and risks’, he clearly outlines the ones he has taken, and he expresses his regret that he could not ‘include more letters in their entirety’ (*LTH* ix-xvi). Sagar, too, whose book *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar* was closely monitored and supported by Carol Hughes, told me in conversation shortly before the book was completed, that he was not able to include all that he had wished to include. Sagar also mentions some letters which are not reproduced in full (e.g. Michael Kurtow’s letter, included in the Appendices). The very fact that Hughes kept so much of his correspondence with Sagar, knowing that Sagar was very likely to use and even publish the contents at some future date, suggests that many were not written as unguardedly as Moulin supposes.

2. On two different occasions, whilst discussing newly published books with Hughes, he surprised me by stating that he did not like illustrated books. The visual image, he believed, took precedence in the brain and distracted the reader from his poems. He also commented that although the mutual stimulation of creative energies was well worth it, the conflicting artistic temperaments (his own and that of the visual artist) often caused difficulties and disputes. And not all of Hughes's books were illustrated by artists of his own choice.

3. Assia Wevill's precise time of birth is unknown. Although accurate measurement of the position of stars and planets in the sky at the time of birth is readily available, and broad traditional interpretations are widely used in interpreting the relationships between these heavenly bodies and their influence on a person's character and life, numerous other factors need to be taken into account in any serious astrological interpretation of a birth chart. The practice of astrology is, as Hughes well knew, a complex art and not a science. Jocelyn's suggestion that Hughes 'may have used his chart as an excuse for his dealings with women' due to the exact position of Venus in that chart, is speculative and questionable.

4. Feminists clearly identify the female figures in *Birthday Letters* and *Capriccio* as Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill and they make what philosophers call a 'category error'. They take a work of fiction as fact, assuming that it is a true and precise account of events, thoughts and feelings rather than a 'story' (Hughes's word for it) based on fact but shaped by memory and imagination. Nowhere in these sequences is the woman named. The protagonist, too, is a constructed persona. Take, for example, the first poem of *Birthday Letters* – 'Fulbright Scholars'. Did that photograph of the Fulbright scholars ever exist? Was Hughes, at the age of twenty-five, the callow youth this persona claims to be – 'dumbfounded afresh / By my ignorance of the simplest things' (CP 1045)? Was not a fresh peach a common simile for an attractive woman? There is a universal aspect to the emotions expressed in and aroused by these poems, regardless of the identity of the characters depicted: 'Your story. My story' ('Visit', CP 1049) could well apply to you and me.

5. Hughes's adoption and practice of organic methods in farming is discussed in Rory Knight's article, 'The Poet's Other Passion' (*Weekend Telegraph*, Sat. Nov. 21 1998, pp.16-18). He quotes Owen Holwell, a close farming neighbour of Hughes, who says that Hughes ran his farm 'on sound organic lines' and that he 'hated even to use fly spray and would spend hours examining the side of a washing powder box

for its contents'. See also my own 'Notes and Queries' pages on Hughes's environmental activities: <http://ann.skea.com/NQ5eco.htm> and on the Moortown farm: <http://ann.skea.com/NQ8farm.htm>.

6. Reddick is wrong when she says that 'Hughes and Plath took their baby daughter Frieda to a nuclear protest for her first outing'. As Elaine Feinstein records in her book, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* ((London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001), p.101)) Hughes had gone to the 1959 Aldermaston March with their close friend Dido Merwin. He had no idea that Plath had decided to attend that event and had returned home to find her and three-week-old Frieda missing.

7. Missing from Golden's record are the fine archive at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge; the growing archive at the University of Huddersfield; a collection of rare books at Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge; and a number of private collections, such as that owned by Mark Hinchliffe.

8. There are factual errors in Elaine Feinstein's book, in Diane Middlebrook's and in Jonathan Bate's. A copy of Olwyn Hughes's extensive notes and correction to Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband* is held in the Pembroke College archive. Heaney notes Terry Gifford's article in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal* which documents amendments made to the paperback edition of Bate's biography. Heaney repeats the statement made by Jonathan Bate's publishers which claims that his biography was written with the 'close cooperation' of Olwyn and Frieda Hughes. This statement is incorrect. I was friendly with Olwyn Hughes at the time Bate was appointed as Hughes's literary biographer. Having read his biography of John Clare, she was initially enthusiastic about this choice and offered her support. However, as she told me, and as I recorded at the time in my notebooks which are now held at the British Library, after Bate had shown her a first sample of what he was writing she could see that it was not the scholarly literary biography she and the original publishers of the book were expecting but was focussed instead on Hughes's personal life and, especially, on Plath. At this early stage she completely withdrew her support.

