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Abstract  
The Elegies of Ted Hughes

The purpose of this study is to make the case that Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is one of the pre-eminent elegists writing in English in the latter half of the twentieth century. Whilst his poetry has been widely criticised for its apparent preoccupation with violence and death, it is puzzling that the links these topics have in common with elegy have never been clearly verified. This might be because Hughes's elegies do not appear to bear the characteristics frequently associated with traditional poetic laments; however, as this study shows, closer scrutiny reveals not only many similarities, but also acts of resistance within the broader scope of elegy.

Drawing on both established and contemporary critical debates surrounding Hughes and elegy, this study undertakes a comprehensive reading of the poet's major works from The Hawk in the Rain to Birthday Letters, whilst also paying attention to limited editions of his verse, including Recklings, Capriccio and Howls & Whispers. Posthumous publications, including the Collected Poems, Selected Translations and Letters of Ted Hughes, are accounted for, so that (alongside the chronological reading of the poems) Hughes's development as an elegist is fully realised.

One of the aims of the thesis is to demonstrate that the poet's elegies are unified in presenting what I term the 'actual'; that is to say, that Hughes does not fabricate sensations or forge experiences that purport to be beyond the realm of recognisable human endeavour. This I term his 'unfalsifying dream'. This is striking because quite often traditional elegies appear to present the opposite: a language which is ornate and images which are close to beatifying the deceased, putting them at a remove from human experience and existence. 'The Hawk in the Rain' is used to illustrate Hughes's theoretical position, especially in the case of his earlier war elegies and the circumstances of Remains of Elmet and Moortown Diary. He is both the observational, seemingly dispassionate poet (the hawk), capable of a detaching himself from the experience he wishes to relay in his verse, and yet, he is also the wanderer 'in the rain', one who is immersed in the momentous instant of his own language and experience.

Like his personas, Hughes is divided. He is complicit with many of elegy's practices and traditions, but he is also a reformer and renovator of elegy, writing invigorating verse which brings the realities of mortality closer to the reader. In doing so, he reaffirms the significance of life and how this life might be better lived in closer harmony to poetry and contemporary ecological urgencies. 'The Elegies of Ted Hughes' aims to prove that far from being just a 'poet of nature', Hughes has been an exemplary elegist in our own time.

The Elegies of Ted Hughes

Edward Hadley

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# The Elegies of Ted Hughes

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For their unflinching and unwavering encouragement from school, to university and beyond, I thank my family whose love and fairness has given me the confidence and eagerness to learn, always. Indeed, for supporting and enduring me through the highs and lows of my research, I must thank Elizabeth whose patience has never faltered.

By no means least, I happily recognise my friends from Durham University and Royal Holloway, University of London. Your encouragement (both academic and otherwise) and friendship is most gratefully acknowledged. You know who you are.

### Note on the Texts

Where possible, I have referred to Hughes's texts in their first editions unless otherwise stated. There are some discrepancies in spelling or grammar between these editions, how they appear in Hughes's revisions of his own work, and their presentation in Collected Poems. I have endeavoured to preserve the texts as they appear in their original editions when referring to them.

*for Elizabeth*

'...most poetry is not equipped for life in a world where people actually do die.'

Ted Hughes.

'No one has any specialised knowledge of death; in this area there are only the ideologies that inhibit freedom and limit scope.'

W.D. Shaw.

Chapter One:  
Introduction

In his introduction to the collected poems of Keith Douglas, Ted Hughes observes that 'Life, for all its desirability, is ultimately futile and the living are hardly more deluded variants of the dead'.<sup>1</sup> Death holds a collective moral distinction and reverence from the ceremonious long-boat cremations of the Vikings through to the state funerals of prominent contemporary figures. One can count the high yield of death-related stories which appear even in the shortest of news bulletins; the human fascination with death is unremitting. Our ceremonies, periods of mourning, bereavement and gut emotional reactions are all a means of interpreting the mystery of death, an act which, though inevitable and definite, eludes us psychologically.

It is curious that Hughes's elegiac tendencies have gone largely unnoticed in the diverse criticisms of his work despite the motifs of violence and death playing prominent roles in many of his poems. If a critical approach is not determined by an obvious theoretical tendency in the verse of a poet, then it is often determined by the recurrence of themes and imagery developed over the course of the poet's output, and it is this factor which dominates the critical reception of Hughes's work. It is not without good reason. What Hughes considers in his poetry (war, nature, mortality), at first glance, might not seem wholly original, but it is the undoubtedly fresh,

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, introduction, The Complete Poems, by Keith Douglas Ed. Desmond Graham (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) xxiii.



layered approach to these matters which marks Hughes's poetry as of interest to the critical reader. However, it is not easy to distinguish how we might define Hughes as a poet. Reference to him as a 'nature poet' is not inaccurate, but it needs to be tempered and refined because such an expression has associations of a whimsical, frivolous poetic. A more fruitful approach, perhaps, is not to define Hughes the poet, but instead to test and elucidate new methods of interpreting Hughes's poetry in the light of contemporary critical theory. This is certainly the case with Paul Bentley's Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond,<sup>2</sup> which seeks to integrate Hughes's poetry with literary theories which came to prominence during his lifetime; these include theories developed by Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. Bentley's studies of 'the real' in relation to Hughes's works are particularly illuminating when considering Remains of Elmet,<sup>3</sup> River,<sup>4</sup> and a selection of Hughes's later war elegies. Bentley dissects Hughes's language in order to discern 'what makes the poems tick *as poems*, over and above what they appear to be saying', whilst acknowledging the poet's artifice where the 'illusion of reality...is an effect of language and imagination – or so the poems themselves seem to suggest.'<sup>5</sup> The result lends this study of Hughes's elegies confidence to stress the unique power of the poet's elegiac voice, and how this voice informs both the 'actual' and the imaginary universe around him.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Bentley, The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond (Harlow: Longman, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes, Remains of Elmet (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Ted Hughes, River (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Bentley, Language, Illusion and Beyond, 1.

For the most part, the critical reception of Hughes's poetry leans towards a close reading of the poems. His verse does not consistently indulge in or become overwhelmed by accessible cultural references, so the Hughes reader must look further afield in order to discern some of the more cryptic allusions in his poetry. It is this which has made critical books on Hughes so multifarious and varied in their approaches. Of prominence is Keith Sagar, whose critical study, The Art of Ted Hughes,<sup>6</sup> was also the first significant book on Hughes. But Sagar does not wish his methods of reading to Hughes to be classified: 'I hope I don't have a "critical approach" which can be labelled. I simply read Hughes, or any other author, to the best of my ability.'<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, his book employs a straightforward and thorough methodology: '[The book] must focus primarily on individual poems, all the important or representative ones, trying to take possession of them (or be possessed by them), asking what they are, what they mean, how they relate to each other, to the tradition, to the work of other contemporary and recent writers, to the experience of living in our time or any time.'<sup>8</sup> It is this ethos which this study of Hughes as an elegist adopts. Sagar's remarks point towards an essential lynch-pin, which is another undertaking of this study: 'Hughes has a vital relationship with tradition. He draws heavily upon it; but he transforms what he draws. And he enters into a dialogue with it, both consciously and

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<sup>6</sup> Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1975 rev. ed. 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Keith Sagar, correspondence with Edward Hadley, 13 April 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Sagar, Art, 1.



unconsciously.<sup>9</sup> Sagar's subsequent books on Hughes follow a similar approach, and they develop concurrently with the output of the poet. The essays edited by Sagar in The Achievement of Ted Hughes<sup>10</sup> and The Challenge of Ted Hughes<sup>11</sup> display the wide critical range which Hughes's poetry evokes. With The Laughter of Foxes,<sup>12</sup> Sagar presents his most recent critical analysis. It is an attempt to identify the mythical imagination in Hughes's poems and to trace its development. Sagar's work on Birthday Letters<sup>13</sup> is especially welcome; in a post-Birthday Letters world, there is a propensity among critics to digress upon the lives and deaths of Hughes and Sylvia Plath, rather than concentrate on their poetry. The exceptions here are Diane Middlebrook's Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage,<sup>14</sup> Erica Wagner's Ariel's Gift,<sup>15</sup> and Elaine Feinstein's Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet.<sup>16</sup> All three are excellent resources for establishing a biographical engagement that also satisfies the need for a critical engagement with Hughes's work.

Ann Skea's research on Hughes's poetry is also essential. Her book, Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest,<sup>17</sup> is a lucid and challenging reading of three of

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<sup>9</sup> Sagar, Art, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Sagar (ed.), The Achievement of Ted Hughes (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Keith Sagar (ed.), The Challenge of Ted Hughes (London: St Martin's Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Keith Sagar, The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes (Liverpool: Liverpool U.P., 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Ted Hughes, Birthday Letters (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Diane Middlebrook, Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage (London: Viking, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Erica Wagner, Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the story of Birthday Letters (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Feinstein, Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet (London & New York: Norton, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Ann Skea, Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest (Armidale: U. of New England P., 1994).

Hughes's poetic sequences. In her chapter on Remains of Elmet Skea develops the idea of regeneration in Hughes's most accomplished poems, an idea of the utmost importance in the study of elegy. Notions of decomposition and renewal are also prominent in the work of Leonard M. Scigaj (below). Skea has recently undertaken cabbalistic readings of Birthday Letters, Howls & Whispers,<sup>18</sup> and Capriccio,<sup>19</sup> and she has published many excellent essays on the internet including a version of 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet'.

Ted Hughes,<sup>20</sup> and The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination,<sup>21</sup> both by Leonard M. Scigaj, make for some of the most challenging, yet rewarding critiques of Hughes's work. The latter book traces a 'three-stage development in Hughes's poetry; a fifties New Critical formalism, a sixties mythic realism, and from the midseventies through River, a mythic landscape poetry.' Scigaj attempts to 'synthesise major influences from depth psychology, myth, alchemy, Trickster folklore, Blake, and many Oriental disciplines.'<sup>22</sup> His work is dense and he has a propensity to contextualise Hughes's work in the frame of a non-Western critique; he notes the influences of Eastern (particularly Oriental) mythology, especially in Hughes's post-Wodwo<sup>23</sup> works. However, Scigaj's reading does pose some

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<sup>18</sup> Ted Hughes, Howls and Whispers (Hadley, Mass.: The Gehenna Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Ted Hughes, Capriccio (Hadley, Mass.: The Gehenna Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Leonard M. Scigaj, Ted Hughes, Twayne's English Author Series (Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Leonard M. Scigaj, The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination (Iowa: U of Iowa P, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Scigaj, Form and Imagination, 173.

<sup>23</sup> Ted Hughes, Wodwo (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

difficulties, most obviously in the sometimes distancing and digressive explanations of Eastern philosophy. Nevertheless, his thesis is of relevance to the study of elegy. It explains the many nuances in Hughes's libretto based on the Tibetan Bardo Thödol, which a standard (even 'Western' approach) might overlook, and also offers compelling ecological readings of Remains of Elmet and River. The idea of natural decomposition and renewal which informs these sequences of poems has a powerful and persistent role in elegy.

Craig Robinson's sympathetic reading of Hughes's Moortown Elegies<sup>24</sup> in his book Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being<sup>25</sup> aids in understanding this sequence in a way that latently acknowledges elegiac practices and motifs. Robinson's appreciation of the poem 'Coming Down through Somerset' is probably the most authoritative take on Hughes's poem for its sheer depth of knowledge, interpretation and clarity. Furthermore, Robinson's comments on Hughes's use of language in Moortown Elegies assist this study in developing the argument that the poet's reforming approach to poetry (its language and form) also extends to elegy, where a formal linguistic tone is substituted by a vivacious and conjuring language, which has the effect of placing the reader in the immediate moment of experience.

Among the most recent critical work on Hughes is Neil Roberts's Ted Hughes: A Literary Life (Roberts previously co-authored Ted Hughes: A

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<sup>24</sup> Ted Hughes, Moortown Elegies (London: The Rainbow Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Craig Robinson, Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989).

Critical Study <sup>26</sup> with Terry Gifford).<sup>27</sup> His book surveys Hughes's major publications from The Hawk in the Rain <sup>28</sup> through to Birthday Letters. At each stage, Roberts rigorously identifies Hughes's development poetically, whilst also showing an awareness of the external factors which helped or hindered his maturation. Roberts notes that Hughes 'died the subject of renewed interest, and in the midst of a wholesale reassessment both of his life and of his work. This book is another chapter in that reassessment.'<sup>29</sup> His lucid and forthright chapter on Birthday Letters is especially relevant to a study of Hughes as elegist.

At the time of writing, this study has been fortunate enough to have benefited from the publication of three major Hughes books which are an invaluable aid for any scholar of his work. The first, Collected Poems,<sup>30</sup> whilst not far short of a 'complete poems', is a comprehensive guide to Hughes's major, minor, and individual collections of poetry spanning his entire career. This offers the opportunity for a renewed assessment (as suggested by Roberts) of Hughes's poetic output. Selected Translations <sup>31</sup> complements the Collected Poems and makes available valuable instances of Hughes's engagement with non-English texts, including his libretto based on The

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<sup>26</sup> Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, Ted Hughes: A Critical Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> Neil Roberts, Ted Hughes: A Literary Life, *Literary Lives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Ted Hughes, The Hawk in the Rain (London: Faber and Faber, 1957).

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ted Hughes, Collected Poems, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Ted Hughes, Selected Translations, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

Tibetan Book of the Dead. The publication of Letters of Ted Hughes<sup>32</sup> has prompted fresh insights into the poet's philosophical interests and working methods.

There is, naturally, a multitude of books, essays and articles beyond the brief survey offered above. P.R. King's chapter on Hughes in Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction<sup>33</sup> is a revealing account of the elemental energies at work in the poet's elegies. So, too, is Stuart Hirschberg's Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes,<sup>34</sup> which offers vital clues about the mythic structure of works such as Lupercal.<sup>35</sup> Egbert Faas's London Magazine interview with Ted Hughes remains an important touchstone in Hughes studies.<sup>36</sup> Tim Kendall's Modern English War Poetry<sup>37</sup> includes an authoritative chapter on Ted Hughes as a war-poet, which has immediate relevance to the discussion of Hughes's late war elegies. Owen Johnson's thesis 'Ted Hughes: Speaking for the Earth'<sup>38</sup> is one of the few critical studies to acknowledge the force and relevance of Hughes's war elegies in Wolfwatching.<sup>39</sup> The varied nature of Hughes criticism is indicative of the range of and scope of his poetry.

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<sup>32</sup> Christopher Reid (ed.), Letters of Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> P.R. King, Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction (London & New York: Methuen, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> Stuart Hirschberg, Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes (Portmarnock, Co. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981).

<sup>35</sup> Ted Hughes, Lupercal (London: Faber and Faber, 1960).

<sup>36</sup> Egbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and Crow,' London Magazine 10, 1970: 5-20.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Kendall, Modern English War Poetry (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Owen Johnson, 'Ted Hughes: Speaking for the Earth,' PhD Diss., U of Durham, 1991.

<sup>39</sup> Ted Hughes, Wolfwatching (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

But what of elegy itself? It might be said that elegy is answering death, and that the work of the elegist is to reaffirm emotions, or rather, place bereavement and loss in a context appropriate to their skill, to expostulate grief in a manner befitting their medium. The elegy is there to preserve the dead as long as possible so they may co-exist with the living or be embalmed immortally in the print of the written word. Its history is long and varied.

It is generally agreed that the word 'elegy' originally leant itself to a particular verse form in Greek poetry, the elegiac distich. However, *elegos*, or *elegoi* (pl.) 'referred to a sad song ...sung to the accompaniment of the flute.'<sup>40</sup> The most influential form of the elegy has been the pastoral, which follows a number of established mourning codes. Virgil's *Eclogues*<sup>41</sup> are early exemplars of pastoral lament:

The Nymphs for Daphnis, cut off by a cruel death,  
 Shed tears (you streams and hazels witness for the Nymphs),  
 When, clasping her own son's poor body in her arms,  
 A mother called both gods and stars alike cruel.  
 In those days there were none who drove their pastured cattle  
 To the cool rivers, Daphnis; no four-footed beast  
 Would either lap the stream or touch a blade of grass.  
 The wild hills, Daphnis, and the forests even tell  
 How Punic lions roared in grief at your destruction.

(V, 20-8)

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<sup>40</sup> T.V.F. Brogan, Peter Sacks and Stephen F. Fogle, 'Elegy', *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton U.P, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Virgil, *The Eclogues*, trans. Guy Lee (London: Penguin, 1980, rev. 1984) 63.

The death of Daphnis is witnessed by nymphs, but also by nature itself. The stream links together these tropes and, as we shall see later in Chapter Five of this study, is a potent image in much of Hughes's later work. From these lines alone, one can readily make associations in image and tone with later elegies such as 'Lycidas'. Eric Smith writes, 'the pastoral world is a sort of Eden...It may be a world which can only be gained, or in essence regained, by transcending the human condition as we know it.'<sup>42</sup> The pastoral identifies with the mourner's need to situate the deceased metaphysically, and in particular, to locate the dead in an environment superior to the one which is left behind. Such a move consoles the poet trying to assuage their grief and alleviate their fears that an afterlife could be any 'worse' than their life on earth. Invocations of nature are true to the topography of the pastoral idyll, but as Peter Sacks suggests, they are also offerings to the vegetation god, a deity symbolic of nature's processes of decomposition/renewal who features in innumerable guises in the elegy: 'such a figure reduces multiplicity to apparent unity, allowing the devotees or survivors to focus and, by simplification, to intensify their grief or gratitude regarding an otherwise manifold and ungraspable world of nature.'<sup>43</sup> The duty of the vegetation god is, as Sacks suggests, manifold. More specifically, 'the trope is designed not so much to humanise nature, although this is partly the case, as to naturalise

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<sup>42</sup> Eric Smith, *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy* (Ipswich: The Boydell Press; Totowa N.J.: Rowan & Littlefield, 1977) 1.

<sup>43</sup> Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1987) 20.

man.<sup>44</sup> The pastoral is born out of the human desire to look towards a better world, which, if it cannot be achieved in life, must certainly be available in death. It is the pastoral elegy's 'conventions [which] have informed non-pastoral elegies throughout the history of the genre' even if its mode is rejected. The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics suggests that these influences include:

...a procession of mourners, extended use of repetition and refrain, antiphony or competition between voices, appeals and questionings of deities and witnesses, outbreaks of anger or criticism, offerings of tribute and rewards, and the use of imagery such as water, vegetation, sources of light, and emblems of sexual power drawn from the natural world depicted as either injured victim or site of renewal.<sup>45</sup>

These symbols are abundantly present in an elegy such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Adonais'.<sup>46</sup> In later elegies, however, their presence has been inconsistent. Yet, as R. Clifton Spargo observes, a number of poets (including Whitman, Hardy, Yeats, Eliot and Stevens) 'invoke pastoral scenes, almost perhaps as a poetic reflex, but with perceptibly diminished expectations about the consolations they will offer.'<sup>47</sup> As the twentieth-century began with the advent of mechanised warfare and industrialised slaughter, the idea of a

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<sup>44</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 20.

<sup>45</sup> 'Elegy,' New Princeton.

<sup>46</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Adonais,' Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works: including Poetry, Prose, and Drama, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2003).

<sup>47</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins U.P., 2004) 225.



pastoral idyll seemed not only archaic, but seriously inappropriate. John

Vickery notes:

Loss of life, of course, continues to play a central role in the elegiac imaginations. But to it have been added losses in cultures and civilisations...dissolutions of the family and families...changes and concomitant losses in personal relations such as romantic love and marriage...intellectual excisions and reconfigurations of philosophical notions such as time...and self...and efforts to assess the contemporary nature and value of war. Each of these has occasioned profound elegiac attitudes ranging from regret, sorrow, confusion, and alienation to outright despair.<sup>48</sup>

Another characteristic which has become prominent in modern elegy is the 'anti-elegy'. Spargo writes:

Locating *anti-elegy* in the modern moment when the elegy takes a turn against itself and begins to doubt the literary conventions for redeeming grief as well as the broader sociophilosophical possibility of consolation, Jahan Ramazani has nevertheless emphasized how modern literary mourning becomes more than ever a viable, perhaps necessary, resource for our psychic confrontation with death. Though anti-elegiac sentiment – wherein the emphasis falls to the anticonsolatory, nontranscendent perspective of modern grief – resists literary and social conventions, it traces implicitly the survival of grief against a social totality that denies the dead.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> John B. Vickery, *The Modern Elegiac Temper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U.P., 2006) 1.

<sup>49</sup> Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 131.

Yet, Spargo insists that anti-elegy is not especially a modern phenomenon and that one should be cautious in defining it so: "There is a risk, however, that in characterising anti-elegy as peculiar to the modern moment, we might underestimate the degree to which anti-elegiac protest is inherent in the tradition of elegy almost since its inception..."<sup>50</sup> The anti-elegy is to be found in a number of Hughes's poems, and as Spargo suggests, in the very act of defying the legacy of elegy, the elegist will implicitly make acknowledgements of its existence.

Furthermore, modern elegists tend to be less involved in the 'act' of the elegy; they perhaps do not actively work for a prosperous solution to the very obvious problem that death has perpetuated. There appears to be an affected passivity in their poems which amplifies the emotional, and sometimes actual, violence of death. Instead of situating the deceased in a heavenly afterlife, the modern elegist seems to prefer locales familiar to the poet and the deceased, a sort of tangible memento which remains. For Seamus Heaney, such a place is at the kitchen sink, where he once stood peeling potatoes with his mother:

When all the others were away at Mass  
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.  
They broke the silence, let fall one by one

...

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<sup>50</sup> Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 131.

I remembered her head bent towards my head,  
 Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives-  
 Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

'Clearances' (III,1-3, 12-4)<sup>51</sup>

There is also a trend in modern elegy to mute the sometimes hyperbolic elegiac feature of a transformation in death to a star or a natural energy, for instance. There may not be a transition to a paradise, but the transformation might be death itself. Sylvia Plath's 'Edge'<sup>52</sup> appears to present a simple, unadorned transformation from life to death, 'The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears the smile of accomplishment' (1-3). The woman of the poem is 'perfected' in death. Plath does not conjure images of disappointment or regret at the woman's passing, nor does she court a glorious transition, the physical body confronts the speaker with a dead woman at her zenith on earth, rather than in heaven. We see in several elegies of the twentieth-century that the circumstances of death are blunt and unforgiving; questioning why the dead have died is replaced by the stark reality that the cause of some deaths (be they through war, disease, accident or terrorism) are painfully obvious, as in the case of Naomi Replansky's Holocaust elegy, 'The Six Million'<sup>53</sup>:

No gods were there, no demons.

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<sup>51</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Clearances,' Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996 (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 306.

<sup>52</sup> Sylvia Plath, Ariel (London: Faber and Faber, 1965, rpt. 1974) 85.

<sup>53</sup> Naomi Replansky, 'The Six Million,' Inventions of Farewell: A Book of Elegies, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert. (London: Norton, 2001) 326.

They died at the hands of men,  
 The cold that came from men,  
 The lions made like men,  
 The furnace built by men.

How can that be, my brothers?

But it is true my sisters.

No miracle to spare them...

(19-26)

The current legacy of the elegy appears to be one which is often a candid, unembellished account of death, dwelling on what is left behind after the departure of the living, rather than an attempt to re-contextualise the dead in the limitless world of an imagined afterlife. Now in the poetry of mourning, death is a 'difficult, tedious, painful enterprise.'<sup>54</sup>

Evidently, the fascination with death has not evaded literary criticism, and a variety of approaches have been adopted; W.D. Shaw's Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions<sup>55</sup> is a detailed debate concerning the many paradoxes present in elegy; Eric Smith's By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy undertakes a critical discussion of the major English elegies from 'Lycidas' onwards. David Kennedy's recently published Elegy<sup>56</sup> is an excellent introduction to the genre and also to contemporary critical debates surrounding its historical development and its contemporary manifestations.

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<sup>54</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Lament,' (l.177), The Man with the Night Sweats (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) 61.

<sup>55</sup> W.D. Shaw, Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins UP, 1994).

<sup>56</sup> David Kennedy, Elegy, The New Critical Idiom (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2007).

Kennedy's study attempts to reconcile elegy with a modern historical context by noting that elegy is no longer restricted to a sub-genre of poetry. Indeed, it has claims on a much broader culture. He writes that 'wider attitudes to experience have become overwhelmingly elegiac. The reasons for wider elegiac attitudes are complex but, from an English cultural perspective, would certainly include what Blake Morrison identified in Philip Larkin's poetry as "post-imperial tristesse".<sup>57</sup> One must also account for 'the rise of the post-war heritage industry and its commodified nostalgia.'<sup>58</sup> Post-war cultural melancholy is considered in relation to Hughes's poetry in Chapter Two of this thesis. It is not just the aftermath of the Second World War that has shaped the nature of mourning in contemporary culture, however. More recently, as Kennedy observes:

Death and mourning have become participatory, public spectacles. Live television coverage of events such as 9/11, the Belsan school siege and the 2004 Asian tsunami and documentaries that seek to explore 'what happened next' have detached grief from personal loss. Anyone who lives in a city will have seen flowers placed at the sites of road accidents; and, since the end of the Second World War, national identity has become synonymous with remembrance.<sup>59</sup>

In Hughes's poetry, one can certainly see the tendency to link national identity and remembrance, and whilst Hughes died before the surge in

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<sup>57</sup> Kennedy, *Elegy*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Kennedy, *Elegy*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Kennedy, *Elegy*, 7.

twenty-four hour news culture, Kennedy's remarks point towards the modern context in which contemporary elegies are now written and received.

Perhaps the most significant critical studies of elegy are Peter Sacks's The English Elegy and Jahan Ramazani's Poetry of Mourning.<sup>60</sup> Sacks's study (which is specifically of the English elegiac tradition) illuminates the motifs and symbols commonly associated with the elegy, but also questions traditional critical responses in the opening remarks of his book, suggesting that, 'Most studies of the elegy tend to describe rather than interpret the genre's conventions'. In order to remedy this, Sacks stresses the importance of asking 'how the traditional forms and figures of elegy relate to the experience of loss and the search for consolation.'<sup>61</sup> Subject to this interpretation are a number of elegiac tropes (also listed above) useful to the study of Hughes's elegies, including 'myth...the use of repetition and refrains, the reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger and cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation and the traditional images of resurrection.' Furthermore, Sacks suggests the importance of 'the elegist's need to draw attention, consolingly, to his own surviving powers.'<sup>62</sup> It is useful to see how Hughes, as an English poet, utilises these traditions in his own elegies, but in some cases how he tries to test their limits and interpret them in a way unique to his poetry.

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<sup>60</sup> Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (Chicago and London: U. Of Chicago P., 1994).

<sup>61</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 2.

Sacks's study concludes in the early twentieth-century with W.B. Yeats, while Ramazani's book concentrates on describing the role of the modern elegist from Yeats and Thomas Hardy onwards. According to Ramazani, 'modern poets reanimate the elegy not by slavishly adopting its conventions; instead, they violate its norms and transgress its limits.'<sup>63</sup> This is true of Hughes's elegies. Where Ramazani's book is of further importance to the study of Hughes is the contextualisation of the modern elegist. 'In the modern period', Ramazani writes, '[there is] an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and scepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before.' He continues:

As warfare was industrialized and mass death augmented, as mourning rites were weakened and the "funeral director" professionalized, as the dying were shut away in hospitals and death itself made a taboo subject, poetry increasingly became an important cultural space for mourning the dead. God may have died, but the dead have turned to gods for many modern poets.<sup>64</sup>

The context for Hughes's writing is set. As Ramazani suggests, a modern elegist, such as Hughes, is eager to open up the subject of death to a reader whose encounters with mortality have been somewhat annulled by a restrictive social climate. It is for these reasons that when reading Hughes's elegies, one must be prepared to acknowledge the conventions, but also to

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<sup>63</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 1.

account for his radical poetic responses to death, and this often necessitates equally radical interpretations.

There are problematic areas for criticism to overcome. Ramazani writes of the difficulties encountered by the elegy in the twentieth-century, which include: 'God's death, the withdrawal of nature's consolatory powers, the apparent absurdity of elegiac expectation, and the disappearance of the individual from the mystic pad of history.'<sup>65</sup> It is up to the modern elegist to create an elegy capable of its own consolations or resurrections for the deceased. Sometimes, it does neither, as in the case of William Carlos Williams's elegy for his father, 'Death': 'he's dead / the old bastard' (6-7).<sup>66</sup> The twentieth-century presents a set of elegies more varied and individual than those of any era preceding it. Perhaps this is in order to compensate for the problems Ramazani cites. The elegy can no longer be easily defined and identified according to established categories and conventions.

Neil Corcoran, writing in English Poetry Since 1940,<sup>67</sup> is one of only very few critics to have observed an elegiac trait in Hughes's poetry, where he notes: "There are poems in which natural energy or effort is evoked with a kind of desperation, in the anguished acknowledgement that, however intense the present power might be, it cannot long survive; and it is notable

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<sup>65</sup> Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 37.

<sup>66</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'Death,' Inventions of Farewell, 83.

<sup>67</sup> Neil Corcoran, English Poetry Since 1940 (Harlow: Longman, 1993).



that elegy itself – is a generic constant in Hughes.’<sup>68</sup> This ‘constant’ can be identified as the poet’s ability to write about death factually as distinguished from his ability to elegise. A comparison between ‘View of a Pig’ and ‘The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar’ in Chapter Three of this thesis shows how Hughes can adopt a cold, factual approach in his verse, but also summon the resources to write more personal elegies. Furthermore, a striking feature is Hughes’s capacity to reveal *both* approaches in his verse; in Remains of Elmet, in the middle period of Hughes’s writing, he fully integrates his capacity to draw upon both modes of representing death. In recognising this trait, we can see that a poem that does not follow convention might still be regarded as part of elegiac tradition.

But what is it that is distinctive about Hughes’s ‘factual’ poetic voice? This thesis argues that Hughes does not falsify in his elegies, or poems about death. There is always a connection to the actual; his work is dense as it appears he is trying mimetically to translate life and death through his verse. Reviewing The Hawk in the Rain in 1959, A.E. Dyson noted that Hughes is ‘concerned to recreate and participate in experience, not to reflect upon it from a distance’.<sup>69</sup> His review further emphasises the strong sense of immediacy in Hughes’s early work:

[There is] a general sense of being at the white-hot moment of experience: directly involved, so that the experience of the

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<sup>68</sup> Corcoran, English Poetry, 117.

<sup>69</sup> A.E. Dyson, ‘Ted Hughes,’ Critical Quarterly Autumn 1959, 220.

words is inseparable from the insight with which they grapple, and is, indeed, the high point of awareness itself.<sup>70</sup>

Hughes establishes a pervasive motif for his ability to mourn the 'actual' from very early on in a poem where 'three of the four elements seem to be in alliance with death.'<sup>71</sup> 'The Hawk in the Rain'<sup>72</sup> presents a hawk operating 'effortlessly at flight' (5) (a symbol of Hughes's poetic imagination) against the persona's struggle to cope with the ploughland in which they walk (the intractable and dense complexities of the 'actual' world). The hawk is forced to the ground and 'smashed'. But, in keeping with the elegiac convention, the life of the hawk, its blood and its energy are transformed into a new energy in nature, and in doing so, imagination encounters the actual. This motif has widespread relevance for those poems by Hughes which convey ideas and processes of thought true to actuality. But perhaps the best expression of Hughes's attempt to convey an authentic and verifiable poetic *language* (and it is one which I will use on occasion) comes from a line in 'Hawk Roosting'<sup>73</sup>: 'No falsifying dream'(2). Al Alvarez points to the unusual way in which Hughes's work appears to be dreamlike and yet firmly committed to the actual. He describes Hughes's efforts as,

a serious attempt to re-create and so clarify, unfalsified and in the strongest imaginative terms possible, a powerful complex of

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<sup>70</sup> Dyson, 'Ted Hughes,' *Critical Quarterly*, 222.

<sup>71</sup> Sagar, 'The Poetry Does Not Matter,' *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes*, ed. Leonard M. Scigaj, *Critical Essays on British Literature* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1992.) 99.

<sup>72</sup> Hughes, *Hawk*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Hughes, *Lupercal*, 26.

emotions and sensations... [which] reach back, as in a dream, into a nexus of fear and sensation. Their brute world is part physical, part state of mind.<sup>74</sup>

Hughes's language may deceive the reader into believing that he is elevating the subject matter to the extent that it is either a distorted or hyperbolic representation of the actual – but a closer inspection reveals that Hughes's metaphors and the essence of his individual poems are close to a tangible human experience. Skea writes, 'in spite of the complex and difficult frameworks [Hughes] adopted...he strove all his life to achieve a simple and direct language which would draw people into his poems, stir their visual imaginations and their memories and, thereby, change them.'<sup>75</sup> This is true of his elegies from the beginning of his career to its end. In turn, Hughes dispenses with much of the artifice and contrivance of earlier elegy, using mimetic devices that help to persuade us that we are in the 'actual' world' rather than one of nymphs and fauns. To paraphrase Alvarez, in the strongest possible terms, Hughes shuns a poetic not complicit with this world-view.

Hughes's stylistic development as an elegist may be better understood by acknowledging the concurrent progression of his poetic style. His early approach might be typified by a poem such as 'Witches'<sup>76</sup>:

Once was every woman the witch  
To ride a weed the wagwort road:

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<sup>74</sup> A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 31.

<sup>75</sup> Ann Skea, *Correspondence with Edward Hadley*, 20 April 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Hughes, *Lupercal*, 48.

Devil to do whatever she would:

Each rosebud, every old bitch.

Did they bargain their bodies or no?

Propriety the devil that

Went horsing on their every thought

When they scowled the strong and lucky low.

(1-8)

The rhythm is slightly inconsistent, but this is negligible; the combined use of half rhyme lends the poems a fluidity which just resists being overtly lyrical.

The alliterative qualities of the poem are markers of what Hughes later relies on greatly when he forgoes a more traditional mode in his poetry.

Furthermore, behind the veneer of a verse regimented by a recognisable prosody, lie words which are slightly jagged, as if they are challenging the regimented context of their form. Seamus Heaney makes similar remarks in his essay, 'Englands of the Mind':

His consonants are the Norsemen, the Normans, the Roundheads in the world of his vocables, hacking and hedging and hammering down the abundance of luxury and possible lasciviousness of the vowels, 'I imagine this midnight moment's forest' – the first line of the well known 'The Thought Fox' – is hushed, but it is a hush achieved by the quelling, battenning-down action of the m's and d's and t's: I iMagine this MiDnighT MoMenT's foresT.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 81.

These are a few characteristics common to Hughes's early poetry. Compare then an extract from the middle period of Hughes's writing in the seventies.

This is 'Crow Sickened', from Crow<sup>78</sup>:

His illness was something could not vomit him up.

Unwinding the world like a ball of wool  
Found the last end tied round his own finger.

Decided to get death, but whatever  
Walked into his ambush  
Was always his own body.

Where is this somebody who has me under?

'Crow Sickened,' (1-7)

Although it is not his most ambitious poem of the seventies, 'Crow Sickened' does betray a few of the stylistic changes from his earlier poetry. By now, alliteration, an inversion of word order and an almost antagonistic choice of words combine to engage the reader in new ways, but also to illustrate an effort to reconstitute poetry into something wild and untamed. David Lodge writes, "The language has a vernacular robustness, often making effective use of colloquialism and slang... [Crow is] one of the rare cases where punctuation and typographical layout are really functional, guiding and controlling the reader's inner voice. There are few rhymes, and no regularity

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<sup>78</sup> Ted Hughes, Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) 68.

of line length in most of the poems, yet Hughes rarely falls into the slackness this invites. The poems are strong-lined, packed, purposeful.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, A. Kingsley Weatherhead writes of how Hughes ‘wants to come to terms with a dehumanised post-holocaust world; fearing what the new may bring, he prepares to meet it with a fearless style.’<sup>80</sup> These attempts at a jagged, belligerent poetry aim ‘to depict a violence which shocks society with [the] truth about itself and its actions.’<sup>81</sup> Yet, in the late seventies and early eighties, Hughes’s tone mellows slightly, as can be seen with Moortown Elegies<sup>82</sup>:

Wind out of freezing Europe. A mean snow  
 Fiery cold. Ewes caked crusty with snow,  
 Their new hot lambs wet trembling  
 And crying on trampled patches, under the hedge –  
 Twenty miles of open lower landscape  
 Blows into their wetness.

‘Bringing in New Couples’ (1-6)

Whilst Moortown Elegies is not typical of Hughes’s style in the seventies and eighties, it does link to his later work in Birthday Letters<sup>83</sup>:

Was it then I bought a peach? That’s as I remember.  
 From a stall near Charing Cross Station.  
 It was the first fresh peach I had ever tasted.  
 I could hardly believe how delicious.

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<sup>79</sup> David Lodge, ‘Crow and the Cartoons,’ Critical Quarterly, Spring 1971, 42.

<sup>80</sup> A. Kingsley Weatherhead, The British Dissonance: Essays on Ten Contemporary Poets (Columbia & London: Uni. Of Missouri P., 1983) 96.

<sup>81</sup> Kendall, War Poetry, 208.

<sup>82</sup> Hughes, Moortown Elegies, 14.

<sup>83</sup> Hughes, Birthday Letters, 3

At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh  
 By my ignorance of the simplest things.

'Fulbright Scholars' (24-9)

In both instances, the verse is prose-like in its presentation, though in the case of Moortown Elegies, it retains something of the vivacious, conjuring language of the Crow poems. With Moortown Elegies and Birthday Letters there is a journal-like drive to the lines; the alliteration is played down slightly, but still paramount to the success of his lines. Whilst this brief summary does not do justice to the stylistic choices Hughes made throughout his career, it is nevertheless a rudimentary guide to a poet whose form was invariably unique and distinguished.<sup>84</sup>

Hughes's drive for a verisimilitude in his elegies, whilst not completely original, is consistent. The desire for honesty, away from the evocation of gods and muses, seems to be in line with a typically twentieth-century approach. This would account for the subtleties of elegies such as W.H. Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats',<sup>85</sup> in which memorialisation appears prosaic:

He disappeared in the dead of winter:  
 The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,  
 And snow disfigured the public statues;  
 The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day

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<sup>84</sup> Keith Sagar's essay 'The Poetry Does Not Matter' in Critical Essays on Ted Hughes ed. Leonard M.Scigaj (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1992) provides a helpful account of Hughes's poetic style.

<sup>85</sup> W.H. Auden, Selected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) 80.

What instruments we have agree  
 The day of his death was a dark cold day.

(1-6)

With Auden's poem, religion has given way to a desacralised world, one substituted by science, and sense by technology, the reliance is now on 'instruments' to remember and report the nuances of the day. Gone are the overt, passionate lamentations of John Milton's 'melodious tear' ('Lycidas', 14) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's lachrymation for Adonais. Instead, the images are deliberately mundane ('the airports [are] almost deserted'). It is atmospheric; the poem recounts a nondescript, unremarkable day on which Yeats died. It is another death on another day. But Auden's nonchalant opening gambit pays off, for by the end of the elegy, the reader is acquainted not just with an unremarkable day, but also with a remarkable poet.

Whilst they do deviate from elegiac convention, Hughes's elegies do not ignore key elegies such as 'Lycidas', 'Adonais', In Memoriam. Indeed, many of his elegies use themes or repeat images and motifs which are featured in the significant elegies of the past. Both Sacks and Ramazani draw attention to common elegiac codes which become apparent in this study. Tropes such as flowers, processions and the hope of renewal for the deceased are present in Hughes's elegies, but in such a way that Hughes can be seen to be contributing something fresh to the elegiac mode.



This study proposes that Ted Hughes is an elegist who is both complicit with and in defiance of traditional modes and practices in established elegiac poetry. Chapter Two introduces a chronological reading of the poems as a way of fully realising Hughes's development. The war elegies of The Hawk in the Rain and Wodwo helps the reader to place Hughes in his literary context as a post-war poet, and they also 'underscore two phenomena: the survivor's view of and response to a recently passed war, and the nature of the deceased as a victim of society and culture, both of which ironically still live.'<sup>86</sup> Yet, the post-war poetic has been divided; if one is to accept Alvarez's line of thought that 'the new poetry' of the post-war world is 'about something'<sup>87</sup> as opposed to its comparatively sedate predecessors (the poetry of the Movement especially), then one finds Hughes situated at the cutting edge. The chapter offers a comparison of war poems by Hughes and Philip Larkin in order to discover Hughes's contextual relationship with other poets. It also introduces Hughes's new and innovative poetry, which is partly an attempt to reinvigorate English verse, but is also born out of a need to keep true to his own inner voice without being compromised by an adherence to existing poetic norms.

Chapter Two uses Hughes's poetry of war as a starting point for a discussion of his elegiac writing. Both World Wars were responsible for a massive social, political and industrial upheaval, and for loss of life on a

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<sup>86</sup> Vickery, Elegiac Temper, 45.

<sup>87</sup> Alvarez, The New Poetry, 31.

colossal scale. By the end of his career as a poet, Hughes was elegising one single individual, his former wife Sylvia Plath, as opposed to the many thousands of lives lost in war. The war elegies featured in this chapter provide a strong indication of Hughes's reforming approach to poetry and to the elegy at an early stage of his career. 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' expresses dissatisfaction with processes of mourning in both literature and society, which it considers insufficient and, to an extent, insulting to the memory of those who died in combat. 'Six Young Men' uses a language of urgency and action as opposed to the often demure language traditionally associated with elegy, and it openly confronts the pain and suffering experienced by the soldiers. 'Out'<sup>88</sup> (like 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers') is frustrated with the rites used to mourn the war dead and, as in 'Six Young Men', the language of the poem powerfully conveys this angst. These poems contain the requisite elegiac acts of reflection on the life of the deceased, and especially important for poetry of the war, they translate grief on a domestic level as something symptomatic of national issues. But they also all express the inadequacy of mourning and, by implication, the shortcomings of elegy as seen by Hughes. Now Hughes can reform it by exploiting an opportunity to purge poetry of redundant and ineffective practices. This is best represented with 'Out', where Hughes uses the opportunity to set a new precedent in elegiac poetry through his verse. The form is innovative, its appearance sometimes erratic, but it marks

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<sup>88</sup> Hughes, *Wodwo*, 155.

Hughes's rejection of existing practices. This chapter considers these changes and how they affect the wider scope of his elegies.

Yet, these elegies still use some tropes and motifs common to the genre. So the elegiac theme of premature death is also explored in Chapter Two, as is the possibility of regeneration in nature and the poet's castigation of those responsible for death. Considering that Wilfred Owen thought of titling a collection of his war poems English Elegies<sup>89</sup> then the notion that war poems *can* be elegiac bears a degree of credibility and lineage. Written after two world wars, where death and destruction occurred on an unprecedented scale, these elegies have to acclimatise to the world in which they find themselves. The lamentation of individuals is replaced by the elegy which has to mourn death on a massive scale. But 'Out', for example, indicates that, for Hughes, surviving a conflict such as the First World War may be only the beginning of a lifetime of traumas lived in the shadow of such harrowing experiences.

Chapter Two concludes with a reading of 'Her Husband', from *Wodwo*. This poem exemplifies a pervasive cultural melancholy in the inter/post-war period where individuals and society both recover from a shell-shock of sorts. This melancholy is evident in Hughes's elegy. The poem uses an emotionally broken marriage as a metaphor for a sense of alienation

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<sup>89</sup> Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 69.

between the subject and the state. It is this alienation and sterility in society which sets the tone for the reading of Remains of Elmet in Chapter Four.

Chapter Three gathers individual elegies written and published between The Hawk in the Rain and Wodwo, as well as some published later in order to establish a comprehensive understanding of Hughes's elegiac poetry. It looks at individual elements which are concurrent in Hughes's poems and the wider scope of elegy, so that we might be able to achieve a range of interpretation which is not limited to the identification of common elegiac characteristics. 'The Jaguar', for example, is used as a starting point for an investigation into the natural energies at work in Hughes's verse. 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar' also utilises these energies, and draws attention to the power that still resides in language. It also examines 'View of a Pig', an unsympathetic appreciation of a dead creature, as an anti-elegy and 'My Uncle's Wound' as a poem which illustrates what it is to be a victim of the conflicting energies at work in the world. A portion of this chapter also considers the role of the vegetation deity who, according to Peter Sacks's study, is integral to the work of mourning. Using the poem 'Lupercalia' and the fertility ritual upon which it is based, one can see not only that Lupercal is perhaps Hughes's most candid invocation of his spiritual muse, but also that strong symbols of fertility operate within, and are juxtaposed with, elegiac norms and conventions. The following section considers Hughes's translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bardo Thödol, a text which is read to the

dying and the dead in order to ensure the purification of the soul so that a transition to a paradisiacal afterlife is more likely to be achieved. The text's linguistic and cultural associations with elegy are examined, in anticipation of its influences on the narratives of later poetic sequences by Hughes. To this effect, this chapter considers Crow, Gaudete<sup>90</sup> and Cave Birds<sup>91</sup> as sequences whose rough-hewn verses and images of harrowings, ugliness and death are in part a reaction against a language of passivity in modern English poetry.

From the wide base of war, Hughes begins to restrict his focus. With Remains of Elmet and Moortown Elegies in Chapter Four, Hughes's vision of the nation is replaced by a response to individual communities. Remains of Elmet is a sequence which examines the decline of Hughes's native Calder Valley in West Yorkshire. The poems lament the erosion of the natural world and the emergence of a social sterility in the area since the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the advent of international conflicts. The poems also lament the fall of these industries in the twentieth-century. Within this, there are inevitable 'man vs. nature' debates, but more appropriately for the elegy, the chapter examines the contrast between rural poetry and pastoral poetry. These disparate modes of expression (in this case defined by W.J. Keith<sup>92</sup>) are important categories. The word 'pastoral' brings with it a set of idealistic values and unspoilt images, which would be untrue to the depiction

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<sup>90</sup> Ted Hughes, Gaudete (London: Faber and Faber, 1977).

<sup>91</sup> Ted Hughes, Cave Birds (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).

<sup>92</sup> W.J. Keith, The Rural Tradition (Hassocks, Brighton: U of Toronto P, The Harvester Press, 1975).

of the Calder Valley, where Hughes embraces a *rural* poetic in order to remain dedicated to his 'unfalsifying dream'. With this style of writing, Hughes can more effectively convey the environment of the Calder Valley without glossing over what might be termed 'un-pastoral' issues and images. But the laments offered are uneasy because of the unremitting sense of hopelessness for the valley, portrayed by Hughes. It emerges that, instead of elegies, Hughes has written a series of anti-elegies – poems which mourn, but in a way which neither calls for sympathy or empathy from the reader, nor elicits overt expressions of grief or regret on the part of the poet. As with his war elegies, Hughes does use commonplace elegiac motifs, but often their function is to subvert the genre rather than to enforce it.

There are several overriding themes which this chapter investigates. The question of spirit (natural or otherwise) pervades the sequence; can 'spirit' be of any use to the rapid decline of the valley, or is such a belief now redundant? Without a renewing spirit, what chance is there for Hughes's poems to operate even as anti-elegies? This is an opportunity to examine Hughes's use of absence in his poetry as an extension of the way death is talked about in terms of 'loss'. The chapter proposes that the closure of the mills inhibits the construction of a mourning cloth, important to the successful completion of consolation and mourning. This has implications for the reading of the war-related poems in Remains of Elmet and the symbol of the cenotaph ('empty tomb'), which Hughes uses repeatedly. Remains of

Elmet is also placed within a tradition of poetry which mourns the loss of the countryside to the encroachment of industry. This is evident in the poems of John Clare and William Wordsworth, whose verse pre-empted Hughes's own concerns about the urbanisation of rural ways of life. The sequence uses the theme of family throughout its course; evoked in the first poem, Hughes's mother takes many matriarchal forms in the poems that follow. It becomes evident by the penultimate poem that Hughes has worked for the salvation of the dead members of his family buried in the valley; once they are saved, he leaves the valley to its own devices. In his ecological appraisal of Remains of Elmet, Leonard M. Scigaj directs attention to Hughes's use of decomposition as a metaphor for 'the dismantling of Hughes's great sixties monomyth: his indictment of the empiricism and religious repression of post-Industrial Revolution Western culture.'<sup>93</sup> Scigaj's argument is compelling and is referred to extensively in Chapter Four. However, this study extracts the principal idea of decomposition, as suggested by Scigaj, and places it in a framework relevant to the elegy, where a process of decomposition and renewal is replicated in poems for the deceased.

By contrast, Moortown Elegies offers a relatively optimistic approach to rural literature. Its title at once identifies itself as important to this study. But what is being elegised? The sequence is an account of life and death on Hughes's Devonshire farm, a series of poems born out of occasional journal

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<sup>93</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 109.

entries written by the poet. He admits that, while he contended with new and increasingly restrictive agricultural policies, he tried not to mourn overtly the passing of farming traditions. Instead, he presents the reader with the birth and death of livestock in a manner true to his poetic gift of 'no falsifying dream'; none of the details, no matter how explicit, is omitted. These poems illustrate the thin divide between life and death in this environment, and how man must play a custodial role with nature in order for them both to survive. The poems, whilst they are largely factual in tone, offer brief glimpses into what Hughes sees as the almost supernatural force operating in nature. There is a sense that the presence of a natural spirit makes problematic the factual nature of Moortown Elegies. 'Coming Down through Somerset' tries to match Hughes's awareness that all things eventually die and decay with a desire to preserve the dead indefinitely. The final poems of the sequence are about Hughes's father-in-law and farming mentor, Jack Orchard. 'The Day He Died', one of Hughes's most accomplished elegies, is complemented by other elegies which recall memories of Orchard. But they do raise difficult questions; Hughes is a poet who utilises rural writing as opposed to pastoral – so how does he mourn the dead shepherd figure of Orchard whilst staying true to his unfalsified approach to poetry. This chapter questions the importance of the sequence as a poetic device within Hughes's elegy, drawing on Sacks's reading of In Memoriam, and it attempts to



understand why the sequence figures prominently as a formal constituent in the history of elegy.

Chapter Five is a chance to consider where Hughes's elegies lie in the broad panorama of elegiac poetry. River<sup>94</sup> is a sequence which contains some of the poet's less obvious elegies, but by using the river as a recurring elegiac motif, this chapter explores the way fluvial imagery has been used in many prominent elegies. This motif usually symbolises a metaphor for life's 'journey', but it has many divergent qualities. Focussing on Wordsworth's sonnet sequence 'The River Duddon',<sup>95</sup> this study investigates how Wordsworth's call for the poet to be free of his confines, in order to invigorate his poetry, is metaphorically linked to death and the afterlife. This dense metaphorical schema is correlated with Hughes's own attempts to encourage the reader and the poet to divest themselves of what they think they know, in order to be receptive to the power and command of nature, and as a by-product, poetry. The chapter also considers contemporary poetry, including Andrew Motion's 'Fresh Water'<sup>96</sup> and Alice Oswald's Dart,<sup>97</sup> and how these poets have used rivers as potent symbols in their elegies. I assess the role of mythological rivers such as the Styx and the Lethe, and the gender personification of the river and how its sexual overtones are linked to death

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<sup>94</sup> This study uses a conflation of Ted Hughes, River (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) and the revised and updated version of River featured in Ted Hughes, Three Books (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).

<sup>95</sup> William Wordsworth, The Collected Poetry of William Wordsworth (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994) 375.

<sup>96</sup> Andrew Motion, Salt Water (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 3.

<sup>97</sup> Alice Oswald, Dart (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

in a dual creative-destructive process. A lot more than human life is lost in the River elegies; at stake is the environmental damage inflicted upon waterways in Britain and across the world. In spite of this, Hughes's 'salmon poems' symbolise the struggle to survive in nature and the natural will to live at any cost.

If the early Hughes strikes one as the elegist of and for England, he increasingly appears to take on intimate, personal elegies in the latter part of his career. Birthday Letters is his final sequence and the culmination of his work as an elegist. He infuses the sequence with all he has written before, from poems of national grief to local lament, and trains the culmination of his skill on to the individual, his former wife Sylvia Plath. Hughes still brings freshness to the elegy whilst investing in accepted elegiac totems in order to further the cause of consolation. In a crucially important way, Birthday Letters exemplifies the elegiac mode of the poet mourning another poet and shows how Plath envisaged her own literary life. The chapter assesses Hughes's use of the elegiac symbol of the flower in 'Daffodils'. This poem originally appeared in Flowers and Insects,<sup>98</sup> without any overt reference to Plath. The chapter considers how the omission of Plath from the Flowers and Insects version might relate to the poem's appearance in Birthday Letters. Finally, the chapter concentrates on the parallels between the post-war cultural melancholy in England and Plath's own tumultuous emotional state,

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<sup>98</sup> Ted Hughes, Flowers and Insects (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

as presented in the sequence. Birthday Letters is an attempt to write outside of the mythologies which began circulating in the wake of Plath's death.

Andrew Motion writes that '[Plath] has never been allowed to enjoy respect for her work without evoking pity for her situation'.<sup>99</sup> Birthday Letters endeavours to illuminate the reasons behind the pity, but it also brings together a dense nexus of personal feeling powerfully expressed. The stylistic problems of the sequence are addressed in this chapter with reference to Neil Roberts's appreciation of the poems.<sup>100</sup> In many instances within the sequence, Hughes is not looking for redemption of himself or the deceased, but seeking communication. All of these issues are addressed in Chapter Six.

Chapter Seven considers a number of elegies published between River and Birthday Letters, and afterwards. This includes the war elegies in Wolfwatching, where Hughes strives to reach some final resolutions in his career-long use of war in his poetry. His elegy for Princess Diana, his only official elegy as Poet Laureate, is also examined. Capriccio and Howls & Whispers, sequences which are in the same vein as Birthday Letters, are both considered. Capriccio is a sequence of poems for Hughes's sometime partner Assia Wevill, who (like Sylvia Plath) committed suicide, while Howls & Whispers is a selection of poems which appear either to have been composed too late for inclusion in Birthday Letters or to have been deliberately excluded from it. Chapter Seven concludes with an appreciation of elegies

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<sup>99</sup> Andrew Motion, 'A Thunderbolt from the Blue,' The Times, 17 Jan. 1998.

<sup>100</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 197-212.

written by poets such as Andrew Motion, Paul Muldoon and Seamus Heaney  
in memory of Hughes, who died in 1998.