Ann Skea

ann@skea.com

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The Voice of Nature in Ted Hughes's Writing for Children: Correcting Culture's Error, by Lorraine Kerslake, London, Routledge Environmental Humanities, June 2018, 182 pp., £115.00 (hard cover), ISBN: 978-1138573673

As a number of critics have noted, Ted Hughes's works for children outnumber his collections of poetry for adults.³ Some commentators, such as Terry Gifford, have gone so far as to acknowledge that Hughes's writing for children is no side project or adjunct to his writing for adults: 'What is remarkable about this body of work for young readers is that none of these books is anything other than a part of the author's central creative project. Indeed, some of them have to be regarded as major contributions to that project'.⁴ And yet, as Lorraine Kerslake points out in this first full length study of Hughes's writing for children, Hughes scholars and scholars of children's literature have been reluctant to write in depth and detail about this impressive and extensive body of work. Perhaps the amount and variety of his writing for children - it includes not only collections of poetry, but plays, short stories, novels, anthologies and works which resist categorisation - deters Hughes scholars who may also feel they lack the expertise in the rapidly developing field of children's literature. Or perhaps they feel that writing for children is by its nature of insufficient importance and complexity to warrant serious critical attention. It may be that writers on children's literature feel that Hughes's re-imaginings of creation myths - *Tales of The Early World* (1987), *The Dreamfighter* (1996) - and his engagement with animals and the natural world - *Season Songs* (1976), *Under The North Star* (1981) and *What Is The Truth?* (1984) - are passé at a time when pugnaciously urban forms derived from hip-hop and slam poetry are strongly recommended for children's reading and writing.⁵ If so, Lorraine Kerslake's new book makes a powerful case against all of those viewpoints.

Using the tools and methods of ecocriticism, Kerslake makes a compelling case for the importance of Hughes's writing for younger readers as not simply some of the finest poetry and prose fiction for children written in the twentieth century, but also on the grounds that that it offers urgently needed 'insights into understanding ecological issues and educating environmental awareness in young children. Not only is Hughes's children's writing sensitive to environmental issues but there is a much clearer sense of ecological healing portrayed throughout his writing for children' (173).

³ Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.167.

⁴ Terry Gifford, *Ted Hughes* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.76.

⁵ Sue Dimmock, Myra Barrs, Andrew Lambirth and Anthony Wilson, *Making Poetry Happen: Transforming The Poetic Classroom* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.125-132.

The title of Kerslake's book, *The Voice of Nature in Ted Hughes's Writing for Children*, could be read as suggesting that in certain works Hughes is literally assuming the character of nature itself and speaking in his/her/its voice. But as she explains in her introduction, Hughes's personal concern for the environment and his growing concern at the great dangers which human activities posed to the natural world mirrored the growth of the environmental movement and 'green' politics. He had been profoundly shocked by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which he read soon after its publication in 1961, and as early as 1970 he published a review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution in Our Environment* in which he expressed dismay about the rapid decline of songbirds (as predicted by Carson), and presciently warned against the decline in soil quality on British farms, the dangers of the creation of monocultures – he cited the example of conifer plantations being created by the Forestry Commission – and pollution of British rivers by industry and agriculture.

Hughes claimed that from early childhood he had been aware that the natural world was under constant threat and encroachment by people and their insatiable appetite for development (he would undoubtedly have seen it as 'destruction'). Kerslake quotes Hughes recalling his earliest awareness of green issues to Terry Gifford:

From my earliest days I was hooked on fish – but I lived by a river, the West Yorks Calder, that had no life in it at all. Straight industrial effluent. And the Don, in South Yorks, which I expect you've glanced into, was worse. So my greening began you can say with everything about me in my infancy. What focused my ideas maybe was just that devastation. (33)

And one of the many achievements of this comparatively brief study (Routledge's *Environmental Humanities* series has a standard word limit of 80,000 words) is its contribution to the field of Hughes biography, in an area of Hughes's life – specifically his passionate concern for the natural world, often but not exclusively focused on his passion for fishing, and his commitment to environmental causes and his constant search for hope and healing in his life and work – which has received less attention from biographers than his personal relationships and marriages.