Chapter Two:  
Griefs for Dead Soldiers

At the start of his career as a poet, Hughes, by his own admission, 'wrote again and again about the First World War...because my father's stories made that very near to me, and living in West Yorkshire, where everybody seemed to have lost everybody that went to war, was a very impressive experience to grow up in.'<sup>101</sup> These memories have almost been prominent enough for him to be dubbed a 'war-poet' due to his prolific output of war-related poetry. He is both the disaffected persona of the soldier-poet like Wilfred Owen ('whose poems I was greatly infatuated by'<sup>102</sup>) but also the conscious voice of a post-war sorrow.

Perceiving Hughes as a war-poet allows one a greater understanding of the elegies in his first collection of poems. But Hughes's position as a war-poet, according to Tim Kendall's excellent chapter on Hughes, 'requires some defending because, notwithstanding his own prompts, the bulk of critical writing on Hughes remains silent about war.'<sup>103</sup> Many of these studies consider the role of war in Hughes's poetry in passing, 'and it is typically assumed to be representative of something larger.'<sup>104</sup> The most effective war-elegies in The Hawk in the Rain are 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers'<sup>105</sup> and 'Six

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<sup>101</sup> From a transcript of Ted Hughes reading at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week, March 1976 The Ted Hughes Homepage, ed. Ann Skea

<<http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Adelaide.htm>> 28 October 2005.

<sup>102</sup> Skea, The Ted Hughes Homepage, <<http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Adelaide.htm>>.

<sup>103</sup> Kendall, War Poetry, 198.

<sup>104</sup> Kendall, War Poetry, 198.

<sup>105</sup> Hughes, Hawk, 52.

Young Men'. These two poems share an elegiac characteristic; from 'Lycidas' through to 'Adonais' and In Memoriam, the elegy often laments the tragedy of a premature death, and seldom has there been such an accelerated amount of premature deaths than during the First World War. Secondly, the tone is distinctly reflective and mournful in these poems as opposed to 'Bayonet Charge'<sup>106</sup> and 'Two Wise Generals',<sup>107</sup> which are less obviously elegiac. 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' is a study of grieving and 'Six Young Men' considers our own impermanence and mortal fragility. There are traditions and traces of the elegiac lineage in both poems; they also allude to poets such as Wilfred Owen, Laurence Binyon, and Ivor Gurney, whose poems were often reflections on mortality.

To consider the wider historical context, one should recall that a majority of those killed in the First World War were buried abroad at the orders of the government; their families in England were denied the traditional ritual of mourning the dead. Cenotaphs and memorials for the dead were built as a direct reaction to the government's decision that the fallen soldiers should be buried together as equals near to where they had been killed. The construction of war memorials was a grass roots movement; communities chose the design of the memorial, but the common aim was to have their names living forever. So in some respects, a poem such as 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers', is an attempt to reconcile individual tragedies amidst the

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<sup>106</sup> Hughes, Hawk, 51.

<sup>107</sup> Hughes, Hawk, 56.

mass of heartbreaks propagated by war, and to become a memorial more appropriate than the cenotaph which Hughes evokes. Written as three sonnets (a form common to elegy), 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' exhibits dissatisfaction with mourning codes. In isolation, part one would be an adequate (if slightly rhetorical) war poem. Yet the very fact that Hughes digresses upon individual causes and shattered ceremonies in parts two and three, as opposed to their formal counterparts in part one shows, not only empathy, but frustration with practices which seem removed from the actuality of experience. The national sorrow, though sombre and earnest, knows of 'no other wound' (I, 13) than the ritual and orchestration of the annual ceremony at the cenotaph. Hughes's language indicates a need for reformation; the sergeant major's voice 'blown about by the wind' (I, 10) may come to symbolise the distortion of the cenotaph's 'artificial' message. The 'Secretest, tiniest' (II, 1) opening of part two lures the reader away from the 'Mightiest.../...unveiling of the cenotaph' (I, 1-2) of part one. It is in part two that Hughes consolidates his frustration with misleading ceremony and, in turn, the consolation found in a language removed from the engagement with experience. For here, 'bared / Words shear the hawsers of love' (II, 4-5): consolatory language has been not only replaced but lashed 'Back in the darkness, blinding and severing.' (II, 6) Restrained and inauthentic language (made manifest by the telegram) is destructive and cannot mediate loss sufficiently enough to console the figure of the widow. The continuation of

domestic ceremony ('Still she will carry cups from table to sink.'(II, 9)) is at odds with the widow's inability to seek a satisfactory consolation; 'She cannot build her sorrow into a monument / And walk away from it' (II, 10-1) as 'The dead man hangs around her neck' (II, 13). Without consolation for the widow, the dead man cannot transcend or be edified by a cenotaph – his continual presence is 'all that remains' in 'a world smashed' (II, 15) for the widow because of his death. Ironically, the soldier's death places an emphasis on his very *presence* for the widow whose grieving process is inhibited by the stress placed on compartmentalising one's grief and not persevering in obstinate condolence. Commenting upon Archibald Macleish's 'Memorial Rain', an elegy which remembers the poet's brother who was killed in combat, John Vickery makes some perceptive observations which can well be applied to Hughes's poem:

[Macleish's poem] sharply polarizes the poet's remembrance of his brother against the official, ambassadorial response. His aim is to undercut the essential trivializing role of the latter in the face of the personal sense of physical loss. In doing so, he implicitly establishes a sharp distinction between the corrupt, valueless world of officialdom and the memory haunted world of the individual and the personal; the latter is held to be guiltless and free of any responsibility for the death or deaths being memorialised.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Vickery, *Elegiac Temper*, 45.



Yet, this guiltlessness may have the survivor distancing themselves from the death, so as to dissociate themselves from those who *are* responsible for this death. In this respect, part two of 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' resembles Ivor Gurney's 'To His Love'<sup>109</sup> where the speaker advises the dead soldier's loved one to 'cover' the deceased and 'Hide that red wet / Thing I must somehow forget' (19-20) so that the mourner may recover and once again be able to function competently in society.

In light of Hughes's attempts to present the 'actual', part three of the poem (which advertises itself as the 'Truest' grief) might be seen as a resolution of the disparate and dissatisfying mourning codes at work. Immediately Hughes uses an image of natural rejuvenation (where since / The battle passed the grass has sprung up' (III, 1-2)) as opposed to the annual ritual of part one and the inescapable static grief of part two; nature in part three is active; the grass has 'sprung', the crow and black fly 'move', the flowers 'bloom', the flies are 'lively'. He observes that such activity is surprising 'in a valleyful of dead men.' (III, 3) The dead of part three 'wait like brides' (III, 7), they are 'flung / Down' (III, 8-9) and are receptive to nature's action. The action of the gravediggers provides a link between nature's action, the static remembrance of parts one and two, and the inert corpses. They use action ('spades hack, and the diggers grunt and sweat' (III, 6)) and omnipotence in order to effect the burial, miming nature's processes with a similar 'craftsman

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<sup>109</sup> Ivor Gurney, 'To His Love,' The Penguin Book of English Verse ed. Paul Keegan (London: Penguin, 2004) 860.

calm' (III, 13). The dead, in waiting like brides, are anticipating their consummation with the earth (by taking 'earth into the mouth' (III, 8-9)) and the fulfilment of the natural process, indeed, ritual of decomposition.

Hughes's suggestion that this is a 'Moment that could annihilate the watcher!' (III, 10) appeals to the mourners of part one who promise 'to remember [the dead] for one day a year in order to be able to forget with a clear conscience for the other three-hundred and sixty-four'.<sup>110</sup> Hughes wants the 'watchers' to remember out of necessity rather than out of duty, but also remember the widow figure of part two, who might be able to seek a greater consolation in the death of her husband if she were to experience the resulting circumstances of his death as depicted in part three. To witness the natural/human process of allowing nature to reclaim the dead is perhaps a more gratifying consolation than the mediation of a telegram and the condolences therein. If this is the suggestion, then Hughes is undercutting the language of elegy, which is often ornate, edifying and untrue to experience; consolation might be better administered in a verse which establishes a mimetic language as a precedent. This is the nature of Hughes's reforming elegiac discourse.

Such a reformation does not inhibit influences on Hughes's poetry.

Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce Est Decorum Est'<sup>111</sup> foreshadows Hughes's linguistic

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<sup>110</sup> Sagar, *Art*, 30.

<sup>111</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Dulce Et Decorum Est,' *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, ed. John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1967 rpt. 1970) 244.

nuances with a language which is both brutal and factual. Indeed, the 'jolt' of Owen's poem ('you could hear, at every jolt, the blood / Come gargling from the froth corrupted lungs / Bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues' (22-5)) is replicated in part three of 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' as 'jolted'.<sup>112</sup> With both poets, there is a need to document the suffering and unceremonious nature of death during battle appropriately. This is a suitable point at which to digress upon the language of the war poem as a lament, as opposed to the ceremonious language of elegy.

What is so striking about Hughes's elegies is, as Keith Sagar remarks, 'a language characterised by its faithfulness to the facts, the evidence of the sense, shaped by a strong inspiration into images...it is a language spiced with great relish for experience, even when that experience is unpleasant or horrifying'.<sup>113</sup> For Hughes, elegy has shifted from the grandiloquence of Milton and the tetrameter stanzas rhyming *abba* of Tennyson's In Memoriam.<sup>114</sup> The First and Second World Wars marked this distinctive change; death became less exclusive since it suddenly affected nearly everyone. Hughes was not the first to rely on a more vernacular diction to report its horrors; the influence of Owen is evident, as too, is the verse of Keith Douglas, who explains his poetic language:

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<sup>112</sup> Hughes again uses the word 'jolt' in his war-poem 'Unknown Soldier' published in Recklings (1966): 'Obscure was the command from the start / That took a bullet's spiritual arc / From the officer's throat through darkness / To jolt a mound of dirt.' (25-8).

<sup>113</sup> Sagar, Art, 26.

<sup>114</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Selected Poems, ed. Aiden Day (London: Penguin, 1991, rev. rpt. 2003) 130.

the word Bullshit...is an army word which signifies humbug and unnecessary detail...to be writing on the themes which have been concerning me lately in lyrical or abstract forms, would be immense bullshitting...my object is to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in the line...I reflect the cynicism and the careful absence of expectation...with which I view the world...many others...are in the same state of mind...I never tried to write about war...until I had experienced it.<sup>115</sup>

The sentiments Douglas expresses are evident in Hughes's work. Though Hughes's experience is not 'actual', the stories of his father are enough for this to translate the action into poetry; indeed, Kendall's remarks seem most appropriate when he writes, 'Hughes's language fights the First World War, going over the top even when his subjects do not.'<sup>116</sup> The reliance on the photograph of 'Six Young Men' lends Hughes's poem an authenticity, and it is a feature he repeats with Remains of Elmet and River. His poems, like Douglas's and Owen's before him, seek to strip down the rhetorical apparatus associated with the Georgian war poetry of writers like Binyon or Brooke. We read in Binyon:

For us the glorious dead have striven,  
They battled that we might be free.  
We to their living cause are given;

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<sup>115</sup> Keith Douglas, Complete Poems, 134-35.

<sup>116</sup> Kendall, War Poetry, 201.

We arm for men that are to be.<sup>117</sup>

(9-12)

In 'Vergissmeinnicht',<sup>118</sup> Douglas describes a dead soldier:

We see him almost with content,  
 abased, and seeming to have paid  
 and mocked at by his own equipment  
 that's hard and good when he's decayed.

...

how on his skin the swart flies move;  
 the dust upon the paper eye  
 and the burst stomach like a cave.

(13-16 / 18-20)

It is not the language of violence (which Hughes himself is so often accused of using), it is the language of the 'actual' driven by a need not to fabricate experience. In the Critical Quarterly, Thom Gunn writes:

[Hughes] is fully engaged by the experience itself and completely immersed in the material of that experience...the reader is moved by the experience conveyed but also lost in it; he is left with an almost overwhelming sense of an experience powerfully communicated and yet incompletely articulated...There is a compulsive, rhythmic energy of significant experience trapped and pinned down in the poetry; the subject is always felt and seen from the *inside* which allows

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<sup>117</sup> Laurence Binyon, The Winnowing Fan: Poems of the Great War, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Elkin Matthews, 1915) 9.

<sup>118</sup> Keith Douglas, Complete Poems, 118.

Hughes little or no room in which the subtleties of irony and ambiguity might manoeuvre.<sup>119</sup>

Tom Paulin considers Hughes's adaptations of history and the language by proposing that Hughes wishes to break from history and that he uses his animal poems to do this. If Hughes does actually wish to exit history, then his role as an elegist would be invalidated. The elegist records an actual physical exit from temporal history caused by death; if the elegist removes himself from history, then he is not in a position to interpret the impermanence and temporality of life. Paulin writes:

Hughes's fierce identification with the momentous instant, the now of action and perception, belongs to a type of Protestant discourse that rejects all that is formal and institutional in favour of something Nietzsche and Hughes term the 'elemental'. By breaking with history, Hughes enables a poetry of free individual conscience, a risky and radically subjective form of writing. But here he immediately re-enters history and exposes the hidden ideology of the natural and elemental.<sup>120</sup>

Paulin argues that Hughes's discourse rejects the formal and authoritarian in favour of something that recognises the realities and creativity of the world we live in: the elemental. By breaking with history, Hughes enables a poetry of 'free individual conscience', something which Paulin notes as risky and

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<sup>119</sup> Thom Gunn, rev. of *The Hawk in the Rain* by Ted Hughes, *Critical Quarterly*, Summer 1960: 185.

<sup>120</sup> Tom Paulin, *Minotaur* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) 255.

subjective writing. But here, Paulin suggests, Hughes cannot remain indefinitely outside of history and the ideological values of his work become apparent. Hughes immediately draws on history's imagery and references and exposes the hidden philosophy of the powers of nature. Once again we return to the resonant image of the hawk in the rain. Hughes's work does not completely desert elegiac and historical frameworks in favour of his shamanistic view of the world (the hawk), since his language is rooted in action ('the drumming ploughland'). What is problematic for the reader, however, is that they might well regard the elegies as 'third hand'. For the reader, the experience of the First World War is articulated by Hughes's father and mediated by Hughes himself; the work inevitably experiences his interpretations which somehow mellow the 'momentous instance' of the language.

How does this language affect the use of elegiac tropes? Like Owen, Hughes dismisses the characteristic of natural consolation through pathetic fallacy in his war-elegies. Part three of 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' serves as a reaffirmation that nature is very much *alive*, and that by insinuation, the dead are very much *dead*. A hope of renewal for the deceased is dismissed in Hughes's poem; for both Owen and Hughes, such a hope seems like a 'sentimental evasion of the reality principle',<sup>121</sup> but an admiration of its process is present. As a consequence, Owen suggests that any elegiac hope

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<sup>121</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 74.

projected by the reader is both 'self-deceptive and deluded'.<sup>122</sup> Ramazani's reading of Owen's poetry as elegy could effortlessly transfer into a reading of Hughes's work, such are the similarities. For both poets, the dead soldier's return to the boggy earth is 'a messy confusion without transcendence.'<sup>123</sup> For both poets, the war dead are not transfigured gloriously, they are permanently underground; Ramazani remarks how Owen mocks 'fictions of [a] rejuvenative return to a source',<sup>124</sup> but as we see, this is also true of Hughes's war verse.

Elegising takes a different tone in 'Six Young Men'. It moves away from an assessment of mourning and its rituals and instead reads as an elegiac remembrance. The poem implicitly laments the premature deaths of the men featured in the photograph, but also remains true to the elegiac need to preserve the dead. Such preservation is a doubled effort; on the one hand, the photograph is a visual record and stimulus, and to an extent, the poem is a record of the photograph rather than the six young men. Hughes elaborates upon the poem's genesis:

[it is] a meditation of a kind – on a photograph of six youths.  
 And it's taken in a valley just below where I lived in Yorkshire  
 and just before the outbreak of the First World War. These six  
 youths were all friends of my father's. And the war came, and  
 this photograph is just one among family photographs – so I've  
 been hearing stories about these characters on this photograph

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<sup>122</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 74.

<sup>123</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 76.

<sup>124</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 75.



for as long as I've been picking up the photograph and looking at it. There were anecdotes about them. When the war came, they all went off together, and my father went, off together... All these Yorkshiremen joined the Lancashire Fusiliers – they were all in the same company. They all trained together. They all went out together. They all fought together and so they tended to get killed together. So this was sort of the fairy-tale – my early stories – just a poem about these early anecdotes that I heard about these men. This is just a poem about this photograph.<sup>125</sup>

'Six Young Men' not only looks like an ode in its formal stanzaic patterning, it also repeats many of the ode's thematic characteristics. The ode's association with formal occasions or temporality lends itself to Hughes's poem, and its likeness to Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'<sup>126</sup> is considerable. Both poems consider the paradoxical nature of figures free from time, age and death but also how these figures are immovable from their temporal designation. This is also true of the photograph in Hughes's poem and the men featured in it:

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well,-  
 Six young men, familiar to their friends.  
 Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged  
 This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.  
 Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,  
 Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,  
 One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,

<sup>125</sup> Skea, The Ted Hughes Homepage, <<http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Adelaide.htm>>.

<sup>126</sup> John Keats, Selected Poetry, ed. Elizabeth Cook, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1998) 177.

One is ridiculous with cocky pride –  
Six months after this picture they were all dead.

(1-9)

The observation of the photograph is given a chilling conclusion. Hughes reiterates the permanent features of the celluloid that 'hold[s] them well' and sets them against the inevitable physical changes to the photograph ('faded and ochre-tinged') the description drawing on sentimental and nostalgic images of the past. The combination of these factors acts as a subtle foreboding that this poem is going to be marked with the impermanence of those it is depicting. This method of foreclosure within the verse can be traced back to Edmund Spenser's 'Astrophel'. Sacks observes:

Spenser seeds the early part of the poem with warning signals, miniature reversals that prepare us for the catastrophic reversal to come. The characteristic form of these reversals is the turning of a word or line against itself: "Both wise and hardie (too hardie alas)" (72); "Besides in hunting, such felicities, / Or rather infelicitie he found" (79-80). This creates a cushion of expectation...as though within language, as in life, there were this sudden tendency for reversal or cancellation, the sudden opening of a chasm...the word lies on its shadow or negation.<sup>127</sup>

Hughes capitalises on the nostalgic elements that the photograph imparts and the conversational manner of the lines in order to make an impact with the

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<sup>127</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 55.

disturbingly frank last line. Initially, the poem resembles the traditional Remembrance Day elegy, from Binyon's 'For the Fallen':

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.<sup>128</sup>

(19-24)

Afterwards, however, 'Six Young Men' seems more aligned with the verse of Owen and Douglas. The anaphoric stress of 'one' displays how the poem has a subtle preoccupation with numeracy. Its repetition mirrors the function of the camera; a photograph is capable of capturing only one moment in time and each picture is unique. The 'one' also stresses that every death is a unique instance and should be treated accordingly. The second stanza shifts momentarily to the natural world and to the environment where the photo was taken, in Hughes's native Calder Valley in Yorkshire. The poem evokes the serene rural atmosphere in order to contrast it with the images of violence to follow:

...I know  
That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,  
Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit  
You hear the water of seven streams fall  
To the roarer in the bottom, and through all  
The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.

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<sup>128</sup> Binyon, *The Wincing Fan*, 28.

Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,  
 And still that valley has not changed its sound  
 Though their faces are four decades under the ground.

(10-18)

The stanza continues the efforts of its predecessor by contrasting impermanence with enduring images of nature's continuance where the same ambiances can still be experienced. However, stanza one's focus on the expressions of the six men gives way to considering what it is they can hear; 'You hear the water' (13), 'a rumouring of air' (15), 'their expressions listen yet' (16). Again, using this Spenserian refrain, listening (an activity requiring concentration and stillness) anticipates the immobility of the figures in the photograph, and their inevitable motionlessness in death.

Hughes's claim that the poem is about the photograph should not be taken literally; the third stanza considers the unknown fate of the men on the battlefields of the First World War outside the parameters of the photograph itself:

This one was shot in an attack and lay  
 Calling in the wire, then this one, his best friend,  
 Went out to bring him in and was shot too...

(19-21)

The mechanical function of the camera and its photographic 'shots' is replicated in the action of the men being shot. Yet the camera fails to capture and preserve the moment of their death; indeed, this is preserved only on the

faces of the men now 'four decades under the ground'. The stanza concludes with the now customary affirmation of their deaths, which Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford suggest raises 'this poem above the elegy in a Georgian or even 'Movement' manner [with the] paradoxical but grimly acute formulation of the sudden intimacy with death at the end of the third stanza.': 'But come to the worst they must have done, and held it / Closer than their hope; all were killed' (26-7).<sup>129</sup> The use of temporal irony does not draw the poem into the clutches of overall irony (as might be the case in a poem of *The Movement*); its tone remains sombre, but not in a manner which repeats the ceremonious and ornate designs of some Georgian war verse. The fourth stanza is neither ironic nor ceremonious; it is deadly factual. The 'locket of a [man's] smile' (29) compared to his 'mangled last / Agony and hours' (31-2) is in no way ironic, it is 'war's worst / ...rending' (35-6), a dichotomy which unambiguously splits life and death. This unambiguosness is reflected in the factual nature of death; Hughes considers the practical matters of the corpse's 'mightier-than-a-man dead bulk and weight'<sup>130</sup> and its 'Forty years rotting in the soil.' (37) The preoccupation with numbers and numeracy in the poem is a part of this need to present the factual.

The final stanza is the climax of the poem's use of sensory perception. Most, if not all the senses are accounted for: 'shake by the hand' (touch), 'see hale' (sight), 'hear speak loud' (sound), 'their smoking blood' (smell). Only

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<sup>129</sup> Gifford & Roberts, *Critical Study*, 84.

<sup>130</sup> This consideration features in 'View of a Pig' discussed in Chapter Three.

taste does not appear to be addressed. Nevertheless, Hughes's use of the senses goes beyond conjuring a tangible atmosphere for the reader. It points towards the cessation of sensory experience in death; for the six men, such perceptions are not only now redundant but frozen in the photograph. The poem is alert to sense because Hughes brings these men to life by contextualising their sensory experience in the shadow of their death. I would like to suggest that taste, omitted from this stanza, emerges as perhaps the most significant of the senses in 'Six Young Men'. If one considers its use in 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' where 'another body [is] flung / Down' into a mass grave and 'the jolted shape of a face, [takes] earth into mouth', then the suggestion is a reversal of the decomposition process; alive or dead we cannot eat the earth, but it can 'digest' a corpse. On its own, this might appear tenuous, but to further consider Hughes's fixation on faces in 'Six Young Men', then there is a certain legitimacy in this justification. We read, 'his smile / Forty Years rotting in the soil', and 'their faces are four decades under the ground.' (18) In terms of the poem's sensory schematic, the face/head is the part of the body receptive to the five senses, so Hughes's references to the face as being underground, embracing the earth and soil, not only emphasise the definite cessation of sense, but also suggest how the poet and the reader employ the senses and use them as a part of their interpretations. Hughes concludes:

To regard this photograph might well dement,  
Such contradictory permanent horrors here

Smile out from the single exposure and shoulder out  
 One's own body from its instant and heat.

(43-6)

The poem uses a familiar rhetorical strategy from the poetry of the First World War by involving the reader in the final verse. Hughes so vividly conjures the immediacy of death in the poem that it has the perceiver 'shoulder out / One's own body from its instant and heat' (44-5). The 'you' is not only reminiscent of Owen's sardonic 'My friend, you would not tell with such high zest', but also his 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo':

You shall not hear their mirth:

You shall not come to think them well content

By any jest of mine. These men are worth

Your tears: You are not worth their merriment.

(33-6)

In 'Six Young Men', 'That man's not more alive whom you confront/And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud' (37-8). This 'you' is also familiar to the elegy as both an address to the deceased ("You were silly like us", 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats') and as an accusation levelled at those the poet/persona believe to be responsible for the death of the deceased. The First World War was perhaps a key instigator of the demolition of the fourth wall in the elegy; the direct involvement of the reader, not as an appeal to a *passive* reader, but to a participant in a society whose war affects the multitude and not the minority. This is a clear indication that the elegy's use

as a lamentation for the high and mighty, or for a close associate of the poet, is broadening to include the wider populace. The vernacular diction of war poetry is one of a number of rhetorical strategies that Hughes adopts and develops as a part of his reforming of elegiac discourse.

Keith Sagar remarks that the hawk of the title poem 'The Hawk in the Rain',<sup>131</sup> in mixing 'his heart's blood with the mire of the land' (20), both echoes and foreshadows Hughes's war poems:

The extinguishing of the hawk's fire, this mingling of mud and blood, as in the trenches and bomb craters of the First World War which (Hughes's) uncles, by their stories and his father, by his aching silence, had made the landscape of the young Hughes's mind, is what death wants and invariably gets in Hughes's poetry of the fifties and sixties.<sup>132</sup>

Hughes's verse and its likeness to the poetry of the First World War is assured, as is his energetic use of a vernacular language close to experience as we have seen in 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' and 'Six Young Men'. But to consider Hughes's reformation of the elegy is to question the contemporaneous situation of his verse. Hughes is commonly set up against the poetry of The Movement, more especially its unofficial figurehead, Philip Larkin. In a letter to his sister written in 1962, Hughes wrote: "Six Young Men" was more or less ignored as just another piece about a photograph, in

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<sup>131</sup> Hughes, *Hawk*, 11.

<sup>132</sup> Sagar, *Laughter of Foxes*, 106.



Movement form – it's now become the example of what that whole Movement genre, with inspiration, could be capable of, it's beginning to justify all those people & their rhymes.<sup>133</sup> Hughes has acknowledged the stylistic and tonal differences from that of his contemporaries who had 'embraced a poetry of deliberately limited aims... [and] sought a more sceptical, commonsensical mode of expression'.<sup>134</sup> However, in his interview with Ekbert Faas, Hughes reasoned that these differences stemmed from contrasting experiences:

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 their wife and kids for the rest of their lives not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park. The Second World War after all was a colossal negative revelation. In a sense it meant they recoiled to some essential English strengths. But it set them dead against negotiation with anything outside the cosiest arrangement of society... Now I came a bit later. I hadn't had enough. I was all for opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there... Where I conjured up a jaguar, they smelt a stormtrooper. Where I saw elementals and forces of Nature they saw motorcyclists with machine guns on the handlebars. At least that was the tendency.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Ted Hughes, 'To Olwyn Hughes,' Late Summer 1962, *Letters*, 205.

<sup>134</sup> John Redmond and Alan Sillitoe, 'Poet of the spirits of the land,' *The Guardian* 30 Oct 1998, <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/poetry/story/0,6000,102005,00.html>> 30 April 2006.

<sup>135</sup> Faas, *London Magazine* 10, 1970: 10-1.

Yet 'experience' does not necessarily dictate the style and subject matter of a poem. 'Six Young Men' and 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' are remarkably close to the tone of Larkin's 'MCMXIV'.<sup>136</sup> 'MCMXIV' is a poem about 1914, written some fifty years later; this offers an affecting comparison to the majority of First World War poetry written during the conflict. With 'MCMXIV', Larkin investigates the past by pondering our present views of it. By using Roman numerals, he is on the one hand removing an immediate recognition of the date to indicate how both idealisation and memorialisation are remote from the actual events. On the other hand, the numerals fix and memorialise 1914 like a gravestone. It is a poem of the home front which does not indulge in the imagery of the trenches exhibited by poets such as Sassoon and Owen, precisely because it is alluding to the very first few months of the war when such horrors had not occurred. Neil Corcoran writes that a selection of Larkin's poems, including 'MCMXIV', demonstrates 'an acute sense of English social history...crossed over with, or nurtured into, a dream of thwarted potential or desired persistence'.<sup>137</sup> It is a poem alert to our own need to idealise the past; the images of 1914 that Larkin offers the reader are particularly fictive, even overdone. The poem ironically observes the contrast between pre-war leisure with its reference to 'the Oval or Villa Park' and the blithe attitudes towards signing up to fight, 'Grinning as if it were all / An

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<sup>136</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: The Marvell Press; London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 127.

<sup>137</sup> Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, 91.

August Bank Holiday lark' (7), in order to stress the illusion of normality against the historical legacy of the First World War. The 'all' of the first stanza is perhaps the ironic foil of the poem. The apparent social cohesion and ordered hierarchy which Larkin observes in society in early 1914 is in marked contrast to the 'differently-dressed servants / With tiny rooms in huge houses' (22-3) and 'thousands of marriages' which would be destroyed by the conflict. He writes that there was 'Never such innocence, / Never before or since' (25-6) the breakout of the First World War. It is not a poem of overt protestation; instead, Larkin approaches the event by exposing our capacity for illusion and our tendency to idealise the past instead of confronting issues such as the estimated 750,000 young men who perished in the conflict; England will never have 'such innocence again' (32).

Both Hughes and Larkin present these tragic histories with an elegant formality. Whilst this is characteristic of Movement poetry, the controlled appearance of Hughes's verse is unusual when viewed alongside his later, more innovative verse forms. However, both poems retrospectively observe attitudes of a pre-war era in a post-war context with surprising similarity and deconstruct the rhetorical attitudes and stylistics of a more contrived form of war verse. Both are laments, elegies born out of a need to warn against the repetition of historical errors and to console the survivors of two devastating World Wars. Though Hughes seems to forego a complete adherence to traditional elegiac blueprints, he does acknowledge the elegy with both of his

poems which digress upon the deceased, speculate about their deaths and how they may have been prevented, whilst also addressing the impact of such deaths upon the individual and society. 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' displays an open dissatisfaction with conventional mourning codes, whilst 'Six Young Men' is perhaps best designated as a specially conceived elegiac remembrance. Both fulfil the elegy's need to remember, but also to take action against the causes of death by memorialising the deceased. This action is manifest in the energy of Hughes's verse, which can be distinguished from the resigned tone of his Movement contemporaries.

The Hawk in the Rain anticipates the wealth of war elegies that Hughes wrote in his lifetime. There is a noticeable development as the poems become less of a socio-political comment and more of an exploration of the inner turmoil and psychological aftermath of the war on Hughes's family. In Remains of Elmet, for instance, Hughes is concerned with how the First World War deeply affected the region of the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire. From the very beginning, though, Hughes's elegies assert themselves with force; his early formal structures are laced with powerful and at times unyielding diction which is skilfully concealed behind a strict typographic appearance. The so-called 'violence' of Hughes's early war-elegies can be justified by the fact that, as Kendall writes, Hughes is 'inspired by the war poets' insistence that a society which requires its young men to kill strangers and die on its behalf is obliged not to turn away from truthful

reports of wartime experience, no matter how horrific or discomfoting they may be.’<sup>138</sup> The elegies of war are infused with a great personal passion which rightfully had Hughes marked as a poet to watch, the author of ‘the most distinguished volume of verse by a poet of [his] generation’.<sup>139</sup> Critics claimed that Hughes would be one of ‘the select few to be read a hundred years from now’.<sup>140</sup> He was an elegist who was breaking new ground with the genre.



In his chapter on Ted Hughes, A. Kingsley Weatherhead writes, ‘No other poet on either side of the Atlantic making a change of style in midcareer out of a sense of the infidelity and inadequacy of a traditional style has made changes as radical [and] as dramatic as Ted Hughes.’<sup>141</sup> These changes make appropriate the line of the title poem of Wodwo, which asks ‘What am I?’ (1) It is a pertinent enquiry which seems removed from the sense of confidence of The Hawk in the Rain. It is a query which permeates the collection in the same way that the image of the hawk in the rain provides an insight into interpreting the war poems of Hughes’s first book. Wodwo contains two elegies, ‘Out’ and ‘Her Husband’. The poems themselves mark the beginning of Hughes’s rejection of traditional, conventional poetic forms. Here, their forms seem to be loose in comparison to the very formal

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<sup>138</sup> Kendall, War Poetry, 207.

<sup>139</sup> Dyson, ‘Ted Hughes,’ Critical Quarterly, 226.

<sup>140</sup> Dyson, ‘Ted Hughes,’ Critical Quarterly, 220.

<sup>141</sup> Kingsley Weatherhead, The British Dissonance, 95.

appearance of the verse in both Lupercal and The Hawk in the Rain. The inclusion of a selection of prose fiction and a play would indicate that Hughes's verse was encountering a crisis of identity.

Questions of identity are at the heart of 'Out'.<sup>142</sup> It is a war elegy, lamenting how the First World War transformed England's identity. It also reconfigured the individual attitudes towards the country from within. With its tripartite structure, 'Out' appears to imitate 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers'; the three sections pose a problem in part one meditates upon it in part two and find a resolution in part three. Again, this is not dissimilar to 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' as it also expresses contention with mourning codes, but with 'Out' there is a distinctively personal slant. Hughes's war poems of The Hawk in the Rain are lamentations which have a general, unspecific application; however, with 'Out', Hughes draws attention to the plight of his father, and by implication, a generation of First World War survivors whose traumatic experiences have rendered them inconsolable. This inability to console is potentially problematic for elegy, so as a part of this reading of 'Out', I shall illustrate how Hughes overcomes this challenge.

Although his father's 'outer perforations / Were valiantly healed' (I, 5-6), his psychological trauma remains an open wound. Hughes directs attention to his father's body, which is 'buffeted wordless' (I, 3). Typically, the voices of elegy are multifarious, but the deceased remain silent; Hughes replicates this,

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<sup>142</sup> Hughes, Wodwo, 155.

his wordless father is both physically and verbally resigned and receptive, a survivor 'Dragged...from under / The mortised four-year strata of dead Englishmen' (I, 10-1). The only identifiable voices in the poem are those of Hughes and his persona, but it would not be unreasonable to assume that they are one and the same. I say this in defiance of Eric Smith's assertion that it is essential to the form of the elegy that 'the speaker is in some degree an imagined being within the work of art rather than the poet himself.' Smith continues, 'This has to be borne in mind with late elegies particularly, where the speaker may not be very distinctly portrayed or characterised and we refer, on the whole legitimately, but not always with due care to [the poet] when we mean the first-person narrator or speaker.'<sup>143</sup> Instead, Hughes produces a substitute of himself within the poem, so that he is both the informed poet and the persona informing. The function of substitution within elegy is, according to Sacks, an act 'without which no work of mourning is complete.'<sup>144</sup> Sacks defines substitution as 'a refined reassertion of desire evident in the accompanying imagery [of the poem]'. In 'Out', Hughes substitutes the sterile, deferential inertia of his father with himself, 'small and / four, / ...his luckless double' (I, 15-7). Neil Corcoran writes, 'Through his father's subsequently guilty, quasi-posthumous existence, it is almost as though Hughes has inherited the war genetically, becoming his father's

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<sup>143</sup> Smith, *By Mourning Tongues*, 15.

<sup>144</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 114.

doppelganger'.<sup>145</sup> He sees himself as an 'immovable anchor'<sup>146</sup> (I, 15) for his father, whose memories and traumas, though actually buried deep in the past, are still present in his mind to haunt him. Hughes's own identity becomes blurred as the double of his father. The question of identifying the self is coupled with a search to locate that self in a place; yet the country whose very identity was fought for has become a washed out, unidentifiable mire akin to the battlefields of the Western Front. The 'kingdom' is England, and the 'sun', more accurately identifies the 'son' (Hughes) abandoning the kingdom. Hughes writes of his father that his 'memory's buried.../ Among jawbones and blown-off boots, tree-stumps, shell- / cases and craters' (I, 15-7), but Hughes's younger self is an emblem of fertility, actively interpreting and trying to understand the 'four-year mastication by gunfire and mud' (I, 2) that 'buffeted' his father. Indeed, it transpires that poetry, the very use of words, is the poem's supreme act of substitution, replacing the wordlessness and silence of his father in an attempt to comprehend his angst rather than to seek a consolation for it. By part three, these seemingly disparate threads become strongly wound together, and it emerges that Hughes's words, his poetry, and his identification with England are deeply disaffected.

Before he reaches this point, however, in true elegiac tradition, Hughes uses part two of the poem as an opportunity to lambast the politics and attitudes which perpetuated the carnage of the First World War. At the

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<sup>145</sup> Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, 115.

<sup>146</sup> An image later used in his *Birthday Letters* poem, 'Daffodils'.



outset, it appears that part two is incongruous, as it not only looks different typographically, but it moves from the intimacy of part one to a rhetorical mode. Here, Hughes lampoons those who remained in England and demonstrated an ignorance of the suffering in the trenches:

Nobody believes, it  
 Could all be nothing, all  
 Undergo smiling at  
 The lulling of blood in  
 Their ears, their ears, their eyes, their eyes

(II, 4-8)

Though they see the casualties and hear of the attrition, they see 'only drops of water' (II, 9) despite the blood being before their eyes. 'The dead man in his cave beginning to sweat' (II, 1) is an image of the shell-shocked soldier trapped because of a lack of recognition for his plight. His 'recovery' swiftly has him wrapped up by a smiling nurse as he is just another victim of the war, 'just another baby' (II, 13). Even those supposed to care for the shell-shocked have themselves become hardened to what they see; they too see 'only drops of water' instead of blood. England required every able-bodied man to fight, so even a rudimentary, insufficient rehabilitation would suffice:

As after being blasted to bits  
 The reassembled infantryman  
 Tentatively totters out, gazing around with the eyes  
 Of an exhausted clerk.

(II, 14-7)

Hughes's meditation on his father's state of mind leads him to see that the 'reassembled infantryman' and his post-war father are one and the same. Both are used, then discarded without sufficient care or recognition; they may as well be dead. His father's identity, both before and after being a soldier, is unstable. The later man is trying to identify with the man who fought in a devastating conflict; the man in the conflict is trying to identify with his pre-war self. Both feel betrayed by the nation whose identity they fought to protect, a nation which once needed them so badly.

In part three, Hughes attempts to find resolutions for both himself and his father. He begins by deconstructing the symbol of wartime remembrance, the poppy, which as a flower, is also a recurrent elegiac totem:

The poppy is a wound, the poppy is the mouth  
Of the grave, maybe of the womb searching-

A canvas-beauty puppet on a wire  
Today whoring everywhere...

(III, 1-4)

According to Hughes, the poppy is better associated with pain and death than sombre remembrance. The detrimental effect of the war on his father, not to mention the countless others, leave Hughes regarding the poppy as emblematic of the attitudes expressed in part two of the poem. Furthermore,

the flower symbolises a negative image of inertia; the inability to progress. In Gallipoli, his father's paybook, which was placed in his breast pocket, stopped splinters of shrapnel killing him. The image of the serviceable paybook has more immediate relevance for Hughes and his father than the gaudy poppy:

The shrapnel that shattered my father's paybook

Gripped me, and all his dead

Gripped him to a time

(III, 6-8)

The paybook, rather than the poppy, is of greater significance to him – it saved his father, unlike the poppy, which represents those who did not survive:

So goodbye that bloody-minded flower.

You dead bury your dead.

Goodbye to the cenotaphs on my mother's breasts.

Goodbye to all the remaindered charms of my father's  
survival.

Let England close. Let the green sea-anemone close.

(III, 15-9)

John Vickery's comments on Archibald Macleish's 'Memorial Rain' have a resonance when applied to Hughes's poem: 'The poem's basic attitude...recalls the caustic anger and outrage of Sassoon...Such a view

emblemizes a common attitude of the 1920s toward World War I: a bitter sense of betrayal, public indifference, and heartbreak at young lives wasted wantonly.<sup>147</sup> Hughes's poem cannot identify with a country which has turned his father into the man he is, or be a part of a nation which had a whole generation slaughtered. By turns, Hughes has also rejected a key elegiac emblem, a flower, as a part of his restructuring of the elegiac discourse.

Leonard M. Scigaj writes:

‘Out’ ends with a firm resolve to bid ‘Goodbye to the cenotaphs on my mother’s breasts’ and ‘Goodbye to the remaindered charms of my father’s survival’...Hughes now affirms that he will no longer be constrained by genetic habit to participate unconsciously in repeat performances of the errors of Western cultural history. There is no stronger statement in *Wodwo* of a departure from Hughes’s early faith in human potential in historical time...In certain poems of *Wodwo* the psychological torment occasioned by the private and the larger cultural tragedy is so great as to cause complete displacement...<sup>148</sup>

By interpolating himself as the luckless double early on, Hughes uses ‘Out’ as an opportunity for self service; in this case to openly advertise his rejection of a western poetic. The poem’s substitution of wordlessness for words leads to a sense of disaffection for Hughes who sees existing forms as too constrictive. He cannot identify with this sort of poetry which replicates his father’s

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<sup>147</sup> Vickery, *Elegiac Temper*, 45.

<sup>148</sup> Scigaj, ‘Oriental Mythology in *Wodwo*,’ *Achievement*, 129-30, 131.

inability to identify with the country he fought for. Hughes's deconstruction of the poppy as an elegiac symbol is a chance for Hughes to refocus his elegies and discard existing tropes; as Sacks writes, 'how can a conventional pastoral elegy find comfort for a death inflicted by a world whose realities so clearly ravaged the realm of pastoral itself?'<sup>149</sup> Like Owen's verse, 'Out' does not look for consolation; this is partly because there is none to be found for his father, but also, because in embracing consolation Hughes would see himself as embracing receptivity and convention instead of breaking away from it. This disaffection points to a cultural melancholy at large; 'Out' is both a war elegy and a post-war requiem. What is the alternative societal mode? Thomas West writes, 'Wodwo [is a] mental process of disencumberment that leads to wodwo-hood, life as a wild man, among wolves and serpents, bulls and bears... [leading to a] true obeisance to Nature'.<sup>150</sup> As Scigaj writes, Wodwo is 'a single persona's adventure toward the goal of achieving the Wodwo's freedom and connectedness. The persona achieves the Wodwo's state by engaging in a process of release, destruction, and revitalisation...By the end of the volume the reader has learned the process by which one creates one's own mandala of psychic wholeness and ecological balance.'<sup>151</sup> Hughes stresses the need for a new order, one close to 'wodwohood', by presenting a dispiriting portrait of domestic post-war culture:

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<sup>149</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 56.

<sup>150</sup> Thomas West, Ted Hughes (London: Methuen, 1985) 59.

<sup>151</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 51.

### Her Husband

Comes home dull with coal-dust deliberately  
 To grime the sink and foul towels and let her  
 Learn with scrubbing brush and scrubbing board  
 The stubborn character of money.

And let her learn through what kind of dust  
 He has earned his thirst and the right to quench it  
 And what sweat he has exchanged for his money  
 And the blood-weight of money...<sup>152</sup>

(4-8)

For Hughes, money represents an ineffective economy; it is dirty, corrupting and our reliance upon it is consuming. The poem, unusually for Hughes, contains no natural imagery. It is sterile, focussing on strong industrial motifs and images of dirt and domesticity. The husband's reification is off-set by a weak veneer of contentment as he goes 'away round the house-end singing / "Come back to Sorrento"' (13-4). This sense of alienation may be linked to the socio-political situation during the post-World War Two years. Britain had beaten Germany and had gained a moral high ground – they had rid the world of a sinister tyranny against the odds – but the soldiers who fought returned to a country whose six years of war had left it financially crippled. Soldiers returned to a world of black-marketing, ration cards and bombed

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<sup>152</sup> Hughes, Wodwo, 19.

cities; it did not fit the ideals they believed they had fought for; this is perhaps a strong definition of the cultural melancholy which gives 'Her Husband' its elegiac tone. Paulin writes of Hughes's appraisal of Henry Williamson's work, and its application seems to befit this miry post-war gloom:

[Williamson's] memory shaped his rejection of what Hughes terms 'the worst side' of democracy: 'the shoddy, traditionless, destructive urban emptiness that seemed to be destroying England, in its ancestral wholeness and richness, as effectively as the work of a deliberate enemy'. Elsewhere Hughes speaks of 'our psychotic democracy...our materialist, non-organic democracy', and the Burkean or Eliotian side of his imagination can express a disgusted hatred of contemporary society.<sup>153</sup>

The husband has become a part of this post-war utility which appreciates only 'the stubborn character of money' (4). The husband distracts himself from this disenchantment and the indignity of fighting for economic survival. Like the soldier in part two of 'Out', the husband and wife are counted among the many instances of this cultural melancholy. The resigned and perhaps weary tone of the final stanza reflects this: 'For they will have their rights. Their jurors are to be assembled / From the little crumbs of soot' (17-19). They are worth little more than the dirt that the husband brings home, their insignificant brief goes 'straight up to heaven' where 'nothing more is heard of it' (19-20). This is a most un-elegiac transcendence.

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<sup>153</sup> Paulin, *Minotaur*, 256.

Neil Roberts observes that as with most of the earlier Wodwo poems, 'Her Husband' 'still looks neat on the page, with regular stanzas like most of their predecessors.'<sup>154</sup> The verse is written in four concentrated quatrain stanzas; its regimented appearance is a part of Hughes's indictment of inert forms of Western poetry. However, underlying the lines are rigorous alliterated consonant and vowel sounds which stand in for what might be an unworkable and constrictive rhyme scheme; they also seem to be bursting at the edges of the poem's apparent formality. I have stressed that such formality is dispensed with in a poem such as 'Out', but by the conclusion of Wodwo, as Roberts writes, 'we can see for the first time the emergence of an aesthetic of ugliness, a challenge to poetic norms, that is to become much more conscious and systematic a few years later in Crow.'<sup>155</sup> Carol Bere concurs, writing:

Hughes claimed that the tragedy of western man is that of 'mind exiled from nature, of man's failure to perceive the relationship of nature to the inmost psychology of man.' And his poetry attempted to move through what Hughes claimed as the mediating, restorative faculties of the imagination, toward some sense of reintegration with the external world or wholeness... with Wodwo, Hughes...initiated his quest, exploring and, to some degree, experimenting in his poetry via two distinct paths: the nature, animal, and poems of place of Remains of Elmet, Moortown Diary, and River, and sequences such as Crow, Prometheus on his Crag (1973), Gaudete (1977),

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<sup>154</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 67.

<sup>155</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 67.



and Cave Birds (1978), which uses mythology, Eastern philosophies, Jungian psychology, and alchemy as structuring elements.<sup>156</sup>

Hughes's elegies are not only a part of this reformation, but instigators of it, as we have seen with 'Out' and 'Her Husband'. The idea of the mind exiled from nature plays a prominent role in Remains of Elmet, a sequence which physically allegorises the disillusioned state of mind that 'Her Husband' touches upon, but it can also be read in the literal sense, for what are the dead if not exiled from nature? These early elegies from The Hawk in the Rain and Wodwo address Hughes's own disillusionment with England and its politics, and by extension, its poetry. This would account for Hughes's attempts to reconstitute the elegy. The poems do not offer a tone of resigned lamentation like many traditional elegies; instead Hughes offers energy and vitality through flexibility with existing poetic forms. The candid language disguises complicated personal, social and historical politics which are intertwined with the fabric of England and the individuals and lifestyles dying within it. 'Her Husband' is the elegy which, arguably, bridges the gap between Hughes's early elegies and Remains of Elmet. With the First World War, Hughes has found a strong base on which to launch his attempts at the elegy. From this, he subsequently manages to refine his ideas and approaches to create elegies which harbour a hidden, powerful kinetic energy.

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<sup>156</sup> Carol Bere, 'Hughes, Ted' The Literary Encyclopaedia, 4Oct. 2004.

<<http://www.litencyc.com/php /people.php?rec=true&UID=5137>> 23 November 2005.

Chapter Three:

Instinct for Loss: Selected Elegies 1957-1967 and Beyond

The Hawk in the Rain latently pricks the sub-conscious into acknowledging the energies at work around us. It is the first realisation of Hughes's engagement with the war between vitality and death.<sup>157</sup> The hawk mixing 'his heart's blood with the mire of the land' in the title poem is an early indication of what happens when these energies clash; there is violence and death. The jaguar of 'The Jaguar'<sup>158</sup> is ascribed with this energy, but its imprisonment in the zoo, a place which traps energy, has the creature 'On a short fierce fuse' (13). The potential for destructive energy is implied, but not physically realised:

He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:

His stride is wildernesses of freedom:

The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.

Over the cage floor the horizons to come.

(16-20)

These energies have implications for Hughes's elegies. Sagar writes: 'Hughes is fascinated in [The Hawk in the Rain] with those moments when man is involuntarily exposed to the Energies – when he is born...when love

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<sup>157</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Rock,' Worlds: Seven Modern Poets, ed. Geoffrey Summerfield (Harmondsworth: Penguin Education, 1974) 126.

<sup>158</sup> Hughes, Hawk, 12.

strikes...and when he is dying. Hughes, like the onlookers in 'The Casualty' and 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar', is "Greedy to share all that is undergone / Grimace, gasp, gesture of death."<sup>159</sup> For Hughes, existence and its cessation are interwoven with two distinct energetic forms: vitality and death. It is the war between 'vitality and death'<sup>160</sup> which Hughes examines in much of his poetry; its application to elegy would seem appropriate. Sagar's remarks about the involuntary exposure to the energies is suitable for the most part, but with 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar',<sup>161</sup> Hughes presents a historical figure who *gives* himself to death over vitality: 'If I flinch from the pain of the burning, believe not the doctrine that I have preached' are Farrar's supposed last words as he awaited execution by being burned to death. Farrar's calculated passivity and mental submission to the energies which kill him may be legitimate ('he fed his body to the flame alive' (28)), but the war between his body (vitality) and the flames (death) is excruciating:

[the flames] can shrivel sinew and char bone  
 Of foot, ankle, knee, and thigh, and boil  
 Bowels, and drop his heart a cinder down  
 ...  
                   ...they see what  
 Black oozing twist of stuff bubbles the smell  
 That tars and retches their lungs...

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<sup>159</sup> Sagar 'Fourfold Vision in Hughes,' *Achievement*, 289.

<sup>160</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1980) 197.

<sup>161</sup> Hughes, *Hawk*, 58.

(2-4/8-10)

The physical ugliness of his death is in contrast to the martyrdom Farrar's execution yields: 'out of his eyes, / Out of his mouth, fire like a glory broke, / And smoke burned his sermons into the skies.' (41-3). The poem ends with ascension; the linguistic manifestation of Farrar, his sermons, are burned into the skies. The meeting of vitality and death is the fuel which powers Farrar's transience, but it is of interest to note how the conclusion of the poem draws attention to the survival of language; what is the significance of Hughes specifically citing the transience of Farrar's *sermons* if it is not a latent self-conscious desire for the endurance of the poet himself after death? Such a move is not uncommon and can be found in many elegies. One is reminded of Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'<sup>162</sup> where the swain entreats the reader to 'Approach and read (for thou canst read)' (115) the epitaph 'Graved on the stone' (116). Sacks acknowledges that with the epitaph, Gray is employing 'a form of posthumous ventriloquism...the poet turns finally to the only form of language that can assure him of its, and therefore his, posthumous identity.'<sup>163</sup> So, too, Shelley is 'trying to compel a certain recognition'<sup>164</sup> for himself after death with 'Adonais'. Sacks's study certainly implies that poets such as Gray and Shelley among others are seeking the continuation of their names after death without subterfuge. Here, Hughes

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<sup>162</sup> Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,' *Inventions of Farewell*, 428.

<sup>163</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 136.

<sup>164</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 148.

differs, and a poem like 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar' draws attention to the surviving power of language over the body physical. Hughes is surely aware of this; after all, who would have really remembered Bishop Farrar's martyrdom if it were not for Hughes's poem? He does not appear to use the longevity of language as a self-serving conceit, but instead, implicitly acknowledges this particular elegiac convention.

To return to the use of energy in the poem, I wish to digress briefly upon the similarity between the concluding verses of 'The Jaguar' and 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar'. Hughes places an emphasis on introspection as a means of consolation for the figures of both poems; for the jaguar, 'there's no cage to him' (16), the cell serves to strengthen the 'visionary' (17) abilities of the creature, who 'Over the cage floor [sees] the horizons to come.' (20) Similarly, Bishop Farrar *looks* towards the completion of the doctrine he has preached ('out of his eyes / ...a glory broke') and the attainment of a heavenly afterlife as a martyr. The conflict of energies for both figures creates an introspection which transcends their present situation, and this offers relief to the pains caused by the convergence of these energetic forces.

However, a redeeming internalised consolation in the above poems is not universally applicable. P.R. King defines the clash between vitality and death (as experienced by Bishop Farrar, for example) as the 'climactic experience', an extreme which might be likened to the 'master fulcrum of violence' of 'The Hawk in the Rain'. It is at this point that man is capable of

uniting with his instinctual energies away from 'the burden of consciousness'. As a result, it is in death that 'man becomes the centre of experience... [it is] the moment of ultimate danger or suffering [that] is the moment which most defines man's meaning and experience.'<sup>165</sup> But as King continues, he asks if it possible 'to acknowledge these energies without being destroyed by them'? The traditional elegy is an attempt to capture this moment; the pivotal extremity between life and death caught in a language desperate to comprehend something beyond known reason. There are exceptions, of course. Trying to comprehend with reason events which are *beyond* reason are a cause for inner turmoil, especially if one has been so close and briefly touched the 'climactic experience'. This is what we see in Hughes's war-elegies; 'My Uncle's Wound'<sup>166</sup> is an appropriate example. The poem was rewritten as 'Walt' and published in Wolfwatching; this later version retains a few of the ideas and motifs which appear in 'My Uncle's Wound'. The story it tells is essentially the same. Though it seems more observational than 'Walt' (which desperately tries to understand the grief of the war) there are moments where Hughes endeavours to attain an understanding of the 'climactic experience':

I was squeezing myself into the ditches  
 Reading my final moment off grassblades

...

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<sup>165</sup> King, Nine Contemporary Poets, 120-23.

<sup>166</sup> Hughes, Collected Poems, 100.

I scavenged for a memory, crumbs of rust or of bone  
 In one man's dead shadow of fertility.

(21-2 / 29-30)

Kendall writes that Hughes's ambition in this poem is 'to appropriate the experience for himself...[which] springs from a desire...which is also profound jealousy that he can never achieve the authority of the combatant poet.'<sup>167</sup> But the attempt to usurp his uncle's experience and to find these memories in order to understand (or even elegise) those killed by the climactic experience leaves Hughes finding nothing, realising that 'maybe they weren't dead men' (31). This is where the poem turns. In finding nothing, Hughes looks to his uncle 'to see in a glass / The landscape as it had been.' (32-3). The need for Hughes's uncle to locate himself geographically on the physical terrain of his past experience is one of the central concepts in 'My Uncle's Wound'. The ability to locate this experience of the battlefield is at odds with his capability of coming to terms with the experience itself. His uncle 'seemed certain only of the low wood / Bristling the ridge.../ Towards which we were walking and towards which / Long ago, he had started to run' (37-40). Both Hughes and his uncle search for the exact spot, 'the earth-scar of that hole' where the latter was shot and wounded twice by a German sniper, but:

He'd lost touch – it was all 'Somewhere down there.'