Many of Hughes's books of poetry for children were published between 1970 and 1990, a period which now appears to have been something of a golden age for children's poetry. Most major publishers children's lists then included original collections from poets as varied as John Agard, James Berry, Richard Edwards, Mike Harding, Brian Lee, Roger McGough, John Mole, Grace Nichols, Judith Nicholls, Gareth Owen, Brian Patten, Kit Wright, the now ubiquitous Michael

Rosen, and of course Ted Hughes himself. National and regional schemes provided generous support for poets and other children's writers to visit schools, and creative writing in schools was also being encouraged by stimulating and excitingly innovative books including Sandy Brownjohn's *Does It Have To Rhyme?* (1980), Kenneth Koch's *Wishes Lies and Dreams* (1970) and arguably the most-widely read and admired of all, Ted Hughes's *Poetry In The Making* (1967) which was based on his broadcasts for the BBC Schools Radio series *Listening and Writing*.

Hughes's poetry for children, and his writing about poetry in *Poetry In The Making* was particularly admired, as Kerslake notes, for his 'desire to communicate directly to children, in a way that is both challenging and unpatronising ... in a language that was not childish, but one that was "within the hearing of children"' (100). Kerslake quotes the Lawrence scholar Keith Cushman's argument that there is often little to distinguish Hughes's poetry for children from his poetry for adults: '[t]he themes and visionary intentions are absolutely the same, and often so is the subject matter' (49), but boldly extends it, declaring that 'his lifelong preoccupation with environmental issues as real subjects that both underlie and affect human ecology embedded in nature', coupled with 'his shamanic quest for healing' and his belief in the child as 'nature's chance to correct culture's error' (*WP* 149) is 'most successfully resolved in the realm of his writing for children' (7) – particularly in what she describes as the 'healing myths' of *The Iron Man* and *The Iron Woman* (157). In these two novels, and also in two of his collaborations with the artist Leonard Baskin, *Under The North Star* and *Season Songs*, and in the extended metaphysical eclogue *What Is The Truth?*, Kerslake argues that Hughes is bringing his young (and older) readers 'closer to healing the gap between our inner and outer nature.'

Kerslake has made a very intelligent and practical decision in choosing to read Hughes's extensive writing for children from an ecocritical perspective, especially given the scope and length restrictions of the series for which she is writing. But it is also a sincere expressions of her two passions as an educator: children's literature and environmentalism.

Ecocriticism provides a way to examine Hughes's sometimes aggressively Manichean worldview : the force of nature, the imagination, creativity, tradition, monarchy, 'the tribe' personified as a female 'goddess' principle is seen in perpetual opposition to the dark side of science, technology, progress, conformity, 'the corporation', and a censorious and controlling masculine 'god'. Which led this most private and guarded of men to become a public campaigner on environment issues – particularly water quality in rivers.

As Kerslake reveals throughout her book, in writing for and about children, Hughes constantly finds hope and the possibility of spiritual healing which is notably missing from many, but not all of his adult poems. Commenting on ‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’, she observes that, ‘Not only can the poem be seen as the reconciliation between humans and nature but as the last stanza brings to mind, perhaps Hughes was also suggesting a way for the adult to reconnect with the child's sense of wonder.’

For Hughes the Moon provided a narrative environment within which he had unlimited scope to imagine bizarre dreamscape creatures in books including *The Earth Owl*, *Moon Whales* and the book that provides an outstanding introduction to both Hughes’s adult and children’s poetry: the Bodley Head edition of *Moon-Bells and other poems* (1986), which was expertly edited by Fiona Waters and superbly illustrated by Felicity Roma Bowers. Some of Hughes’s moon creatures, for example the moon whales, are vast and awe-inspiring; some are ludicrously comic; some are poignant and sad; and some are the creations or creators of nightmares. Kerslake notes certain similarities between Hughes’s poem ‘Moon Walkers’ and Maurice Sendak’s justly famous picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*. The supposed ‘unsuitability’ of Hughes’s poems for children – and in particular critics’ concerns about the supposed violence of his language and subject matter, and even accusations of sadism – mirror closely the accusations levelled at Sendak when *Where The Wild Things Are* was first published. ‘We should not like to have it left about where a sensitive child might find it to pore over in the twilight’, wrote the reviewer for *The Journal of Nursery Education*, and for the reviewer in *Publisher’s Weekly* it was the text rather than the pictures but that was most likely to cause offense: ‘The plan and technique of the illustrations are superb, but they may well prove frightening, accompanied as they are by a pointless and confusing story’.⁶ Hughes’s defence might have been the same as Sendak’s:

Truthfulness to life – both fantasy life and factual life – is the basis of all great art. This is the beginning of my answer to the question: where did you get such a scary, crazy idea for a book? I believe I can try to answer it now if it is rephrased as follows: what is your vision of the truth, and what has it to do with children?⁷

In what is a key document for all serious students of Hughes’s writing for children – a letter he wrote to the Canadian scholar and writer Lissa Paul in April 1984, which Kerslake quotes – Hughes restates his commitment to telling children the truth, and (as Kerslake puts it) ‘admonishes’ those writers and critics who argue

⁶ Quoted in Nat Hentoff, Nat ‘Among The Wild Things’, *New Yorker*, January 22, 1966.

⁷ Maurice Sendak, *Caldecott and Co.* (New York: Reinhardt, 1989)

that children's literature should avoid difficult or embarrassing truths and believe that child readers should be 'protected' from the fears and worries with which, in all probability, they are already familiar. 'Children don't demand anaesthetics,' Hughes wrote. 'One can communicate with children in a simple & whole way – not because they are innocent, but because they're not yet defensive' (112).

Undoubtedly, Hughes's poetry for children occasionally lapses into doggerel – for which his one-time editor Craig Raine admonished him on at least one occasion – but it never descends into sentimentality.⁸ Of Hughes's poems in *Season Songs* (1976) Kerlake observes that 'they enact Carson's sense of wonder in their unsentimental treatment of the creative nature, depicting the cycles of life and death in all its [sic] splendour along with all its [sic] brutality offering a complete vision of the universe [sic] and portraying a sense of wholeness' (117). It's a succinct and accurate summary of the delights and challenges of Hughes's finest poetry for children. It is also an example of what annoys me about so much contemporary publishing, both trade and academic: the poor standards of editing. If publishers are going to charge £115 plus for relatively short books like this, it's not unreasonable to expect from them commensurately high standards of editing and proof-reading. Instead, I'm sorry to say, this book is marred by the kind of annoying literals and solecisms that are all too common in so many books being published in both the US and UK. However, this is intended as a warning that teeth may occasionally need to be gritted, and should not discourage anyone from buying and reading a perceptive and thought-provoking reading of Hughes's writing for children and a most welcome addition to Hughes scholarship generally.

Mick Gowar

Independent Scholar

gowarmichael@gmail.com

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⁸ Quoted by David Whitley, "'The Fox is a jolly farmer and we farm the same land': Ted Hughes and Farming", in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford, eds., *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 96-111; p.106.

The Alvarez Generation: Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Peter Porter, by William Wootten, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2015, xvi + 228 pp., £25.00 (hardback or ebook), ISBN 978-1-78138-163-2

Some Hughes scholars may, like myself, have overlooked this contextualising, rigorous and provocative book which was published in 2015. It considers, with forensic care and alertness to the tensions of the times, the emergence of Al Alvarez's anthology *The New Poetry* in its two editions, its influence and its detractors, and Alvarez's eventual regret at having championed 'extremist poetry' in quite the terms he had. Wootten's argument that there had been some overlap between the poets and projects of what came to be known as the Movement and Alvarez's critique in 'Beyond the Gentility Principle' that introduced *The New Poetry* is supported by detailed evidence. Chapters on violence, confessional poetry, Alvarez's notion of the 'new seriousness', the anthology wars and Donald Davie's claims for craft and form against experiential content are written with a lively sense of the ironies and the serious issues involved.

Ted Hughes is not the central figure of this book: 'the poet of *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal* is notable as much for his capacity to escape the emergent spirit of the English poets of his generation as for his ability to exemplify it' (49). Sylvia Plath is seen as the exemplification of Alvarez's values and, indeed, directly influenced by them in her meetings with him to read her poems of autumn 1962. However, Wootten makes much of Hughes's apparently writing to out-Plath Plath. '*Crow* follows the logic of the extremist aesthetic to its skull-grinning caricature [...]' A piece of rivalrous writing if ever there was one, Hughes's *Crow* pointedly seeks to outstrip the imagery of Plath' (141). Wootten does not trouble his reading of *Crow* by attention to its most humanising poems or the humility of its narrative arc, seeing no 'structured single work' (142). His very brief chapter on *Birthday Letters* continues the theme of rivalry, but now in a style that signals that extremism is over: 'There is nothing in Philip Larkin that has quite the studied passivity of *Birthday Letters*' (190). It is, in fact, the new poetry of Geoffrey Hill that is championed by Wootten as a late flowering of some of the values of 'Beyond the Gentility Principle', as quotations from Alvarez's admittedly mixed review of *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2008) indicate. The book ends with something of a regret for a time when the poetry editor of the *Observer* not only enlivened a public debate about poetry, but could edit popular paperback collections (including Penguin's Modern European Poets) that drew readers to poets of such influential quality.