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<sup>167</sup> Kendall, *War Poetry*, 201.

Somewhere or other in time, somewhere in him.  
 As the world's mass kept those skylines so quiet  
 He became quiet  
 With his memories...

(56-60)

This is the sentiment which is reiterated in 'Walt', one of unquantifiable loss 'somewhere' within the self and 'somewhere' on what was once the battlefield. The geographical locale does not manage to connect Hughes's uncle with his pre-war self which is also 'somewhere' beneath his feet. The poem concludes without consolation.

The elegiac trope of locating the deceased is given an imaginative twist where the *living* ex-soldier is trying to locate the part of him which 'died' on the battlefield. 'My Uncle's Wound' is not conventionally elegiac (one has come to expect this from Hughes); it is nevertheless a remembrance. Hughes's uncle has encountered the energies of the climactic experience and survived, but it has left him traumatised and slightly despondent, 'Sleepwalking in the khaki familiar uniform' (12). It is a theme which Hughes returns to again and again. Each encounter brings with it a greater determination to fathom the traumatic depths which affected those who fought in the First World War, and elegise what it was they 'lost' and left behind in the trenches.



However, Hughes's elegies do not always try to empathise with or understand death. Few of his poems are as coldly clinical as 'View of a Pig'.<sup>168</sup> The persona observes the pig's carcass lying dead on a barrow and marvels at how 'Such weight and thick pink bulk / Set in death seemed not just dead. / It was less than lifeless, further off.' (5-7) The tone of the poem is set: 'I thumped it without feeling remorse. / One feels guilty insulting the dead, / Walking on graves. But this pig / Did not seem able to accuse.' (9-12) The persona seems to excuse himself after striking the pig by repeating similar remarks, 'It was too dead' (13), 'Too dead now to pity' (17), 'Too deadly factual' (21). The persona tries to comprehend the pig's death among his own experiences by juxtaposing living pigs with the one in front of him, or as Kendall writes, 'he temporarily circumvents his own objection [to the dead creature] and breaks out of the scene's inertia'<sup>169</sup>:

Once I ran at a fair in the noise  
 To catch a greased piglet  
 That was faster and nimbler than a cat,  
 Its squeal was the rending of metal.

Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens.  
 Their bite is worse than a horse's-  
 They chop a half-moon clean out.  
 They eat cinders, dead cats.

(25-32)

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<sup>168</sup> Hughes, *Lupercal*, 40.

<sup>169</sup> Kendall, *War Poetry*, 211.

But instead of these thoughts making the dead pig seem less dead, they only make the creature even more lifeless. He concludes that:

Distinctions and admirations such  
As this one was long finished with.  
I stared at it a long time. They were going to scald it,  
Scald it and scour it like a doorstep.

(33-6)

This last line is a mixture of indifference and morbid fascination. The view of the pig is utilitarian, it is just 'A poundage of lard and pork'; his concerns are with how one can deal with the aftermath of something so deeply dead: 'Its weight / Oppressed me – how could it be moved? / And the trouble of cutting it up!' (21-4) Paul Bentley suggests that the question of how the pig might be moved is the locus of the poem. He writes that the 'I-speaker' of the poem is disturbed by the sight of the dead animal and that the poem's momentum is to be found in the repeated attempts 'to give it meaning, and thus assimilate it to consciousness'. When this fails, the question of how it could be moved is 'the key to the poem's own "meaning" ... the dead pig here embodies what is *intractable* (it cannot be moved within or by language) and thus [it is] disturbing for a consciousness that constitutes itself through its ability to represent the world to itself.'<sup>170</sup> The result is a subliminal distancing effect. This is unusual for an animal poem by Hughes, who often attempts to

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<sup>170</sup> Bentley, Language, Illusion and Beyond, 18-19.

transmit mimetically 'the living energies of nature' via the written word.<sup>171</sup>

One need only compare this poem with the compassion he has for suffering/dying animals in the Moortown Elegies sequence.

'Flanders'<sup>172</sup> continues Hughes's concern with mourning the casualties and the circumstances of the First World War:

Dead eyes, blurred by hard rain,  
Mouths that grin into mud and  
Puddles unwinding heavy crimson.

Still they hear nothing of peace.  
They remain locked in the problem.  
The young clover cannot distract them

The poem reads like an epilogue to 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers'; it repeats images from this poem's final verses, such as 'the jolted shape of face, earth into the mouth' and the flowers which bloom around the burial site. But the poem also reads like a manifesto for Hughes's own attitudes towards the conflict. He, too, is 'locked in the problem' of the First World War; his poems are a means of relieving his own difficulty in comprehending it. The young clover, perhaps an emblem of his own poetic potential outside of the 'problem' exists, but does not distract him from encountering the actual in his poetry. With no full stop to conclude the final line, the suggestion is that the problem

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<sup>171</sup> James Lasdun, 'Notes on a Footnote,' The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes ed. Nick Gammage (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) 19.

<sup>172</sup> Ted Hughes, Recklings (London: Turret Books, 1966) 12.

continues for Hughes; the evidence of this can be read in Wodwo and later elegies born from the theme of war.

Conflicting energies (whether the climactic experience or the master fulcrum of violence) in these intermediate poems, and the factual indifference displayed in 'View of a Pig', combine to play an essential role in Remains of Elmet where Hughes calls for the decomposition of his native part of England in the eventual hope of renewal. This combination of influences and techniques is not limited to Remains of Elmet, but extends and becomes a part of the overall evolution of Hughes's abilities as an elegist.



Of the poem 'Lupercalia',<sup>173</sup> from Lupercal, Ekbert Faas writes: 'It shows the first traces of a long search for symbols and rituals that might still be alive under the debris of present-day civilisation. Yet despite the use of the present tense throughout and a lack of direct historical references, there is little to relate these symmetrically patterned and finely drawn miniatures into our present situation.'<sup>174</sup> Whilst it is beyond the remit of this study to verify whether or not the connotations and symbols of 'Lupercalia' have a bearing on today's society, one might suggest instead, that one need not look any further than Lupercal itself to justify the presence of the title poem. Several Hughes scholars have analysed the ancient Roman Lupercalia festival and

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<sup>173</sup> Hughes, Lupercal, 61.

<sup>174</sup> Faas, Unaccommodated Universe, 62.

related it to Hughes's poem, 'Lupercalia', for obvious reasons.<sup>175</sup> The intention here, however, is to understand how the festival, and indeed the poem, might relate to a core principle within the elegy. The festival of Lupercalia ritual shares characteristics with the figure of the vegetation god whose role, according to Sacks, is not only crucial, but integral to works of lament; the presence of this god is 'latent beneath the figures and conventions that we otherwise take for granted.'<sup>176</sup> To decipher these similarities, we first need to understand what actually occurred at the festival and what these practices represented.

The Lupercal cave is said to be where Romulus and Remus suckled on the milk of the wolf-mother as a part of the myth which tells of the founding of Rome. The significance of this place, what occurred there, and the subsequent festival, which this myth gave birth to, is summarised by Hughes:

The Feast of Lupercal was a Roman festival held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, in honour of Zeus as a wolf. Nobody knows how it originated, but it came from Mt. Lycaon in Greece, and combined sacrifices of goats and a dog (originally of a wolf, I suppose) It was mainly a fertility rite.<sup>177</sup>

The details of this rite vary slightly according to different accounts, but it seems that at the Lupercal cave stood an altar to the god, Lupercus (the

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<sup>175</sup> Highly recommended are Ann Skea's essay 'Wolf-maks: From Hawk to Wolfwatching,' Critical Essays on Ted Hughes ed. Leonard M. Scigaj. Critical Essays on British Literature (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1992) and Stuart Hirschberg's section on 'Lupercalia' in Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes (Portmarnock, Co. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981) 23-7.

<sup>176</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 27.

<sup>177</sup> Hughes, 'To Olwyn Hughes,' Summer 1959, Letters.

Roman god of shepherds, often associated with dogs and goats. In terms of elegy, we can perhaps link these shepherd figures to the early pastoral tradition of elegy) where the Luperci (the 'wolf-brothers') presided over the practice of the festival. There, two goats and a dog would be sacrificed and their blood would anoint the foreheads of two young patricians. Part of the goat's skin would be fashioned into a thong and worn by the Luperci, whilst another part of the goat skin would be formed into a whip which was used to strike those the Luperci encountered as they ran through the streets around the Palatine hill. Both infertile and fertile women would hope to be struck because it was believed that this would encourage both fertility and unproblematic childbirth.

Already, one can draw parallels between the festival and principles behind the vegetation deity. Sacks writes, 'The immortality suggested by nature's self-regenerative power rests on a principle of recurrent fertility.' The Lupercalia festival, with its most immediate origins in Greek/pagan mythical culture, was held on what was believed to be the first day of spring; as Sacks suggests, by human figures indulging in their festival, they are not so much replicating nature's power, as transferring it into the tangible, and recognisable human form, 'Since individual humans are no more than mortal vehicles of this regenerative power, the particular human figure can represent the principle of sexuality only by appearing to undergo a succession of

extinctions and rebirths'.<sup>178</sup> With the Lupercalia festival, the Luperci made extinct a dog and two goats, whose blood and skin were marked upon them. In this respect, the Luperci were marked with death. But by wielding their leather-like straps of skin and whipping the barren women of Rome, they are mimicking the natural processes of death followed by regeneration. From death comes life. Furthermore, Sacks writes, 'The vegetation deity, and especially his or her sexual power, must be made to disappear and return.'<sup>179</sup> Again, we see this in practice at the festival; the initial rites of the ceremony occur in a cave, out of sight, so in a sense, the Luperci (who embody this version of the vegetation deity) disappear before very publicly returning to complete the ceremonial, sexual flagellation of women. One must recall that these infertile women are prone to the disappearance of their reproductive sexual power and hope that by being struck by the 'reappearance' of the Luperci/vegetation god, they too will be physically touched by divine power. We read in Hughes's poem the point at which the Luperci struck these women:

...Maker of the world,  
 Hurrying the lit ghost of man  
 Age to age while the body hold,  
 Touch this frozen one.

(IV, 13-6)

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<sup>178</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.

<sup>179</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.

Hughes's poem, although not an elegy, has these ancient and elegiac principles of death and the *post mortem* associations of regeneration, as Stuart Hirschberg observes: 'In this poem we have an intuition of Hughes's conception of an energy at the heart of creation that is both divine and destructive, a power that is indistinguishable from the 'rank thriving' of the goats or the 'blood heat' of dog...[both] have a primal physical force...that the Luperci hope to pass on through the ceremony to the waiting women.'<sup>180</sup>

What is of interest is the fact that, in this fertility festival, it is claimed that the men covered their genitals with the thong fashioned from the goat's skin; furthermore, when we recall that the women are infertile, they are too, in this respect, without genitalia. Perhaps this is a latent acknowledgment of the role of castration, which is present in several early myths and elegies as Sacks reminds us: 'Persephone is raped or abducted by Death. Adonis is killed by a tusk wound to the groin. Atthis castrates himself and dies. Orpheus is torn apart and decapitated by women. Daphnis dies after being blinded by a jealous Aphrodite.'<sup>181</sup> Sacks calls these figures 'representatives of undeterred desire'<sup>182</sup>, so perhaps it is the case that on the basis of these (or similar) myths, the runners and the women of the Lupercalia festival were eliminating sexual desire by being covered, because nature does not know desire, only functional

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<sup>180</sup> Hirschberg, *Myth*, 25.

<sup>181</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.

<sup>182</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.



reproduction and fertility, which the Luperci as vegetation gods hope to symbolize.

The above lines from Hughes's poem (IV, 13-6) are probably its most significant. However, earlier in the poem, Hughes points to the fact that what we perceive as natural 'wholeness' (represented in the poem by a wheel) is made incomplete by infertility. One of the infertile women is 'a surviving / Barrenness' (II.1-2) who is 'flung from the wheel of the living' (II.3). As Sagar writes, "The athletes run not to distinguish themselves but to snatch the lowliest, the barren women...back into that wheel, into 'the figure of the races'".<sup>183</sup> But of what importance is female fertility to Hughes's poetry? One answer may be found in the poem 'Song' from The Hawk in the Rain, a poem which is perhaps Hughes's most explicit evocation, in his early verse at least, of the goddess who rules his poetry. The poem, according to Roberts, is 'marked by imagery that is reminiscent of The White Goddess'.<sup>184</sup> This 'beloved' female muse of the poem is 'blessed by the moon, caressed by the sea and kissed by the wind; the stars swim in her eyes. Her power is such that the poet is in her shadow, and when she turns away, her shadow turns to ice...her combination of desirability and destructiveness is exactly that of Graves's goddess'.<sup>185</sup> Her fertility is important to Hughes's poetry because, as his muse, she gives birth to his imagination. Evidence of this can be found in

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<sup>183</sup> Sagar, Art, 59

<sup>184</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 17.

<sup>185</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 17.

an interview conducted several years after Lupercal's publication, in which Hughes remarked that 'Almost all the poems in Lupercal were written as invocations to writing. My main consciousness in those days was that it was impossible to write. So these invocations were just attempts to crack the apparent impossibility of producing anything.'<sup>186</sup> This gives further credence to the idea that, with a poem such as 'Lupercalia', Hughes is invoking the aid of the great Goddess who represents the manifestation of Sacks's vegetation deity. Nicholas Bishop writes, 'The most obvious invocation to writing in the volume is "Crag Jack's Apostasy"'.<sup>187</sup> Bishop cites the following lines:

...you, god or not god, who  
 Come to my sleeping body through  
 The world under the world; pray  
 That I may see more than your eyes

In an animal's dreamed head; that I shall  
 Waking, dragged suddenly  
 From a choir-shaken height  
 By the world, lord, through its dayfall –  
 Keep more than memory  
 Of a wolf's head, of eagle's feet.<sup>188</sup>

(9-18)

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<sup>186</sup> Faas, Unaccommodated Universe, 209.

<sup>187</sup> Nicholas Bishop, Re-Making Poetry: Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology (Hemel Hempsted: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 70.

<sup>188</sup> Hughes, Lupercal, 56.

The final two lines are arresting; they typify the wealth of symbols related to the Goddess which feature in many of the Lupercal poems. The identification of these symbols can be found in Graves's study. He writes:

Why the cat, pig and wolf were considered particularly sacred to the Moon-goddess is not hard to discover. Wolves howl to the moon and feed on corpse-flesh, their eyes shine in the dark, and they haunt wooded mountains. Cats' eyes similarly shine in the dark, they feed on mice (symbol of pestilence), mate openly and walk inaudibly, they are prolific but eat their own young, and their colours vary, like the moon, between white, reddish and black. Pigs also vary between white, reddish and black, feed on corpse-flesh, are prolific but eat their own young, and their tusks are crescent shaped.<sup>189</sup>

We see the pig in 'View of a Pig', though according to Hughes's poem, this dead creature is apparently incapable of transfiguration in death because it appears to be 'too dead' (13). Cats feature prominently throughout Lupercal in a variety of forms; in 'Things Present',<sup>190</sup> the tramp is without 'Cat or bread' (5); in 'Esther's Tomcat',<sup>191</sup> the cat has 'his mind on the moon' (22);<sup>192</sup> in 'Of Cats'<sup>193</sup> we are 'all held in utter mock by the cats' (21). However, it is on dogs (wolves) that Graves seems to place an emphasis in the above extract, and accordingly, we see this in Hughes's verse. The very title of Lupercal has

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<sup>189</sup> Robert Graves, The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth (London: Faber and Faber, 1961 rpt. 1988) 222.

<sup>190</sup> Hughes, Lupercal, 9.

<sup>191</sup> Hughes, Lupercal, 23.

<sup>192</sup> The moon is of course one of the Goddess's most powerful symbols.

<sup>193</sup> Hughes, Lupercal, 32.

etymological roots in *Lupus*, the Latin for 'wolf'; indeed several poems use canine imagery. Of these, 'February'<sup>194</sup> is the most striking. The title of this poem has immediate links with the Lupercalia festival which occurred in February. Sagar writes that 'the pure spirit of the wolf...is captured in "A photograph: the hairless, knuckled feet / Of the last wolf killed in Britain"<sup>195</sup>. He continues, 'There are no wolves in Britain, no large predators at all to make the nights dangerous. And we like to think we have got rid of the wolfishness in our own natures.'<sup>196</sup> As an emblem sacred to the goddess, it is unthinkable that, not only should this be the 'last wolf' in Britain, but that we should build barricades against our own inner connections with nature's (indeed, the vegetation deity's) spirit. It is here that the poem can be correlated directly with 'Lupercalia', and recall that it was believed that Romulus and Remus suckled from the wolf in the Lupercal cave, where the festival was subsequently celebrated. Their suckling connects them to this emblem of the Goddess, but also to their inner 'wolfishness', which went on to create Rome. The conclusion of 'February' reads:

Now, lest they choose his head,  
Under severe moons he sits making  
Wolf-masks, mouths clamped well onto the world.

(22-4)

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<sup>194</sup> Hughes, *Lupercal*, 13.

<sup>195</sup> Sagar, *Art*, 55.

<sup>196</sup> Sagar, *Art*, 55.

Sagar interprets this as a 'final image of the world held between the teeth of a wolf-mask'<sup>197</sup>, that is to say, that the suppressed wolf-spirit remains in the jaws of nature and things not dreamt of in our philosophy. By comparison, part one of 'Lupercalia' concerns the dog who is to be sacrificed at the festival: 'It held man's reasonable ways / Between its teeth. Received death / Closed eyes and grinning mouth.' (l. 8-10). The lines seem to acknowledge the final lines of 'February'; at the point of sacrifice, the dog grips man between its teeth, but like 'February' Hughes does not signify that the jaws ever snap shut, but the potential is there. So as the dog undergoes its transfiguration rite, the reader is asked to recall that creation is locked in the jaws of destruction, and that awareness of these extreme energies puts us in a more attuned consciousness with the surrounding world.

Through Sacks's insistence that the vegetation deity is present in most, if not all elegies, one can identify that in reading Hughes's poetry this deity is a woman, an embodiment of the Goddess herself. In Remains of Elmet, she plays various roles, including an angelic-swan creature, Mother Nature, and is partly manifest in human form in the figure of Hughes's mother. In River, she is several personalities, most notably a sexually proactive incarnation of the rivers. She is apparent in the figure of Plath when one considers the creative-destructive nature of her life. There is no need to identify every occasion where the Goddess is present in Hughes's poetry, but as one can see with his

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<sup>197</sup> Sagar, Art, 55.

war-elegies, where even out of mass slaughter comes life, the Goddess inhabits a metaphysical world of extremes. The poem 'Lupercalia', with its emphasis on fertility and regeneration, might be read as a furtherance of matters raised in and by 'Song'; for if the Goddess ceases to be Hughes's muse, then his imagination is barren, and his poetry is bereft. The continued presence of the Goddess/vegetation deity for Hughes not only produces a 'fertile' poetic, but also quietly imbues his elegies with the requisite trope of natural regeneration brought about by the healing powers of poetry.



The recently published Selected Translations<sup>198</sup> of Ted Hughes is evidence of the poet's lifelong commitment to the translation of poetry from the Continent, the Middle East and beyond. Of those he translated, the most well known recent poets are probably Yehuda Amichai and János Pilinszky. But the reworking of mythological stories is evident in many, if not all, of his myth sequences of the nineteen-seventies. As a part of this reworking, Selected Translations presents translations of Homer, Seneca, and Ovid; but perhaps most significantly for this study is Hughes's translation of the Bardo Thödol, or, The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Daniel Weissbort writes:

The book is a guide for the dead during the state that is held to intervene between death and the next rebirth. It was traditionally read aloud to the dying to help them attain

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<sup>198</sup> Although published in 2006, Hughes's Bardo Thödol translation dates from 1959/1960 possibly between the publication of Lupercal and before the publication of Wodwo.

liberation, guiding the deceased and encouraging them to use the moment of death to recognise the nature of mind and attain liberation. It seeks to persuade its reader that both the peaceful and the terrifying, wrathful visions appearing at this time are their own creation, the result of gathered karma, or of actions followed by inevitable results, i.e. of cyclic suffering. The 'Light of Pure Reality', which it is hoped will be attained, is the 'true Intellect', inseparable from the 'great Body of Radiance' or the 'mind of the Buddha'.<sup>199</sup>

In Western culture, this intermediary state ('Bardo') might be likened to 'purgatory' in Roman Catholic doctrine, where souls are purified after death.

Leonard M. Scigaj details the processes which occur in the Bardo:

Buddhists believe that after the death of the body, the spirit wanders for a period of 49 days, during which time it may attain the release of nirvana by recognising the *Dharma-Kaya* of Clear Light. But if karmic illusions – self-created projections of one's fears and attachments to the phenomenal world – continue to obscure one's vision, the spirit will gradually descend and after 49 days re-enter the womb door of the phenomenal world and be reborn amidst its transitory decay.<sup>200</sup>

Associations with basic elegiac characteristics are identifiable in both Scigaj's and Weissbort's accounts. The excerpts of Bardo Thödol in Selected Translations feature some of the core principles of this process of harrowing, beginning with the decomposition of the body physical:

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<sup>199</sup> Hughes, Selected Translations, 1.

<sup>200</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 57.

A: Death comes over him slowly.

Now earth drinks up the throb of his arteries,

Earth drinks up the light of the world

And his eyes darken, his mind darkens.

This is: the moment for which his life has waited.

(I. 8-12)<sup>201</sup>

The deceased's perceptive faculties are rendered useless. As such, much is made of darkness and light, which are obvious metaphors for life and death, and of spiritual enlightenment and spiritual ignorance. The process of decomposition begins. This procedure is likened to a poison or intoxicant; death 'comes over' rather than strikes, and the emphasis on drinking points towards a basic biological concept of digestion. Furthermore, one should consider the emphasis that the Bardo later places on re-birth via the womb, which completes the image of biology. It is worthy of note that, despite the decomposition of the body, the body is (at least according to Hughes's translation) one of the Bardo's primary metaphorical structures. One recalls images of decomposition and bodily degeneration in innumerable elegies, such as John Stone's 'Death'<sup>202</sup>, where bodily deterioration comes on 'slowly as rust / sand' (2-3). In the case of Bardo, the initial bodily decomposition, followed by the subsequent visions and harrowings, is part of a restructuring

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<sup>201</sup> The cast of characters, as given in Selected Translations, is as follows: 'Chorus A & B: Readers of the Thödol, Guide and instructor. Chorus C: Relatives, Karmic Voices, etc. Solo: Dead Soul'.

<sup>202</sup> John Stone, 'Death,' Inventions of Farewell, 58.



for the libretto<sup>203</sup> and for the physical return of the deceased into the phenomenal world, or hopefully into the desired ethereal afterlife. In short, the libretto mimics the elegiac schema of decomposition and renewal. The invocation of spiritual deities also figures as a part of the Bardo's process, much as it does in traditional laments, as does the hope for a successful transition into a paradisiacal afterlife:

A & B: O Dharma Kaya, Divine Body  
 Of Perfect Enlightenment  
 O Sambhoga Kaya, Divine Body  
 Of Perfect Endowment  
 O Nirmana Kaya, Divine  
 Body of Incarnation  
 Gather him into your Trinity in the Bardo.

By the presence of these divinities, it is hoped that the dead soul may 'escape forever the Wheel of Blood', that is, the physical world blighted by karmic egocentricity which prevents the spiritual nourishment the Bardo's process craves, or as Scigaj notes, "To attain nirvanic liberation from the physical round of decay and reincarnation in the temporal world, one must, in Jung's words, "give up the supremacy of egohood".<sup>204</sup> It is the ego which blocks the attainment of a purified spiritual release in the afterlife. Scigaj writes:

[Bardo Thödol]...abounds in imagery expressing psychic dissociation, withdrawal, and nightmarish violence. Long familiar with the Bon/Bhuddist background of the Bardo,

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<sup>203</sup> Hughes's translation was conceived as a libretto. See Selected Translations, 1.

<sup>204</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 56.

Hughes tried to render its surrealism faithfully and also found it a powerful addition to his style, an effective way to bring home to the reader the dire consequences of the mythification of science and technology in the West...[offering an] Oriental philosophy and psychology...to Western rationalism and utilitarian egocentricity.<sup>205</sup>

This imagery can be seen in abundance in excerpts three and four of Hughes's translation and, as Scigaj has suggested, these are projections of the deceased's own mind:

Solo: Now my terrors begin, I have not yet tasted my terrors.

Baked blood-brown and triple headed

With nine pitiless eyes forcing

Out of their sockets in fury

...

The three heads hung with human skulls and

Suns and moons and belly girdled

With skinned heads, with ebony serpents

Writhed in garland.

In answer, the chorus replies that these terrors are 'Rising / Out of your own mind. Do not fear them. / These are your intellect embodied', they are an evil karma which 'catches you from yourself and from / Liberation.' The fear of being 'plunged forever in the fleshy / Anguish of an earthly existence' is great for the dead soul, despite the chorus's urges to forgo the ego: 'All is unreal: / Draw this teaching / Into your mind's / Inner continuum, / Closing the

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<sup>205</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 11.



womb.' As with the more common form of elegy, the deceased is transfigured into a natural energy outside of the human form.

In excerpt five, the nightmarish karmic visions take on the appearance of humans with animal characteristics, such as wolves and foxes. Of especial interest are the bird-men, 'Headed like the cemetery bird and shouldering a gigantic / corpse; / Crow-headed, crow-coloured.../...Owl-headed and blue as starlight'. These images are certainly influences on Cave Birds, a sequence which bears a similarity to the processes of a harrowing in the afterlife designed to purify the soul, as featured in the Bardo Thödol. Hughes makes explicit this connection in a letter to Ann Skea:

This judgement [in Cave Birds] follows a simple course: accusation, defence, conviction for the murder, execution after an expiatory sacrifice...passage to the underworld. In the underworld, a different order of judgement takes place – as in Bardo Thodol...the soul is confronted by everything which, in the upper world, he had rejected.<sup>206</sup>

Of Cave Birds, Paul Bentley writes, 'Cave Birds is perhaps nothing more than a working through of depression characterised by Kristeva as "an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long term basis, lays claim upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself."<sup>207</sup> Yet, it is the desire to work through loss and the shamanistic flight to help salvage the soul of the deceased which seems

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<sup>206</sup> Hughes, 'To Ann Skea,' Letters, 491.

<sup>207</sup> Bentley, Language, Illusion and Beyond, 90-1.

central to this work. The visions which the personae are subject to are both nightmarish and an extension of an inflated reality. Such visions are identifiable in Crow (which might also be said to be a working through of loss, see below) in a variety of forms, and certainly in the prologue of Gaudete, whose vision of violent death is compelling. But the Bardo Thödol exerts its influence primarily on Wodwo. The central play in part two of the volume, 'The Wound', is a replication of the processes featured in the Bardo Thödol. In an interview, Hughes said:

I interpreted [the play] first of all as a sort of Celtic Bardo Thodol - a Gothic Bardo Thodol - because, in fact, it's full of all the stock imagery of a journey to the Celtic Underworld. And there was a definite, odd, meaningfulness about the two [main characters] - about the Massy and Ripley.<sup>208</sup>

Neil Roberts's explanation of the relevance of 'The Wound' to the 'shamanistic flight' of the Bardo Thödol is more explicit. The play 'powerfully and unnervingly suggests what it is like to die, the struggles of consciousness overwhelmed by the brute destiny of the body: as Hughes told Janos Csokits, "it all takes place in a few seconds when the protagonist's heart stops."<sup>209</sup> Here, we might say that the solider of 'The Wound' has encountered the 'climactic experience', which sends him on his journey through an

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<sup>208</sup> Ann Skea, transcript of 'Ted Hughes: The Wound', interview with Ted Hughes from the Adelaide Festival, March 1976, reproduced by permission of Radio National and the ABC (Australia) 'The Ted Hughes Homepage' <<http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/ABC2AF.htm>> 10 November 2007.

<sup>209</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 60-1.

underworld of sorts; it is these energies which shamans appear to inhabit during their 'flight'. But, as Hughes reveals, his character in 'The Wound' is a typical figure in shamanistic journeys: '[H]e's a stock - that figure that goes on that kind of adventure, with a hero who's torn to bits in the Underworld - he's a sort of sacrifice to the Underworld, so the other one can escape. He's a standard figure. He appears often in epics - the twin who doesn't come back.'<sup>210</sup> One can identify these figures in the subsequent volumes of Hughes's poetry, where, as Corcoran notes, they become *doppelgängers* of sorts:

Their central figures literally 'transgress', having their beings astride the boundaries between two worlds. The creature inhabiting the title poem of Wodwo is the seeker of an identity between air and water, 'no threads / fastening me to anything'; Lumb, the protagonist of Gaudete, is an Anglican priest and a spirit changeling; Crow and the cave birds are – strikingly in Baskin's accompanying drawings – fusions of anthropoid and ornithoid characteristics, the taloned and feathered possessors of bulkily protuberant human genitalia.<sup>211</sup>

One might also identify Hughes himself as this figure in Remains of Elmet. He is both intimately attached to the Calder Valley, but he is also the dispassionate observer documenting its demise.

It might be said that the Bardo Thödol's influence on Hughes's work extends more towards his poetic oeuvre of the seventies than it does his elegies. But in both cases, there is evidence of 'the central experience of a

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<sup>210</sup> Skea, 'Ted Hughes: The Wound', <<http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/ABC2AF.htm>>.

<sup>211</sup> Corcoran, English Poetry Since 1940, 118.

shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again or finding a new one.<sup>212</sup> One can see that this is mainly true of the post-Wodwo era, where a pared down, tightly-fused language is a recurring metaphor for the reduction and replacement of elegiac processes and expressions, so that they might be better identified with the very real *un*-metaphorical facts of life and death. Hughes's poetic therefore mimics the Bardo Thödol by eschewing contrived artificial production in favour of a purer clarity of vision.



Whilst it is a landmark in his career, it is debateable whether or not Crow is particularly fundamental to Hughes's development as an elegist. The poems are witty, dark and acerbic, as typified by the powerful characterisation of death in 'Examination at the Womb-Door'<sup>213</sup>:

Who is stronger than hope? *Death*

Who is stronger than the will? *Death*

Stronger than love? *Death*

Stronger than life? *Death*

(15-8)

The sequence's dedication to Hughes's partner, Assia Wevill, and their daughter Shura casts an inevitably long shadow over a critical reading of the poems. According to what little information there is, a combination of jealousy over Hughes, doubts over his fidelity, the increasing popularity of the

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<sup>212</sup> Sylvia Plath quoted in Nick Bishop, 'Ted Hughes and the Death of Poetry,' Challenge 3.

<sup>213</sup> Hughes, Crow, 3. N.B. the poem's title derives from the womb which offers re-birth in the Bardo Thödol.

Plath legend and all manner of reasons, which may be substantiated or not, drove Wevill to take her own life and that of her daughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1969. For this reason, Crow has become regarded as an exorcism for Hughes's inner demons at this time, and indeed, there are images in Crow which seem to have a concurrent non-fictional resonance about them.

'Crow's Account of St George'<sup>214</sup> concludes with the protagonist of the poem dropping his sword and running from the house 'Where his wife and children lie in their blood.' (50-1), and in 'Revenge Fable'<sup>215</sup> the lines, 'With all her babes in arms, in ghostly weepings, / She died' (15-6) might also allude to this tragedy. The possibility for speculative biographical interpretation is limitless.

'Crow's Nerve Fails'<sup>216</sup> might be read as a poem for Hughes's self-reproach: 'Is he the archive of their accusations? / Or their ghostly purpose, their pining vengeance? / Or their unforgiven prisoner?' (8-10) the poem asks -- could these be read as Hughes's own concerns after the deaths of Plath, Wevill and Shura? The poem concludes: 'He cannot be forgiven. // His prison is the earth. Clothed in his conviction, / Trying to remember his crimes // Heavily he flies.' (11-14). Yet, such a reading of the poems is lazy. Hughes is a skilled poet; he 'avoids the confessional and disparaging by translating individual suffering into a universal experience.'<sup>217</sup> Death, like life, is the common touchstone of

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<sup>214</sup> Hughes, Crow, 21.

<sup>215</sup> Hughes, Crow, 63.

<sup>216</sup> Hughes, Crow, 40.

<sup>217</sup> Rand Brandes, 'Ted Hughes: Crow,' A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry, ed. Neil Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 514.

mortal existence, and it is death, as Rand Brandes's writes in his excellent essay on Crow, which 'was the midwife that delivered Crow'.<sup>218</sup>

Brandes's assertion is easily substantiated. But can a claim that Crow is elegiac be validated with equal legitimacy? To answer, one needs to withdraw from the question of what makes a poem an elegy and instead consider the process of elegy. For the most part, elegy is a means of preserving the dead against the sterility of death so that they might be remembered and evoked through language. But one must consider how the elegy serves the living; in its purest form, the elegy is meant to console those who survive the deceased, and this usually takes the form of a process which mimics the cathartic plays of Ancient Greece. The poet/persona is to one degree or another subject to a harrowing (this may take the form of anger, melancholia, self-doubt) so that by the elegy's conclusion, the poet/persona is consoled and spiritually content to continue towards fresh woods and pastures new.

The poems of Crow, however, repeatedly depict thwarted efforts, noble or otherwise. God's attempts to teach Crow language end in chaos ('Crow's First Lesson'<sup>219</sup>), and the image of Crow 'spraddled head-down in the beach-garbage, / guzzling / a dropped ice-cream' ('Crow and the Birds'<sup>220</sup>, 19-20) typifies the bathos at work in the poems. 'How Water Began to Play' (the

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<sup>218</sup> Brandes, 'Ted Hughes: Crow,' Twentieth Century Poetry, 513.

<sup>219</sup> Hughes, Crow, 9.

<sup>220</sup> Hughes, Crow, 29.



second of "Two Eskimo Songs"<sup>221</sup>) characterises the calculated subversion in Crow. The poem's title presupposes recreational frivolity; this is continued by the figure of Water wanting 'to live', but the desire to live is met with continual setbacks, disappointment and distress: 'It went to the womb it met maggot and rottenness / It came weeping back and wanted to die' (II, 13-4). Water is subjected to further anguish before it emerges 'Utterly worn out utterly clear' (II, 21) in its present recognisable state. As with other Crow poems, there is no evidence of renewal common to elegy, but there are traces of decomposition. Time and again, the apparent lack of cohesion or wholeness is achieved by the subversion of the reader's expectations; but Hughes goes beyond tricking the reader. Crow a further realisation of Hughes's deconstruction and dismantling of Western poetic norms; the minor acts of defiance within the poems are echoes of the text as a manifesto against tradition. The result is a poetry which invites comparison by the use of titles which declare a likeness to existing stories or myths, only to reinvent and destabilise the stories according to Hughes's new poetic. Ultimately, there are no verifiable verse forms or generic categories; the conventional elegy is also left by the wayside. There are hints of the elegiac process of decomposition, but this decomposition leans more towards Hughes's deconstruction of poetry than a manifestation of an elegiac trope.

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<sup>221</sup> Hughes, Crow, 87.

With Gaudete, however, Hughes's poetic is less jagged and belligerent. Although it feels more cohesive and complete, it is not wholly reconciled with Western modes of thought. Like Crow, Gaudete implicitly mimics the natural processes of decay and reconstitution which are replicated in elegy; like its predecessor, it also utilises a harrowing as a means of destabilising the central shaman-like figure. In this case, it is the Rev. Nicholas Lumb, whose story begins in 'the other world'<sup>222</sup> in a nightmarish scene resembling a massacre:

All the length of the street, dead bodies are piled in heaps  
and strewn in tangles everywhere between the heaps

...

Layered, interlocked, double-jointed, abandoned,  
The corpses stare up at the purpled sky  
Or at the black walls, or deeply into each other  
As in the bottom of a mass grave.

A mass-grave! The whole street a mass grave!

They were herded in here, then all killed together.  
As they embraced each other, or fought to be free of each  
other, or clutched at each other.  
Babies lie, tumbled separate, like refugee bundles.

'Prologue' (16-7/22-30)

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<sup>222</sup> Hughes, Gaudete, 9.

The uncompromising, unrelenting repetition of the image does not diminish its horror, nor do the prose-like lines lose any of their impact; every word multiplies the feeling of fear, and each sentence compounds the sensation of repulsion. Such images can hardly be far from the mind of any reader, recalling the powerful photographs and films of the holocaust and the discovery of the mass graves at the concentration camps. Throughout Gaudete, Hughes contrasts domesticity (or symbols of domesticity) with acts of violence which are often viscerally described. The effect of this is one common to Hughes's poems, the idea that death and violence are an integral part of day-to-day life; it is only that we consciously distance ourselves from it. This is the tone at the conclusion of the final poem, 'Easy and Strong', where the changeling version of Lumb in the real world is shot dead and unceremoniously cremated on a pile of 'chairs, tables, / ... Everything combustible'. Roberts observes that Lumb's death has a 'powerful, disturbing and bewilderingly negative...effect, given that the theme of shamanistic invocation of natural forces, to cure a spiritually and sensually atrophied human society, is of such central importance to Hughes.'<sup>223</sup> Yet, with the epilogue of the poem, the real Lumb appears in 'a straggly sparse village on the West Coast of Ireland'<sup>224</sup> where he leaves a notebook full of verses of which the epilogue consists. Lumb's apparent death and rebirth have clear associations with elegy, but in leaving a book of verse behind him, Lumb's

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<sup>223</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 105.

<sup>224</sup> Hughes, Gaudete, 173.

actions have a greater significance which points towards the surviving power of language. The real Lumb's appearance in Ireland is quickly replaced by his disappearance; he has instead been substituted by poetry, perhaps one of the elegy's prime directives. However, the second epilogue poem (#2) appears to dismiss specifically spoken language as inadequate:

...I hear speech, the bossed Neanderthal brow-ridge  
 Gone into beetling talk  
 The Java Man's bone grinders sublimed into chat.

Words buckle the voice in tighter, closer  
 Under the midriff  
 Till the cry rots, and speech

Is a fistula

(#2, 5-11)

Spoken language reduces, categorises and cheapens into conformity timbres which occur naturally. The written word cannot capture 'Cries from birds' (#2, 2) from the 'awkward gullets of beasts' (#2, 3); such timbres 'will not chill into syntax' (#2, 3). Similarly, the dead man of #39 makes a cry 'Incomprehensible in every language' (#39, 9), so he instead 'dances and sings'<sup>225</sup> (#39, 12). The implication is that the spoken word is incapable of capturing multifaceted lexical idiosyncrasies. From this, we see that *written* language not only survives both the fake and real Lumb, but also threatens to

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<sup>225</sup> That the man sings (i.e. he uses the spoken word accompanied by a melody) might be a submission to the supposed reducing effects of the spoken word. However, I would contest that songs (which preceded the *written* poem) are perhaps closer to shamanistic ritual and that it is an acceptable mediation of language which enhances rather than reduces its effect.

itself in the form of a mediating prose-like linguistic reduction which loses the important natural linguistic energies found in nature. Poetry, however, is exempt from these criticisms as it endeavours to replicate these energies and seeks to further their continuance. This is also true of Crow, where the mediating effect of the written word survives Hughes's own defiance of normative poetic contrivance by remaining close to natural songs rather than constrictive verse forms.

The mediatory presence of language in elegy is noted by Sacks on several occasions; elegy can dually mediate between life and death, but also act as a barrier (whether intended or not) between these two figurative worlds. These problems are inherited by Hughes and his elegies. Crow and Gaudete both communicate dissatisfaction with linguistic expression, but also acknowledge its resilience and the staying power which exists beyond death.

Like Crow and Gaudete, the alchemic drama that is Cave Birds follows the elegiac pattern of deconstruction and rebirth. Hughes writes, "The poems plot the course of a symbolic drama, concerning disintegration and re-integration"<sup>226</sup>; he points specifically to Leonard Baskin's picture which accompanies the poem "The Knight"<sup>227</sup>, a figure who is 'a decomposing bird of the crow type'.<sup>228</sup> The Knight has 'surrendered everything' (1) and is at the mercy of these natural processes, 'Blueflies lift off his beauty. / Beetles and

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<sup>226</sup> Ted Hughes, Selected Poems: 1957-1981 (London: Faber and Faber, 1983, rpt. 1984) 237.

<sup>227</sup> Hughes, Cave Birds, 28.

<sup>228</sup> Hughes, 1957-1981, 237.

ants officiate // Pestering him with instructions.' (18-20). Hughes brings attention to the construction of the poem and the image; the Knight is created by language and so, language decomposes along with him: 'The texts moulder - // The quaint courtly language of wingbones and talons.' (25-7) The penultimate poem of Cave Birds, 'The Risen'<sup>229</sup>, completes the natural process of Hughes's 'drama'. The poem complements 'The Knight', and appears to complete the process of transfiguration from corpse to 'otherness': 'He lifts wings, he leaves the remains of something, / A mess of offal, muddled as an afterbirth.' (3-4) The body, which submits to decay in 'The Knight', loses significance by the conclusion of 'The Risen' and is replaced with an environment of heat, light and creation, 'the wind-fondled crucible of...splendour' (21), where even dirt is transfigured into God. The wholeness, the completion of this cycle is under threat as we learn in the concluding poem, 'Finale'<sup>230</sup>, where, 'At the end of the ritual / up comes a goblin.' (2)

'The Risen' anticipates the conclusion of the Remains of Elmet poems, where the figure of the bird plays a deeply symbolic role associated with renewal. So, too, the encounter with the climactic energies anticipates the forces at work in both Remains of Elmet and Moortown Elegies. In both sequences, the implications of choosing the correct language to mimetically translate these energies to the reader is of great importance; this language is subject to doubt on behalf of the poet who is also reinvigorating codes of

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<sup>229</sup> Hughes, Cave Birds, 60.

<sup>230</sup> Hughes, Cave Birds, 62.

mourning in poetry. With Crow, Gaudete and Cave Birds, and with the poems between The Hawk in the Rain and Wodwo, Hughes is moving 'towards a mythical synthesis garnered from eclectic and esoteric sources (including Graves's The White Goddess, Egyptian mythology, American Trickster legend, Elizabethan alchemy and shamanistic tradition) which might act as an imaginative substitute for the doctrinal and symbolic hollowness of contemporary Christianity.'<sup>231</sup> But Hughes is going further; by revising and refining his skill he is preparing his poetic for its application in the actual world in the sequences to follow, he is testing the shortcomings of his elegiac poetic and anticipating what he will encounter.



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<sup>231</sup> Corcoran, English Poetry Since 1940, 118.

Chapter Four:

Singers of a Lost Kingdom

Remains of Elmet and Moortown Elegies represent a u-turn in Hughes's poetic output of the seventies, which until this point had focussed on creating or re-imagining existing mythological stories with Crow, Gaudete and Cave Birds. Both sequences return to matters of the real world to continue Hughes's development as an elegist.

Not for the first time in his poetry, the photograph is the prompt for his poetic imagination. Like 'Six Young Men', it is pictures which remind Hughes of the actuality which his poetry at once wishes to defy and to capture. Remains of Elmet is the result. But whereas the past is often regarded as a sanctuary which the sub-conscious imbues with a rose-tinted light, the landscape of Hughes's native part of England is unceremoniously celebrated in the black and white contrast of Fay Godwin's photographs together with the bleak ambience of the poems. The photographs are an essential visual stimulus; they assist in conveying Hughes's presentation of the 'actual' in his elegies. In a letter to Fay Godwin in 1979, Hughes stresses the interdependence of the poems and photographs: 'Without your pictures there would have been no poems at all. Without your pictures most readers would be completely lost for a concrete setting. The poems relate to your pictures as commentaries to an original...and there is no question of them having any



existence apart.<sup>232</sup> The pictures detail a variety of sundry minutiae, from sweeping landscapes to insects crawling up wild grasses, which gives the sequence wholeness in terms of its physical staging, but also in the presentation of its subject, as something real, tangible and claustrophobic.

But although the photographs provide a visual clarity, Hughes's Calder Valley fluctuates between a part-real and part-dream landscape; it is 'an alternative England, fierce and mysterious, a final stronghold against the levelling restlessness of modernity'.<sup>233</sup> Hughes's laments in the sequence operate somewhere between what is going and what has gone. He is both the dispassionate hawk, observing the decline of the area, and the sensitive poet concerned about the landscape which shaped and influenced much of his poetry. In every sense, the poems fulfil Eric Smith's observation that in the elegy, 'The passing of...a countryside, with its accompanying social order, [can] be the subject of lament'.<sup>234</sup> The sequence's title immediately signifies that Hughes's exploration of the Calder Valley is one which encounters the fragments of dissolute and bygone eras. The remains the poems investigate are more than the derelict remnants of buildings which scatter the landscape; they are the last spiritual, psychological and environmental vestiges which successive societies have left behind. Of especial note is the way Hughes repeatedly emphasises how the Calder Valley need not have become a ruin.

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<sup>232</sup> Hughes, 'To Fay Godwin,' 31 May 1979, *Letters*, 420.

<sup>233</sup> 'Ted Hughes, OM; Obituary,' *The Times* (London) Oct 30, 1998: 27.

<sup>234</sup> Smith, *By Mourning Tongues*, 2.

For Hughes, the blame lies squarely with man's severance from nature, a matter which he attributes to the Industrial Revolution. But within this, Paulin notes contradictions which Hughes exploits:

The apparently natural forces [Hughes] celebrates are symbolic metaphors for a series of historical struggles – Reformation, Industrial Revolution, First World War – which echo and combine in Hughes's radically unsettled imagination. And for all his professed hostility to technology, many of his poems are laments for Britain's decline as a great manufacturing power.<sup>235</sup>

The poems often undercut something symbolically mimetic of the ecological processes at work not only in the elegy, but the valley at large. Within the established elegiac framework, the process of decomposition and renewal is a common trope; this is worked over the entirety of Hughes's sequence for reasons which will become apparent. As Scigaj writes:

Within the ecological design of the volume, Hughes reveals in these poems a sense of nature imparting a special gift that the poet responds to with a sense of stewardship. Hughes not only accepts the gift, but does so with the conviction that his Yorkshire environs provided a very adequate, even unique training ground for his spiritual development.<sup>236</sup>

This is the mantle which Hughes carries forth in Moortown Elegies, where there is a progressive co-existence between man and nature. The poems focus on Hughes's experiences as a farmer and his observations of the births of

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<sup>235</sup> Paulin, Minotaur, 252.

<sup>236</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 115.

lamb and calves which are sometimes as excruciating as they are inspirational. Man never succeeds in overcoming nature; as Scigaj suggests, he is a steward. The sequence is about the struggle to retain the balance of the natural world and enrich man's interaction with it. There are trials of endurance for man and beast often pitted against intense meteorological conditions, there are struggles to bring in new life to the world and sustain it, and there are great ironies found in the most touching deaths contrasted with moments of great serenity in the most unpredictable moments in life. Death is observed in a context directly at odds with the approach taken in Remains of Elmet; it is one of the primary contrasts of the two sequences and a driving force behind both of them.

Though their approaches to the man/nature relationship are disparate, their elegiac approach is unified. 'In the English [elegiac] tradition at least,' writes Eric Smith, 'there is a contrast between the idyllic pastoral and the intrusive reality.' It is an observation echoed by both Sacks and Ramazani. With its associations of an idealised, pre-lapsarian countryside landscape, the pastoral mode of elegiac poetry seems immediately suitable as a place to safeguard the dead. But for a poet such as Hughes, whose latent elegiac quest has been to provide elegies which present the appearance of truth or reality, the pastoral mode is insufficient and deviant to his line of discourse.

W.J. Keith's The Rural Tradition offers a helpfully discriminating account of the rural tradition of poetry. It is common to refer to the verse of

the countryside, and to a certain type of elegy, as 'pastoral'. But this, argues Keith, imports a set of values which distorts the countryside poetic. He stresses that pastoral poems offer one the basic distinction that the town is complicated and that the countryside is simple and that the two should remain divided. In turn pastoral writing offers an allegorical or idealised landscape, an image of a golden age rather than a degree of realistic accuracy. Rural writing depends upon a verifiable connection with an existing countryside for effectiveness. The nature of the verse is also reflected stylistically; pastoral writing praises the simplicity of the countryside through an ornate and complicated style, and appreciation of natural beauty is conveyed in the language of urban elegance. Conversely, the style of rural literature is closely related to content, 'and the tension between the natural and the artificial, which offers the opportunity for sophistic pastoral effects, is here reduced to a minimum.'<sup>237</sup>

Applying this model to Hughes's two sequences reveals him to be a rural poet. Terry Gifford notes that with the poem 'Open to Huge Light', 'the humans are sheep and the (wind-)shepherds, who, in a twist of the pastoral iconography, are now playing 'the reeds of desolation' rather than idealisation.'<sup>238</sup> Hughes eliminates the nostalgic buffer-zone of pastoral poetry and instead 'finds some procedure for stripping away the protective

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<sup>237</sup> Keith, *The Rural Tradition*, 4-5.

<sup>238</sup> Terry Gifford, "Dead Farms, Dead Leaves: Culture as Nature in Remains of Elmet & Elmet", *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons*, ed. Joanny Moulin. Context and Genre in English Literature (Lisse: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2004) 40.

layers...that prevent us making contact with anything outside ourselves'.<sup>239</sup>

Gifford comments that, with the pastoral, there is 'a false construction of reality, usually idealised, often nostalgic, and distorting the historical, economic and organic tensions at work in human relationships with nature'.<sup>240</sup> Like the landscape, Hughes's poetry will not be tamed; he resists the temptation to present a sequence of idylls of a bygone time in favour of an exposition of the grim present. The poems do not submit to urban growth; their simple, almost vernacular, qualities mask a sedulously fostered grave warning about treating the world as *real* and not a make believe world with imagined problems. As rural elegies, they are poems which speak from beyond the grave of failed industrial conquest; Hughes, like an archaeologist, is sifting among the remains of a dead world in order to produce a warning from history so that future 'deaths' may be avoided.

In resisting pastoral elegiac modes, the language and its relation to the subject matter is objective in tone; this is an appropriate move for poems which are documentations of a place and situation in time. Gifford and Roberts insist that the language of Moortown Elegies, for instance, 'presents not an imagined vision...but a symbolic moment as it arises in everyday

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<sup>239</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Wild Things,' Guardian Unlimited 3 December 2005  
<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1655550,00.html>> 26 April 2006.

<sup>240</sup> Terry Gifford, 'Gods of Mud: Hughes and Post-pastoral,' Challenge, 130.

practical life.<sup>241</sup> Commenting on Hughes's repeated use of the verse paragraph in Moortown Elegies, Robinson notes that:

Hughes's attitude towards form implies his attitude to life. Where the use of fixed stanzaic divisions, rhyme schemes and metres implies that the life dealt with is a meaningless chaos until it is redeemed and ordered by art, Hughes's free verse implies that life has a pre-existing significance which it tries to discover, celebrate and make available.<sup>242</sup>

In the hands of a lesser poet, the verse could easily slip into overt sentimentalism and become pastoral. The Romantics are Hughes's most obvious forbears when it comes to the poetic, indeed, elegiac interpretation of ruin and the hope of restoration; Wordsworth's 'The Ruined Cottage' is an immediate example. The apprehension of these poets and their fears regarding the rise of the Industrial Revolution and its influence are both confirmed and dispelled by Hughes.

Remains of Elmet, according to Nicholas Bishop, 'chronicles the death of the kingdom of the whole psyche in historical terms.'<sup>243</sup> Indeed, the sequence wholly deconstructs the troubles which led to the Calder Valley's demise. Conversely, Moortown Elegies attempts to offer resolutions in a different locale, and with an alternative dominating 'psyche'. There are instances where the tones of individual poems are elegiac, which leads to an

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<sup>241</sup> Gifford & Roberts, Critical Study, 251.

<sup>242</sup> Craig Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd: Moortown Elegies,' Achievement, 259.

<sup>243</sup> Bishop, Re-Making Poetry, 204.

overall sense of lament latent in the sequences. Both present reactions to the mundane and the extraordinary, and feelings about the acts of the past and the shape of the future and of all the hopes, fears, apprehensions and anxieties in between. 'What grips me about the place,' Hughes wrote of the Calder Valley, 'is the weird collision of that terrible life of slavery – to work, cash, Methodism – which was a heroic life really, and developed heroic virtues – inside those black buildings, with that wilderness, which is really a desert, more or less uninhabitable.'<sup>244</sup> These comments might also be applied to Hughes's experiences in Devon. Such emotions in such personal works cannot help but touch a nerve in the reader, and the laments within touch upon these emotions, the contradictions and of course the prevalence of ruin and restoration which are elegised in its many and varied forms.



It is significant that in Remains of Elmet, the poem 'The Dark River' should precede even the book's table of contents.<sup>245</sup> Its arresting presence suggests that its role in prefacing and introducing the sequence is more important than finding the location of the individual poems. A close textual interpretation reveals this to be the case, for with this poem Hughes presents many of the prominent themes and ideas which are manifest in the sequence.

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<sup>244</sup> Hughes, 'To Fay Godwin,' 4 July 1976, Letters, 379.

<sup>245</sup> This poem in Remains of Elmet (Faber and Faber, 1979) bears no title; however, in the subsequent revisions of this work by Hughes in Three Books (Faber and Faber, 1993), Elmet (Faber and Faber, 1994) and Collected Poems (Faber and Faber: 2003), the poem is entitled 'The Dark River'. For the purposes of reference, I shall be using the Three Books and Elmet title when referring to this poem in the first edition.

The 'posthumous life' (1) of his mother is an early indication of the myriad of similar contradictions which life and death present in such close proximity to the valley's inhabitants. This 'death in life' *modus operandi* at work in the Calder Valley is also indicative of the supernatural occurrences which are observed and discarded. But the evocation of Hughes's deceased mother in the presence of his uncle appears to summon up in his poetry how both members of his family are remains themselves; they are anachronisms (a theme later developed in 'Crown Point Pensioners'<sup>246</sup>) who in Hughes's eyes are 'Keeping their last eighty years alive and attached to me / Keeping their strange depths alive and attached to me.' (8-9) Hughes has become a guardian, a preserver of their lifetime, a documenter of an era which he has watched die. It is the 'strange depths' which remain ambivalent to Hughes; the phrase is interpretive but suggests a connection which is dying or has died along with his uncle's generation.