Rather than end with complaints about poor proofreading, or the placing of ‘Second Glance at a Jaguar’ in *Lupercal* (138), it would be better to praise the polemical liveliness of this book. It had originally been Faber’s intention to include Larkin in the Gunn and Hughes *Selected Poems*, but Larkin, as he wrote to Robert Conquest, demurred at appearing in the company of ‘Thom, Thed and Yours Thruly’.

Terry Gifford
Bath Spa University
t.gifford2@bathspa.ac.uk
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Capriccio: A Novel, by Dina Davis, Sydney, Cilento Publishing, 2018, 390 pp., \$19.95, ISBN 978-0-6482398-8-8

Why would an Australian want to write a first novel ‘based on one of the most notorious love triangles of the twentieth century’ and ‘inspired by the life of Assia Gutmann Wevill’ when the result, for readers of Hughes’s poems, is almost bound to be what it is here: excruciating?

Terry Gifford
Bath Spa University
t.gifford2@bathspa.ac.uk
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Contributors

Chair of the Ted Hughes Society, **Terry Gifford** is editor of *Ted Hughes in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and co-editor of *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). His latest poetry collection is *A Feast of Fools* (Cinnamon Press, 2018).

Christopher North's first collection, *A Mesh of Wires*, was published by Smith Doorstop and short-listed for the Forward Prize in 1999. He has published two full collections since: *Explaining the Circumstances* (2010) and *The Night Surveyor* (2014) and a joint, bilingual collection *Al Otro Lado del Aguilar* (2011) with Terry Gifford – all with Oversteps Books. His pamphlet collection *Wolves Recently Sighted* was published by Templar Poetry 2014 and his latest pamphlet collection *The Topiary of Passchendaele* was a winner in the Smith Doorstop Pamphlet competition in 2018. He is chair of the Poetry Society's 'Stanza Alacant' in Spain. Since 2002 with his wife Marisa, he has facilitated poetry writing retreats and courses at Almassera Vella in Relleu, Alicante Spain (www.oldolivepress.com) and has run creative Writing workshops specialising on the journal, a special interest, at the Dartington Literary Festival for the last five years or so.

Holly Ranger is a Research Associate at the Institute of Classical Studies, School of Advanced Study (University of London). Her research interests lie in classical receptions in twentieth- and twentieth-century women's writing, and the intersection of politics and aesthetics in those texts. A monograph, *Sylvia Plath and the Classics*, is forthcoming with Bloomsbury (2023).

Neil Roberts is Emeritus Professor of English Literature at the University of Sheffield. His publications on Ted Hughes include *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (with Terry Gifford), *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* and *Reading Ted Hughes: 'New Selected Poems'*. He is also co-editor of *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* and *Ted Hughes, Nature and Culture*. His other recent publications include *A Lucid Dreamer: the Life of Peter Redgrove* and *Sons and Lovers: the Biography of a Novel*.

James Robinson currently teaches in the Department of English Studies, Durham University. He is the author of *Joyce's Dante: Exile, Memory, and Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) and a number of articles on Dante, on James Joyce and on Ted Hughes. He is working on a new book, *Ted Hughes and Medieval Literature: 'Deliberate Affiliation'* arising from the research conducted during the tenure of a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship.

Katherine Robinson's essays, poetry, and fiction have appeared in *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry Ireland*, *The Hudson Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She holds an M.F.A. in poetry from Johns Hopkins University and is a Ph.D. candidate at Cambridge University where she is researching the influence of early Welsh literature on Ted Hughes's poetry and criticism.

Martin Shaw is author of the award-winning *Mythteller* trilogy. A mythologist, his book of Lorca translations, *Courting the Dawn* (with Stephan Harding), will be released in 2019, alongside his conversation/essay on Ai Weiwei by the Marciano Arts Foundation.

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