The presence of Hughes's mother and uncle also establishes the strong family-ties worked throughout the sequence; as a consequence, motherhood and the labour of childbirth (developed later in Moortown Elegies) are examined in Remains of Elmet with a special precedence. In 'The Dark River', the valley is described in relation to the birth of Hughes's uncle: 'the smoky valley opens, the womb that bore him.' (14) We see here that both industry and birth are rendered, in Hughes's vision, as creative acts which are

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<sup>246</sup> Hughes, Remains, 89.



seemingly doomed to destruction; so the economic thrust of the Industrial Revolution and its spoils are matched with the birth of new life and its pains. Birth and motherhood are notably employed in the poems 'Where the Mothers'<sup>247</sup> (which looks at the spirituality of motherhood), 'Long Screams'<sup>248</sup> (which evokes the pains of child labour and links them with the 'pains' of death), and 'The Angel'<sup>249</sup> (which in many respects fuses all these elements). On each occasion, birth is marked with foreboding omens. The creative-destructive processes have fused the circuit, which is why birth is set against what Hughes sees as sterility in the valley. There is a sense in which this unfulfilment is echoed in the technical aspects of Hughes's Elmet elegies.

What survives and what escapes this creative sterility is poetry. For Hughes it is the language of the valley, his 'last inheritance', an 'Archaeology of the mouth' that hangs on a 'frayed, fraying hair fineness' which is the last hope for Hughes's bleak vision of the valley. But even then, it is a treasure that could 'crumble at the touch of day.' (18-20)<sup>250</sup> Hughes uses his poetry to 'renew his prime', and put vigour into elegising what is left in order to salvage what remains of Elmet.

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<sup>247</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 10.

<sup>248</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 26.

<sup>249</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 124.

<sup>250</sup> As a point of interest, this line appears in *Elmet* (1994) as '*Funeral* treasures that crumble at the touch of day' (my emphasis) which would suggest the ancient rite of burying the dead with treasures to take with them into their afterlife. Their crumbling hints at the fragility which operates both in life and death in the Calder Valley.

The derelict buildings ‘crackling with redundant energy’<sup>251</sup> which punctuate the landscape of the Calder Valley are, for Hughes, representative of a personal and social state of mind for those who have lived and continue to live in the area. Aside from the few remaining Celtic standing stones, it is the ruins of the Industrial Revolution which are of prominence. ‘Lumb Chimneys’<sup>252</sup> considers the history of the giant industrial chimneys which remain virtually intact to this day. In order to construct them, ‘Days are chucked out into night’ (1), and the years that it takes for nature to grow and develop, ‘The huge labour of the leaf’, are ‘simply thrown away’ (2). But by the third stanza, an avenging force in nature is pronounced, ‘The brave dreams and mortgaged walls of the mills are now let rot in the rain.’ (6) The vengeance is enhanced with ‘nettle venoms’ and disparaging diction such as ‘dumped’ and ‘cynical’. Prosperity can return to the area on nature’s terms, but there is a price to pay: ‘Before these chimneys can flower again / They must fall into the only future, into earth.’ (17-8) As Iain Twiddy writes, ‘nature is in the process of assimilating the remnants, sealing over the industrial wounds inflicted upon it.’<sup>253</sup>

Whilst the walls and chimneys are being reclaimed by nature, their defiance, their not ‘falling’ in the quick motion suggested, has led to a stand off between the ‘brave dreams’ of men and the nature on which they have

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<sup>251</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 62.

<sup>252</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 14.

<sup>253</sup> Iain Twiddy, ‘The Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry,’ PhD Diss., U. of Sheffield, 2005, 37.

trespassed. The chimneys, in their defiance, have stalled the decomposition/renewal process, something central to the elegiac formula. In turn the elegy cannot be fulfilled. The concluding lines of the poem are a call for the completion of the elegy which can only be achieved by the destruction of the chimneys. The transfiguration of the chimneys into flowers is an unusual play on the more common renewal of the dead organic matter being reclaimed and renewed by living organic matter. The poem supplements flowers with nettles and brambles to underscore its 'failure' as an elegy. But the 'flower' in 'Lumb Chimneys' is symbolic not only of the ecological process, but also of hope, both for the chimneys and as a symbol of elegiac characteristics. Scigaj's invaluable ecological reading of Remains of Elmet states that, 'The receptive Earth must process its spent creations'.<sup>254</sup> This is true of the defunct chimneys where vegetation indiscriminately reclaims inorganic matter, and also the wider elegiac tradition, in which the corpse of the deceased decomposes in accordance with natural ecological progression.

The discord of 'Lumb Chimneys' is compounded in 'Hill Stone Was Content'<sup>255</sup>, which accounts for the occurrence of the psychological inertia which distanced the men from the countryside that supported them. The poem appears to take its cue from comments Hughes made about the Calder Valley: 'Everything in West Yorkshire is slightly unpleasant. Nothing ever

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<sup>254</sup> Scigaj, 'Ted Hughes and Ecology: A Biocentric Vision,' Challenge, 172.

<sup>255</sup> Hughes, Remains, 37.

quite escapes into happiness. The people are not detached enough from the stone, as if they were only half-born from the earth and the graves are too near the surface.<sup>256</sup> In the poem, the hill stone is complicit in its reification, 'to be cut, to be carted / And fixed in its new place' (1-2) as the walls of a mill. This conscription, however, comes at a cost: 'It forgot its wild roots / Its earth song / In cement and the drum song of looms.' (6-8) This line, an explicit indictment of the attitudes which led to the valley's state of decay, is also a central analogy of the sequence. But Hughes's indictment is troublesome. The assumption is that 'mankind' shunned its 'earth-song' out of greed (which is surely true in many cases), but might it not have been for individual economic survival? This leads one to question the true nature of the 'idyllic' existence which they rejected; it clearly was not idyllic enough when one considers how many of the underprivileged populace were prepared to become 'four-cornered, stony' workers supporting the propagation of the factories and mills. There is certainly a gesture on Hughes's part which suggests that mankind left behind something better, but the idyll, whilst no doubt less polluted and more tranquil, is a fiction. The socio-political context just prior to the Industrial Revolution compromises the poem and Hughes's position as a writer of *rural* elegies. On one side, Hughes has rejected pastoral elegiac modes in favour of an unfalsified dream in his poetry; but at the same time, in this poem, he is harking back to an idyll which is conjured in Virgil's

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<sup>256</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Rock: Growing up in the Calder Valley,' The Listener, (70:421-3) 19<sup>th</sup> September 1963.

Eclogues and the pastoral elegies of Milton, Shelley and Arnold. But as Sacks writes, the 'features of [the pastoral's] influence are to be found even in those elegies that are not strictly pastoral.'<sup>257</sup> Such contradictions are inevitable; they represent the sensitivity of the poet to the nuances of a complicated subject matter. It is no surprise, therefore, that the reader is presented with, for example, 'Lumb Chimneys', which is partly a call for industrial rejuvenation as opposed to 'Hill-Stone Was Content', which is partly a warning against the influence of industry. It implies a false dichotomy in Hughes's sensitive work that the poet should persevere with one mode of poetic thought alone, without the opportunity for debate in his own poetry.

The demise of the local textile industries in the valley further complicates Hughes's elegies. Sacks writes, 'the elegy has employed crucial images of weaving, of creating a fabric in the place of a void...To speak of weaving a consolation recalls the actual weaving of burial clothes and shroud, and this emphasizes how mourning is an action, a process of work.'<sup>258</sup> But without the means to manufacture a weave (which was the valley's central industry) Hughes's elegies cannot fully realise their potential; if the trade which produced the weave has ceased to function, then there is no fabric to fill the void. Hughes alludes to the weaving industry by citing the mechanisms which produced the cloth, but they are silenced ('...the leaf-

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<sup>257</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 19.

<sup>258</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 18-9.

loam silence / Is old siftings of sewing machines and shuttles' (2-3)<sup>259</sup>, the product has decayed ('Cloth rotted, in spite of the nursing.' (5)<sup>260</sup>) and now the remaining inhabitants are 'Occupying the blanks.'<sup>261</sup> The void remains unfilled, 'a draughty absence' ('Mill Ruins', (9)) 'An absence, famished and staring' ('Remains of Elmet'<sup>262</sup>, (12)) without this trope of consolation.

The absence of the weave points to Hughes's use of images of absence, be it silences, open landscapes, or things apparently 'missing' or gone. This can be seen repeatedly in his sequence; the chimneys 'vanish in the brightening', progress shifts 'out of nothingness into nothingness'. The 'leaf loam silence'<sup>263</sup> of 'Hardcastle Craggs' is the 'old siftings of sewing machines and shuttles' (2-3). The language of elegy euphemises death as 'loss'; the immediate effect of 'loss' is to be unable to interact with the deceased and, as we have seen, this metaphorically extends the euphemism to questions of location: the whereabouts of the dead, the whereabouts of the poet/persona at the time of the death, and where the divine spirits were at the time of his/her passing. What troubles Remains of Elmet is that the answers to these

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<sup>259</sup> Hughes, 'Hardcastle Craggs,' Remains, 13.

<sup>260</sup> Hughes, 'Mill Ruins,' Remains, 38.

<sup>261</sup> Hughes, 'Crown Point Pensioners,' Remains, 89.

<sup>262</sup> Hughes, Remains, 53.

<sup>263</sup> Loam (a soil with a mixture of clay, sand and a high yield of organic matter) is valued for its fertility. It can also be turned into plaster. Hughes's mention of it succeeds Shakespeare's use which also hints at the decomposition/renewal processes of life and death:

Alexander died,  
Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust  
is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto  
he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Hamlet, V.i (192-95). The Norton Shakespeare.

questions are all too evident, as Iain Twiddy remarks: 'The landscape offers no alternative to death, since it bears the marks of those deaths.'<sup>264</sup> The dead industries and 'anachronistic' inhabitants of the valley are what compromise the 'remains' of the sequence's title; the poet/persona grew up alongside these remains admitting that 'throughout my lifetime...I have watched...the region...die.'<sup>265</sup> Since the answers to the questions raised by absence are evident, Hughes's elegies are not permitted a standard rhetorical mode of elegiac consolation because of the immediate proximity of the remains. As Sacks writes, 'few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living.'<sup>266</sup> But Hughes's emphatic mention of absences does not explicitly reveal what it is that is missing from the valley, leaving a sense of irresolution to a selection of the poems, a condition mimetic of the valley's turmoil.

With the mills gone, the 'shuttle's spirit' fails to 'come back' to the area. This spiritualization of industry, again metaphorical for the condition of those in the Calder Valley, is akin to the forgotten 'earth-song' of man. Perhaps it is this which would fill the absences Hughes presents in his elegies. What the valley lacks in industry, it also lacks in spirit (the 'strange depths' at work in 'The Dark River', perhaps). The answer as to the whereabouts of the valley's spiritual guardians is to be found in 'Lumb Chimneys', where it is

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<sup>264</sup> Twiddy, 'The Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry,' 42.

<sup>265</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, preface.

<sup>266</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 19.

made clear that the spirit 'does what it can to save itself alone.' (9). Nature's spirits, in a desperate bid to salvage what remains of the inhabitants' belief in them, indiscriminately 'Gallop...souls // ...Looking for bodies / Of birds, animals, people' ('Where the Mothers' 1, 4-5) but are forced to save themselves. Throughout the sequence, Hughes summons spiritual lore which he sees as an essential element for fixing the topological fabric of the valley, and the minds of its inhabitants, as in 'Where the Mothers'. Ann Skea writes:

These 'Mothers' were the earliest Celtic-British personification of the powers of the Great Mother Goddess, Nature, whose cycles of life and death pervade this sequence. Their evocation in this opening poem defines the geographical and historical context from which the Calder Valley civilisation grew. It was these primitive energies and this bleak environment that shaped the people and gave them their toughness and endurance. It was these energies that spawned and fed the Industrial Revolution. And it was the physical and spiritual misdirection of these energies which Hughes believes brought this society to 'the dead end of a wrong direction'.<sup>267</sup>

The mention of spirits, common elegiac motifs and figures, returns one to the question of Hughes's suitability as a *rural* elegist, as these are more often the tropes and evocations to be found in the pastoral tradition. Skea's presentation of the early Elmet populace is in line with Eric Smith's reading of the pastoral schematic which supposes that, 'however artificial it (pastoral) became in its conventions, [it] fundamentally represented a basic life in contact with

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<sup>267</sup> Ann Skea 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet,' Challenge, 118.



Nature...a minimal society in proximity to the elemental forces'.<sup>268</sup> Smith manages to answer the question of Hughes's suitability in a way which reaffirms his position as a rural elegist. His poems may evoke spirits, but in a way that connects him and his poetry to a time before contrived artificial production in both industry and poetry. Hughes's poems emerge as the most appropriate candidates to mend the voids in the Calder Valley where, in almost every sense, spirit is a 'frayed, fraying hair-fineness' (23).<sup>269</sup>

'Where the Mothers' presents the 'cradle-grave' existence of the Calder Valley, which, as the later poem 'Cock-Crows'<sup>270</sup> suggests, offers the possibility of hope for the remains of Elmet. In her essay, 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet', Skea suggests that hope for the valley lies within these juxtaposition of variables:

The title of the poem joins "Cock" with "Crows", linking the symbolic bird of dawn with those of darkness and of death to create a unity from which there can be a new beginning. In the connection between darkness and light, birth and death, which is thus achieved, there exists a consubstantiality of opposites which allows for change and renewal.<sup>271</sup>

Hughes repeatedly takes images of absences, and juxtaposes them with the key creative spiritual element of light in order to kick-start the renewal of the valley's remains; this is a move appreciated by Sacks, who writes 'like the

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<sup>268</sup> Smith, By Mourning Tongues, 5.

<sup>269</sup> Hughes, Remains, 7.

<sup>270</sup> Hughes, Remains, 121.

<sup>271</sup> Skea, 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet,' Challenge, 125.

other consoling tropes of the elegy, [light] offers the most paradoxical blend of absence and presence, of weakness and strength.<sup>272</sup> Hughes clearly illustrates this paradox: 'From brightness to brighter emptiness' ('Open to Huge Light'<sup>273</sup> (7)), 'What rummaging of light / At the end of the world' ('Long Screams' (3-4)). Ultimately, 'Chapels, chimneys, vanish in the brightening' so with 'younger, fresher wings' light can hold 'this land up again like an offering // Heavy with the dream of people.' ('The Trance of Light'<sup>274</sup> (11, 14-6)). Typically, Hughes subverts expectation; in his hands, light is used as the brief, climactic culmination of energies, like a flash of light from an explosion, before it takes something with it into an 'other' world. In this case, the element of light disappears, taking with it a wealth of associations such as a symbol of hope and 'the elegiac image of a renewing light'.<sup>275</sup> Hughes withdraws the consolatory powers available to him in poetry in order to maintain a realistic finish to his elegies. He is not the first elegist to have meditated in darkness; Thomas Gray is an obvious candidate:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
 The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1-4).

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<sup>272</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 34.

<sup>273</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 16.

<sup>274</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 20.

<sup>275</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 74.

Darkness, with its links to solitude and mystery, and a likeness to how many perceive the state of death, is not an unusual environment in which to meditate on mortality. As early in the sequence as 'The Dark River', the reader learns that light is to be associated with degeneration, where language is a treasure that will 'crumble at the break of day'. As a result, the reader finds many of Hughes's poems presenting a gloomy ambience. But what are the wider implications of the withdrawal of the figure of light? Its associations with the creative spirit are palpable, so with light removed as a viable energetic force and a consolatory trope, the power of spiritual/natural regeneration remains ambivalent. 'Bridestones'<sup>276</sup> presents the spirit of earth and 'a crown of outcrop rock' (2) as a part of the funeral procession of spirits adorning the Calder Valley. Hughes's suggestion is that they are possessive elements which leave their mark upon anyone who has visited this 'Tense congregation of hills':

And you go  
 With the wreath of weather  
 The wreath of hills  
 The wreath of stars  
 Upon your shoulders.

And from now on,  
 The sun  
 Touches you

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<sup>276</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 64.

With the shadow of this finger.

From now on

The moon stares into your skull

From this perch.

(13-24)

As affecting as they may be, they are still the *remains* of an ancient culture's spiritual belief. Like Hughes's mother and uncle, the stones are anachronistic to the contemporary inhabitants of the Calder Valley who do not carry the necessary spiritual gravitas in their hearts and minds which could aid the area's rejuvenation.

Whereas the moon at the end of 'Bridestones' is a powerfully symbolic voyeuristic force, the Mount Zion Methodist Chapel<sup>277</sup> of 'Mount Zion'<sup>278</sup> is 'a building blocking the moon' (2). Hughes maybe deliberately undercutting his image of the moon in order to signify how Christianity, or more specifically Methodism, eclipsed and erased the memory of Celtic religious rituals. Here, Hughes relates today's religion to death in almost every image; the connotations of 'Blackness', 'deadfall', the 'Darkening of the sun' are obvious, and his diction is direct. Hughes recalls being forced into going to church 'gripped by elders/ Like a jabbering calf' (9-10) only for him to endure "The convicting holy eye, the convulsed Moses mouthings' (12) of the Priest. Hughes portrays Methodist preaching, at least in his experience, as something

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<sup>277</sup> Situated not far from Hughes's childhood home in Mytholmroyd.

<sup>278</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 82.

oppressive in comparison to his own 'paganistic' beliefs, favouring instead rituals that bring one's spirit in closer harmony with the 'Mothers', despite knowing that both religious practices are in a state of decay in the Calder Valley.

'Heptonstall Old Church'<sup>279</sup> allegorises the spiritual situation in the valley. Here, the spirit takes the form of a bird:

Its song drew men out of rock,  
Living men out of heather

Its song put a light in the valleys  
And harness on the long moors.

Its song brought a crystal from space  
And set it in men's heads.

(2-7)

The bird brings with it salvation and enlightenment to the people of the valley. The central image of the crystal carries with it connotations of purity, clarity and, as a naturally occurring mineral, an authentic natural connection. These images are at odds with Hughes's descriptions of what is now a dilapidated area and, as the Hughes reader expects, such images are a setting up for the fall which concludes the poem:

Then the bird died.

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<sup>279</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 118.

Its giant bones  
 Blackened and became a mystery.

The crystal in men's heads  
 Blackened and fell to pieces.

The valleys went out.  
 The moorland broke loose.

(8-14)

The poem reveals in no uncertain terms that a viable spirit no longer operates in the Calder Valley. The implications for the elegy are obvious, as the traditional image of divine/natural salvation, the absence of spirit does not bode well for rejuvenation. However, the image of the bird emerges with renewed significance by the conclusion of the sequence. The power of spiritual renewal is strongly felt in the traditional elegy, the absence/whereabouts of the nymphs in 'Lycidas' critically exemplifies the poetic belief that spirits in nature and poetry are capable of salvation in the real world; but like 'Lycidas', their whereabouts are questionable. Hughes harnesses this belief in order to salvage Elmet, but as one now expects from the Elmet elegies, such hopes are dashed.

The environment, industry and spirituality of the area have been tarnished not only by domestic attitudes but also by national events. In an interview in 1963, Hughes revealed that he felt he could 'never escape the

impression that the whole region is in mourning for the First World War'<sup>280</sup>

In a letter to Fay Godwin, Hughes wrote that the untamed wilderness of the valley 'was sealed by the First World War – when the whole lot was carted off and slaughtered, as a sort of ultimate humiliation and helplessness.' He continues:

So I grew up with a feeling that the buildings were monuments to a great age and a great generation which was somehow in the past, and the people round me, my parents etc, were just survivors, tolling on...just hanging around, stupefied by what had happened. And as that generation finally died off...the whole region just fell to bits, the buildings collapsed, the walls collapsed, the chapels were sold for scrap and demolished, likewise the mills...But that only makes what remains more poignant for me...the way the primeval reality of the region is taking over again from the mills, chapels, farms [etc]<sup>281</sup>

With Remains of Elmet, Hughes turned to this conflict for the first time since Wodwo. As with his earlier poems 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers' and 'Out', the cenotaph is a recurring motif in Hughes's Pennine sequence. With both poems, Hughes rejected the cenotaph, perceiving it as an inappropriate memorial, a mechanism to distance oneself against the atrocities of frontline warfare. In Remains of Elmet, its appearance is initially ambiguous, despite Hughes's belief that the valley is still in mourning for the First World War. The cenotaph appears first in 'Hardcastle Craggs' ('Name-lists off cenotaphs

<sup>280</sup> Hughes, The Listener, (70: 421-3) 19<sup>th</sup> September 1963.

<sup>281</sup> Hughes, 'To Fay Godwin,' 4 July 1976, Letters, 379.

tangle here to mystify / The voice of the dilapidated river' (11-2)) and then

'First Mills'<sup>282</sup>:

*First, Mills*

and steep wet cobbles

Then cenotaphs.

First, football pitches, crown greens

Then the bottomless wound of the railway station

That bled this valley to death.

A single fatal wound. And the faces at windows

Whitened. Even the hair whitened...

(1-8)

'First Mills' is one of Hughes's most unyielding Elmet poems. It emerges that these features of many Calder towns are (in the poem) slowly bled to death. Of 'First Mills', Roberts writes that the poem 'memorably evokes the effect of the Great War on the places from which soldiers were recruited: "the bottomless wound of the railway station / That bled this valley to death." This is a technique of superimposition: one visualises the flow of young men away from the valley via the station, and at the same time the bleeding that killed them at the other end of their journey: the effect is one of poignant inevitability.'<sup>283</sup> Hughes creates silence ('Everything became very quiet') in

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<sup>282</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 34. As with several poems in the sequence, the title of the poem is also read as the first line.

<sup>283</sup> Roberts, *Literary Life*, 131.



order to indicate the space where life, indeed noise, once was. But this silence proves to be more than an effective juxtaposition; the 'very quiet' becomes resolutely *silent* by the poem's conclusion:

The hills were commandeered  
For gravemounds

The towns and villages were sacked

Everything fell wetly to bits  
In the memory  
And along the sides of the streets.

Over this trench  
A sky like an empty helmet  
With a hole in it.

And now – two minutes silence  
In the childhood of earth.

(10-20)

The introduction of First World War imagery to the confines of the valley endorses Hughes's own belief of a perseverance of 'obstinate condolment' for the conflict; but the imagery is also appropriate. The valley also goes through a war of attrition with the decomposition/renewal process, the remains of industrial conquest falls 'wetly to bits', whilst the topological shape of the valley does bear a resemblance to a battlefield trench. The two minutes of

silence which concludes the poem operates on several levels of meaning. Its obvious application is to the ritualistic two-minutes of silence which occurs on both Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday; in terms of Hughes's Elmet poems, it is another example of silences being representative of gaps in the Calder Valley's mourning shroud, or the lack of such a garment altogether. But to consider the actual silence; it is an act which not only allows one to focus their thoughts on the lives and deaths of the deceased, it is also mimetic of the silence which we assume the deceased experience in death as well as a mark of respect for the silence their 'loss' leaves behind. David Kennedy notes in his study of elegy that the 'relationship between speech and silence to which later elegists habitually return'<sup>284</sup> is established in Theocritus's 'First Idyll'. Indeed, according to Kennedy's account, 'The emphasis on silence and absence converges with the way in which later elegists have explored the elegy as a structure for mourning and consolation that is always on the verge of breaking down and whose efficacy is therefore perpetually in doubt.'<sup>285</sup>

To return to the cenotaph, as has been observed in chapter two, individual movements lead to the construction of war-memorials, but the cenotaph (meaning 'empty tomb') holds a particular significance as a focal point for national grief. Eric Smith traces the lineage of tomb-building in the elegy back to Virgil's 'Eclogue V'; it is a ritual followed by an annual vigil

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<sup>284</sup> Kennedy, *Elegy*, 13.

<sup>285</sup> Kennedy, *Elegy*, 13.

where 'flowers are strewn on the bier, nymphs...deck the tomb and shepherds...render yearly praises.'<sup>286</sup> There are lucid parallels with the rituals performed at the cenotaph; the memorial is strewn with wreaths, and whilst nymphs do not deck the tomb, service men and women parade past, and appropriate music is played and hymns sung. The services held at the cenotaph are close to the matter of the Renaissance elegy Alcon of Castiglione. Smith writes, 'Alcon dies far away from home, the bereaved Iolas builds and has decked with flowers an empty tomb, when his friend Leucippus, who was with Alcon on that fateful day, has already done the honours abroad.'<sup>287</sup> Art and life appear to imitate each other; but what the silence masks is the 'truest, only just' grief underneath the surface of the valley to which 'Long Screams' testifies:

Unending bleeding.  
Deaths left over.  
The dead piled in cairns  
Over the dead.  
Everywhere dead things for monuments  
Of the dead.

(5-10)

The final mention of the cenotaph in 'Rhododendrons'<sup>288</sup> reads like a move by Hughes to silence his own resentment towards the cenotaph and the 'long screams' which it masks: 'Cenotaphs and the moor silence! / Rhododendrons

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<sup>286</sup> Smith, By Mourning Tongues, 10.

<sup>287</sup> Smith, By Mourning Tongues, 10.

<sup>288</sup> Hughes, Remains, 87.

and rain! It is all one. It is over.' (14-6) Ironically, by calling for silence, Hughes is submitting to the ceremonies of the cenotaph and an observance of its mourning rites. But the cenotaph is an appropriate motif as a memorial for the Calder Valley; it is a monument given significance by nomination rather than the physical presence of the dead which can be found at war-graves and cemeteries. The Calder Valley is also an empty tomb, but what it was that has been 'lost' is not only in an 'other' land, it has also been forgotten. The sole mourner is Hughes.

For all the incomplete tropes worked over the Elmet poems, Hughes is observing one of the elegiac fundamentals, what Smith calls 'the ultimate memorial...the making of the poem itself.'<sup>289</sup> Hughes returns the reader to the 'hawk in the rain' metaphor, a prominent feature of his elegiac output. As the hawk, he is the dispassionate observer documenting what he sees as the fall of the Calder Valley; as the poet/wanderer he is walking through the mire of the land, one in which he grew up and one which shaped his poetry. From this contrast comes his poetic creativity. As a memorial, the sequence benefits from Godwin's photographs which provide a historical visual stimulus to the poems, which in turn lend an authentic atmosphere to the detachment of the photograph. Hughes's attempt to capture the area at a time of upheaval repeats the memorialisation which the Romantic poets wrote of as the rural

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<sup>289</sup> Smith, *By Mourning Tongues*, 10.

landscape was annexed by industrialisation. John Clare's 'The Fallen Elm'<sup>290</sup> warns of the increasing urbanisation and advance of the Industrial Revolution upon rural landscape and society:

It grows the cant terms of enslaving tools  
 To wrong another by the name of right  
 It grows a licence with o'erbearing fools  
 To cheat plain honesty by force of might  
 Thus came enclosure—ruin was her guide  
 But freedoms clapping hands enjoyed the sight  
 Though comforts cottage soon was thrust aside  
 And workhouse prisons raised upon the site  
 E'en natures dwelling far away from men  
 The common heath became the spoilers prey  
 The rabbit had not where to make his den  
 And labours only cow was drove away  
 No matter—wrong was right and right was wrong  
 And freedoms brawl was sanction to the song

(51-64)

Matterson and Jones observe:

...common land (land which was available to all in order to graze their livestock) has been enclosed – fenced up – by private concerns, and is metaphorically transformed into a 'workhouse prison' – this rhetoric of the workhouse takes us back to Blake and forward to Dickens, both notably urban (metropolitan) writers – but here, the workhouse is built in the country. Symbolically this signifies the invasion of the urban into the rural, the subordination of rural economies to strict

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<sup>290</sup> John Clare, *Selected Poems*, ed. Geoffrey Summerfield (London: Penguin, 1990 rev. rpt. 2000) 167.

capitalism which meant impoverishment for labourers, figured here as enslavement or imprisonment.<sup>291</sup>

Remains of Elmet reports similar concerns. But it is too late to resuscitate what is regarded as the pre-Industrial Revolution idyll which Clare witnesses being lost.

Wordsworth's 'The Ruined Cottage'<sup>292</sup> highlights a comparable angst. Jonathan Wordsworth explains that William Wordsworth's poems (which address the decay of rural ways of life and the natural world) such as 'Michael',<sup>293</sup> 'have it in common that they are about love and about the feelings of the survivor in a broken relationship'.<sup>294</sup> Wordsworth accentuates the breakdown of these relationships by interweaving them with images of rural degeneration. An extract from 'The Ruined Cottage' illustrates how the breakdown in relations between Margaret and her husband Robert is mirrored in the natural world.

Beside yon spring I stood,  
 And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
 One sadness, they and I. For them a bond  
 Of brotherhood is broken: time has been  
 When every day the touch of human hand  
 Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered

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<sup>291</sup> Stephen Matterson & Darryl Jones, Studying Poetry (London: Arnold, 2000) 67-8.

<sup>292</sup> William Wordsworth, The Ruined Cottage, The Brothers, Michael, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Cambridge U P: Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>293</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Michael,' Romanticism: An Anthology, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell 1998, rpt. 2001) 356.

<sup>294</sup> Wordsworth, Wordsworth, 1.

To human comfort. When I stooped to drink  
 A spider's web hung to the water's edge,  
 And on the wet slimy foot-stone lay  
 The useless fragment of a wooden bowl.

(II. 82-91)

The well is emblematic of a bond between the waters it contains and Margaret's family; to have it in a state of dereliction is indicative of the collapse in family relations, a plight reflected by the natural world reclaiming the man-made spring. Jonathan Wordsworth explains that, 'nature is active and will 'minister to human comfort' only as long as it is met by countering activity'.<sup>295</sup> This is echoed in almost every poem in Remains of Elmet.

Contextually, the relationship between Margaret and Robert is severed by the latter's unannounced decision to become a soldier in order to financially support his family. The expense of the wars led to the introduction of new taxes and an increase in the price of bread, a move which fell harshly upon the poor, motivates his decision to leave. Like Hughes's use of the First World War in Remains of Elmet, Wordsworth uses events on a national scale to elucidate how it affected rural communities and relationships. The devastating effect of war impacts just as harshly on individuals as it does in nature.

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<sup>295</sup> Wordsworth, Wordsworth, 7.

'Michael', like 'The Ruined Cottage', proposes that industrial and economic prosperity are achieved at the expense of the fragmentation, or dissolution, of family ties:

Three years, or little more, did Isabel  
 Survive her Husband; at her death the estate  
 Was sold, and went into a stranger's hand.  
 The Cottage which was named The Evening Star  
 Is gone; the ploughshare has been through the ground  
 On which it stood. Great changes have been wrought  
 In all the neighbourhood; yet the oak is left  
 That grew beside their door; and the remains  
 Of the unfinished Sheepfold may be seen  
 Beside the boisterous brook of Greenhead Gill.

(483-491)

The unfinished sheep fold stands much like one of the leftover relics of the Industrial Revolution in the Calder Valley. The cottage, named 'The Evening Star', which symbolised the spirit of independent rural prosperity and a simple way of life, has been demolished and has given way to a ploughshare. So it is true of the Calder Valley where remnants of man's former exploitation of nature remain, whilst the pre-industrial revolution spirit, as Wordsworth would have us believe, has long since departed.

The word 'remains' suggests a humbling reaffirmation of the mortality of movements, ideas and lives; it is something which has been left behind, and for this reason, the word evokes a sentimentality which encourages a



sense of sympathy. This is perhaps why the Elmet poems are best classified as 'anti-elegiac', something common in the twentieth-century elegiac poetic.

Ramazani writes, 'In becoming anti-elegiac, the modern elegy more radically violates previous generic norms than did earlier phases of elegy; it becomes anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary.'<sup>296</sup> The paradoxical nature of the anti-elegy reflects the inconsistency in Hughes's 'mourning' (both celebrating and lamenting the downfall of industry for instance) and his innovative, unique poetic style. Furthermore, his Elmet poems operate in what Ramazani designates as 'melancholic mourning'.<sup>297</sup> He writes:

They are like the Freudian 'melancholic' in their fierce resistance to solace, their intense criticism and self criticism, even as they 'mourn' specific deaths... Unlike their literary forebears... they attack the dead and themselves, their own work and tradition; and they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself.<sup>298</sup>

Many, if not all of these characteristics have their application in Remains of Elmet. Hughes's own decomposition of existing elegiac maxims has been worked for one end alone: the salvation of his family who lived and died in the Calder Valley.

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<sup>296</sup> Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 2.

<sup>297</sup> Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 4.

<sup>298</sup> Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 4.

Though Hughes may not see the deaths in his family as being a result of the Calder Valley's decline, he regards their spirits as being trapped in a world *without* spirit. He offers release for his family and for himself, having earned his right to do so by acknowledging the lost spiritual world and summoning its neglected ghosts; he has gone through a harrowing. The dedication of the sequence to his deceased mother Edith,<sup>299</sup> followed up with explicit references to her in 'The Dark River' and in the penultimate poem, 'Heptonstall Cemetery',<sup>300</sup> would suggest that she has been present in Hughes's mind throughout the 'journey' of Remains of Elmet. The imagery of mothering, motherhood and birth within the poems further endorses this theory; Hughes pays tribute to his mother ('The Dark River'), the landscape that bore him ('Long Screams'), and the Earth-Mother, or Mother Nature ('Where the Mothers'). Indeed, as Carol Bere writes, the sequence 'recalls a steady catalogue of deterioration – of the erosion of the land and the inevitable loss of personal relationships.'<sup>301</sup> From 'Heptonstall Cemetery':

And Thomas and Walter and Edith

Are living feathers

Esther and Sylvia

Living feathers

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<sup>299</sup> In Elmet (1994), the sequence is dedicated to both of Hughes's parents.

<sup>300</sup> Hughes, Remains, 122.

<sup>301</sup> Carol Bere, "How Precisely the Job Can Be Done": Ted Hughes's Moortown,' Critical Essays on Ted Hughes, 225.

Where all the horizons lift wings

A family of dark swans

And go beating low through storm-silver

Toward the Atlantic.

(5-12)

Hughes takes up the image of the bird spirit featured in 'Heptonstall Old Church': the members of his family are not just feathers, but *living* feathers on the beating wing of the valley. In cathartically releasing his mother's spirit and that of his former wife Sylvia Plath and his uncles Thomas and Walter (also all buried in Heptonstall Cemetery) Hughes has also managed to renew his own poetic prime. As a part of his ecological reading of the sequence, Scigaj sees Remains of Elmet as a process of poetic regeneration for Hughes. Hughes is harrowing his technique using the ruins of the Calder Valley as his muse. Scigaj cites the elemental meditations, which feature as destructive in many of the poems, to illustrate his point, "The birds (air or spirit), rain (water), and the peculiar purplish light of the region (fire – the sun's transformational energy) compromise elements of an ecological system that assists in the process of decomposition".<sup>302</sup> The outcome is that the elemental decomposition process is one which will, like a poetic phoenix, emerge again replenished spiritually and poetically. But this time it is not an individual who is being mourned. So can poetry redeem the Calder Valley in the same

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<sup>302</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 110.

way 'Lycidas' intends to rescue Henry King? Do the traditional criteria of what constitutes an elegy have to be adapted? 'The Angel', the final poem in Remains of Elmet, provides an uneasy answer and a sense of revitalisation among the ruins in the sequence. It recounts a dream Hughes had which prophesied Sylvia Plath's death two years before it actually occurred.<sup>303</sup>

'In my dream I saw something disastrous' (1), the poem begins, echoing the opening line of the Book of Revelation with its direct address. Unlike Revelation, however, the apocalypse of 'The Angel' is not a global event; the poem is very aware of location, it is only the Calder Valley which needs to be so thoroughly cleansed. The epicentre of the destruction is made clear: 'The full moon had crashed on to Halifax. / Black Halifax boiled in phosphorous. / Halifax was an erupting crater.' (2-4) Geographically, Halifax is about twenty miles from Mytholmroyd, but as the central town of the Calder Valley during the Industrial Revolution, it is also the sensible place to start if the valley is to be 'reborn'. According to Jules Cashford's The Moon: Myth and Image, a full moon is a highly symbolic occurrence:

Full moons were festival nights and days, times of culmination and fruition: sacred marriages of gods and goddesses, coronations of kings and queens, weddings of men and women, the best time to give birth...In Gaelic, the word for 'good fortune' comes from the word for 'Full Moon'...As the Moon at the full was complete, so all potentialities were at their height:

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<sup>303</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 117.

it was either the Healer of sorrows and Muse of poets and dreamers, or the Afflictor of madness or blindness.<sup>304</sup>

A strong emphasis is given to good fortune. So is the moon falling on Halifax a mixed blessing? Its crash is a muse to Hughes's poetic imagination; the moon is symbolic of the White Goddess, a deity which greatly influenced Hughes. The White Goddess falling to Earth and being reborn fits Scigaj's proposition that Hughes is renewing the energy of his own poetry through a process of decomposition. Likewise, the reduction of Halifax to 'boiling phosphorous' points to the valley stumbling towards revitalisation. The moon turns Halifax into a place where its only industry is its own transformation. Both Halifax and Hughes's dream assume an industrial production line:

The flames seemed to labour. Then a tolling glare  
Heaved itself out and writhed upwards –  
It was a swan the size of a city!

Far too heavy for the air, it pounded towards me,  
Low over Hathershelf

(5-9)

The 'living feathers' of Hughes's deceased family which take the form of 'A family of dark swans' in 'Heptonstall Cemetery' appear amalgamated here. But the swan in 'The Angel' is not the delicate, comfortable swan found in 'Heptonstall Cemetery'; diction such as 'pounding', 'labouring' and 'heavy' would imply that there is a greater significance to it. These labels of artificial

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<sup>304</sup> Jules Cashford, *The Moon: Myth and Image* (London: Cassell Illustrated, 2003) 60-1.

construction also suggest that Hughes has become distinctly aware of the dual processes of his art. On one side, the poem is an attempt to come to terms with the natural world, though it is one blighted by man's technological progress and exploitation of it. On the other side, Hughes is aware that the poem is a synthetic by-product of nature as well; it has been his muse, but he can only mediate nature in his poems as the written word is perhaps incapable of fully expressing or understanding nature's mechanisms. It is in between the two sides where Hughes is placed; yearning for the full power of nature in his poems, but fully conscious of the lexical fabrics which constrain him. In these respects, the poem is a result of this tension and a culmination of his labour. He may be expressing this angst through the product of the swan which, if one is to follow the diction, may be read as an artificial product born in the mills of the Calder Valley. This poem, and the others in this sequence, can be allegorised by the swan; a 'natural' product mediated by man. In dissecting his poetry in this way, Hughes is breaking down his poems in order to renew his poetry, which links to Scigaj's decomposition/renewal process. Appropriately, this may shed light on Hughes's repeated use of the image of the labour of child birth which could represent the birth of a new poem. In the case of 'The Angel', it is a mechanised process, as if the newborn swan were being cast in steel; the 'tolling glare' may represent the look of sheer painful determination on the face of the mother during labour. This is unlike many elegies which have preceded Hughes, for the 'rebirth' of the

deceased which takes place in elegies is more commonly set in a pastoral idyll than an industrial background. But then the poem has an early turn:

And it was no swan.

It was an angel made of smoking snow.

Her long dress fluttered about her ankles,

Her bare feet just cleared the moon beneath her

Which glowed like the night-cloud over Sheffield.

(10-4)

The swan's transformation into an angel unsettles Hughes. On one level, it may show an uneasy transformation from a pagan symbol to a Christian one.<sup>305</sup> Hughes has steadily layered the feminine imagery with child birth and the swan, but the angel, something regarded as a positive symbol, is greeted with great apprehension. This the Hughes reader has come to expect, as birth in the sequence is portentous:

Mother, I cried, O Mother, there is an angel –

Is it a blessing? Then my mother's answer

Turned that beauty suddenly to terror.

(15-7)

Though one is led to believe that Hughes is calling on his actual mother for an interpretation, he may in fact be calling upon Brigid, the Earth Mother of 'Where the Mothers' and the feminine figure of nature's energy who has

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<sup>305</sup> In pagan lore, the swan represented feminine grace and beauty that stir Divine inspiration.

appeared in several guises in the sequence, or indeed the White Goddess herself. In either case, their interpretation turns a 'blessing' into 'terror'. It is worth iterating how unconventional the idea of terror in an elegy is.<sup>306</sup>

Certainly one would expect in a traditional elegy for this terror to be overcome; instead, Hughes watches 'for the angel to fade and be impossible' (18), but the dream becomes stronger and the angel acquires a statuesque affinity as she is 'cast in burning metal' (20). For all the terror for which the angel is culpable, there is an implicit image which Hughes is vexed by in his dream:

Her halo

Was an enigmatic square of satin  
Rippling its fringed edges like a flounder.

I could make no sense of that strange head-dress.

(20-3)

Though the 'immense omen' of the angel leaves cataclysmic destruction in its wake, it leaves a more poignant image for Hughes, the 'enigmatic square of satin', a 'strange head-dress' which is ambiguously resonant. Hughes provides an equally ambiguous answer to the question of what his mother's interpretation of the 'immense omen' actually is:

When I next saw that strange square of satin  
I reached out and touched it.

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<sup>306</sup> There are of course exceptions. One may refer to Yeats's 'Easter 1916', where blessings and terrors operate simultaneously: 'A terrible beauty is born'.



When next I stood where I stood in my dream  
 Those words of my mother,  
 Joined with earth and engraved in rock,  
 Were under my feet.

(24-7)

Scigaj reveals that 'Ted and Olwyn Hughes in conversation identified this satin square as the cloth covering Plath's face' when Hughes viewed her body.

<sup>307</sup> This answers not only the first question, but the second also. One could speculate that his Mother's words interpret the omen as a prediction of her own death and of Sylvia Plath's. Skea makes a concurrent argument to this effect:

...the detail which links Hughes' vision with events in his life, and which gives her words "doubled" significance, is his second sighting of the angel's strange and puzzling halo...So, this angel of beauty and light is also an omen of disaster and death, and the fact that both Sylvia Plath and Edith Farrar are buried on the moors where Hughes stood in his dream, seems to suggest that the angelic omen has been fulfilled.<sup>308</sup>

Skea points to the enigmatic final stanzas of 'The Angel', stating that the 'words of my mother / Joined with earth and engraved in rock' are in fact the words engraved on his mother's gravestone. Though the engraving is an unremarkable account of her name and the dates of her life, Skea suggests

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<sup>307</sup> Scigaj, *Ted Hughes*, 117-18.

<sup>308</sup> Ann Skea, 'Regeneration in *Remains of Elmet*,' *Challenge*, 120.

that it is the inscription on Plath's nearby headstone 'which asserts, through the symbolism of the lotus, the endurance of the creative energies and the promise of regeneration and spiritual rebirth': 'Even amidst fierce flames / The Golden Lotus can be planted'. These lines found in a poem by Wu Ch'eng are about alchemy and regeneration.<sup>309</sup> This sentiment is at the core of many of the poems in the sequence, as is the alchemic regeneration; 'The Angel' alone uses the alchemical 'Mothers' of Air (the swan), Fire (the destruction of Halifax) and Water ('fringed edges like a flounder') to 'undertake the careful dissolution and cleansing of the base matter of a generation in order to release the Soul'.<sup>310</sup> So it would appear that Hughes's poetry has not only saved itself, but also freed the spirits of his deceased relatives and, to some extent, the Calder Valley is presented 'with a message of enlightenment and hope'.<sup>311</sup> 'The Angel' tries to compensate for previous anti-elegies by acknowledging the transformation of the deceased into a revitalised energy. The result, as Twiddy notes, makes the consolation of the poem 'visionary rather than natural'.<sup>312</sup>

Although Remains of Elmet concludes with 'The Angel', there is a sense in which Hughes has unfinished business to attend to. Collected in New Selected Poems is 'Anniversary',<sup>313</sup> a poem which remembers Hughes's

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<sup>309</sup> Skea, 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet,' The Ted Hughes Homepage, 7 November 2007 <<http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Elmet.htm>> Footnote13.

<sup>310</sup> Skea, 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet,' Challenge, 119.

<sup>311</sup> Skea, 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet,' Challenge, 121.

<sup>312</sup> Twiddy, 'The Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry,' 50.

<sup>313</sup> Ted Hughes, New Selected Poems: 1957-1994, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 291.

mother in an afterlife likened to a 'perpetual Sunday morning / Of everlasting' (7-8). Yet, whilst the poem remembers Hughes's mother, Edith, it is for the most part dominated by an imagined dialogue she has with her sister, Miriam, who died at the age of eighteen:

My mother in her feathers of flame  
Grows taller. Every May Thirteenth  
I see her with her sister Miriam. I lift  
The torn-off diary page where my brother jotted  
'Ma died today' – and there they are.

(1-5)

In correspondence with the author of this study, Ann Skea illuminated many of the poem's nuances. She writes, 'Miriam would appear to his mother two days before any death in the family and [Hughes's] mother gradually recognized this as an omen. At each appearance, she had changed a little, becoming taller and more angelic each time, clothed in feathers which his mother said she had touched and which 'felt like the taste of honey'. Clearly, there is regeneration of a sort in this story, plus prophecy and a belief in some sort of spirit life after death.' Skea continues, 'It is interesting, that Ted chose to mention the May 13<sup>th</sup> date of Edith's death, so there is another link with the Goddess and with death and rebirth – hence the Sunday morning (the seventh day, the day of completion and rest), the larks linking heaven and earth, and the cosmic creation and destruction.'<sup>314</sup> These energies inform

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<sup>314</sup> Ann Skea, Correspondence with Edward Hadley, 10 November 2007.

much of the imagery in the poem, where the afterlife is a dreamscape which fuses a rural setting where the sisters are 'Listening to the larks' (9), but present is what seems to be a more malevolent natural beauty:

The work of the cosmos,  
 Creation and destruction of matter  
 And of anti-matter  
 Pulses and flares, shudders and fades  
 Like the Northern Lights in their feathers.

(10-4)

The beginning of 'Anniversary' has Hughes remembering his mother 'in her feathers of flame'. The image of Edith Hughes as a feather/with feathers returns one to the Remains of Elmet poem 'Heptonstall Cemetery', where among other deceased family members Edith is one of the 'living feathers' (8), a part of 'A family of dark swans' (10) heading towards the Atlantic Ocean. We recall that 'Heptonstall Cemetery' is the poem in which Hughes has earned the release of his family from the remains of Elmet. The flight towards the west has clear associations with the sunset, which is metaphorically linked with death, as is seen in A.E. Housman, for example:

Ensanguining the skies,  
 How heavily it dies,  
     Into the west away.  
 Past touch, and sight, and sound,  
 Not further to be found  
 How hopelessly underground  
     Falls the remorseful day.

More Poems, 'XVI' (15-21)<sup>315</sup>

Yet, the concluding poem of Remains of Elmet, 'The Angel', leaves Hughes in a dreamscape set in the Calder Valley where his mother (or a mother-figure) interprets a nightmare of Hughes's. This dreamscape, like that of 'Anniversary', is swathed in boiling phosphorous, where 'flames seemed to labour' (5) among a figure made of 'smoking snow' (11) and 'burning metal' (20). The energies of 'Anniversary' also participate in creative-destructive ethos employed by the Earth-Mothers, with a 'Creation and destruction of matter' (11). The conclusion of 'The Angel', as has been noted above, leaves Hughes apparently at the graveside of Sylvia Plath. The dreamscape imagery of 'The Angel' appears to correspond with 'Anniversary', and like the former poem, Hughes is once again left alone, seemingly eavesdropping on his mother's reminiscences. Some of these images seem authentic enough: "This is the water-line, dark on my dress, look, / Where I dragged him from the reservoir" (18-9), whilst others are perhaps exaggerations of the truth, or perhaps symbolic of Edith's commitment to her son: "...that is the horse on which I galloped / Through the brick wall / And out over the heather simply / To bring him a new pen." (20-3) But it is the following lines which turn the poem towards a more uncomfortable tone:

'...And these

Are the mass of marriages of him and his brother

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<sup>315</sup> A.E. Housman, Collected Poems (London: Penguin, 1956, rpt. 1961) 176.

Where I was not once a guest.' Then suddenly  
 She is scattering the red coals with her fingers  
 To find where I had fallen for the third time. She laughs  
 Helplessly till she weeps.

(24-30)

These lines, whereby Hughes uses his mother to accuse himself, anticipate the overall tone of both Capriccio and Birthday Letters, but more specifically 'The Offers' from Howls & Whispers (discussed below). The 'third time' is more than likely to mean Hughes's third and final marriage to Carol Orchard, yet why Edith should laugh remains awkwardly ambiguous. Herein lies the crux of the poem; Edith is 'telling Miriam / About her life, which was mine.' (15-6) At this point, the reader learns that Hughes has constructed a remembrance for his mother, but also for himself. There are signs of Hughes's self-reproach; his mother is an autobiographical figure for him, whose 'rosary prayers of unending worry' (34) were apparently perpetuated by Hughes and his brother Gerald. Much of this worry, which is masked as being 'wonderful' (40), was 'Knowing they were somewhere' beyond the horizon which she watches, almost in longing. When Edith finally acknowledges the presence of Hughes, the reader is presented with a disquieting conclusion:

She is using me to tune finer  
 Her weeping love for my brother, through mine,  
 As if I were the shadow cast by his approach.

As when I came a mile over fields and walls

Towards her, and found her weeping for him –  
 Able for all that distance to think me him.

(53-8)

Gerald Hughes had emigrated to Australia whilst Hughes was a young man. He seldom returned to England, despite Hughes's pleading. Like Hughes's other poems which divulge his weaknesses (for example, Capriccio, Birthday Letters, Howls & Whispers) there is perhaps the obvious conclusion that by poetically releasing his emotional demons, Hughes might be cathartically purged. There is evidence that perhaps the elegy is more for Hughes than his mother; at no point is Hughes out of control of the poem. He is the one who has selected the form, the words and how they are said. His mother's words, whilst they may be approximations of what she might have said, are not her own. He is the author of his own report. And yet, by the conclusion, Hughes seems to have written himself out of the poem, symbolically leaving his mother and his brother together. Skea appreciates this point of view, but concludes otherwise, writing, 'I agree that... 'Anniversary' is as much about Ted as it is about his mother, and that it is very like the Birthday Letters, Howls & Whispers and Capriccio poems in the way he evokes his mother and her sister Miriam. But I do think it is an elegy for her. For one thing her image is so strongly evoked throughout. 'I do this for her' balances everything

in the poem which she did for him, even though it was his brother she constantly looked for and wept for (in the poem, at least).<sup>316</sup>

The 'reunion' of Edith and 'Gerald' echoes the reunion in death featured in 'Heptonstall Cemetery'; Hughes is on the fringes perhaps fulfilling his role as an observer (as he has throughout Remains of Elmet) to its most extreme. He is once again enacting the function of the substitute for another family member, as he did for his father in part one of 'Out' and in 'Dust as We Are' (examined below). This deferral is characteristic of elegy. Whilst he follows a Freudian discourse, Sacks's understanding of the work of mourning seems to appreciate Hughes's position: "The healthy mourner...submits to a displacement of his prior attachments and to a disruption of his potential regression to dyadic fantasies, allowing his desires to be governed instead by a rule like that of the father's law of substitution."<sup>317</sup> Sacks writes of the mourner's (in this case, Hughes) detachment from latent oedipal constructions; that is to say, Hughes has forgone his natural attachment to his mother and allowed himself to be displaced by his brother (in this case) who, at ten years Hughes's senior, was regarded as 'the most important figure in his own early childhood.'<sup>318</sup> Gerald represents the father figure in this poem, whose 'castrative authority keeps us in life... [and] bars us from the fulfilment

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<sup>316</sup> Ann Skea, Correspondence with Edward Hadley, 10 November 2007.

<sup>317</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 17.

<sup>318</sup> Feinstein, The Life of a Poet, 10.



of a premature death<sup>319</sup>; that is, as a father figure, Gerald blocks the supposedly dormant desire to fulfil the Oedipus myth, which results in the early death of the fantasy's propagator. However, such a reading seems to distract from the poem itself, which is a heartfelt lament. The author of this study suggested to Skea that the poem perhaps intimates a 'survivor's guilt' on the part of Hughes. In response, she writes:

I think there is less 'survivor's guilt' in 'Anniversary' than love, and sorrow (but no blame) that for her he so often seemed to be only 'the shadow cast' by his brother. Sorrow that he could not heal the wound of his brother's absence for her.

Acknowledgement, too, of the worry and pain he had caused her whilst she was alive. Although worry is shown to be her choice – the thing she 'likes to wear best' – the mention of the 'mass marriages' to which she was not invited shows that he recognized the hurt this caused her. But I don't think there is guilt there, just an acknowledgement of her hurt. That final acknowledgement that she is using his love and his poem to 'fine tune' her own continuing love for his brother, is acutely painful, yet he will 'do this for her'. How few people have enough love in them to do that?<sup>320</sup>

The dedication of the sequence and the evocation of family in 'The Dark River' reaches its climax with 'The Angel', but there is still an opportunity to interpolate 'Anniversary' as a post-script to the sequence. The remains, the poetic fragments, are elegies of sorts; they are fragile, there is a sense in which

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<sup>319</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 17.

<sup>320</sup> Ann Skea, Correspondence with Edward Hadley, 10 November 2007.

their words are a 'frayed, fraying hair-fineness' ('The Dark River') holding together the appearance of a complete aesthetic. Such poems, whilst they contribute to the melancholic/elegiac tone of the sequence as a whole, are individually 'unsuccessful' as elegies on points of technicality, but succeed as anti-elegies. The wholeness of the sequence hopes to fill this void; the poet is at the loom ('mourning is an action'<sup>321</sup>), the poems are the individual threads, and the complete work is the cloth in which the valley is wrapped and mourned. Hughes's picture is pessimistic; his role as documenter finds little joy or hope in the valley where he grew up. Hughes has tried earnestly to salvage the remains of his family and his spirit, but he is convinced that little can be done to the valley itself. The edifices which represented a surge in economic prosperity have become markers of their own downfall; now the mills, the 'humming abbeys', have become tombs, and 'the sunk mill-towns [are] cemeteries'. They are memorials which signify the tumultuous elegiac decomposition/renewal process 'in the broken spine of a fallen land.'



As a supplement to the elegiac reading of Remains of Elmet, one should perhaps consider the nature of Elmet.<sup>322</sup> Published fifteen years after its predecessor, Elmet is perhaps best regarded as a collection of previously published material (from Hughes's life's work) whose locus is the Calder Valley. So does Elmet supersede Remains of Elmet, and do the elegies of the

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<sup>321</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 19.

<sup>322</sup> Ted Hughes, Elmet (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).

earlier publication have to be read in a new light when considering their later context?

One of the most immediate differences between Elmet and its predecessor is that a number of the titles of poems have changed; for the most part, these titles are now separate from the body of successive verse, as opposed to Remains of Elmet where most of the titles were also the first lines. This is innocuous in itself, but it serves to remind the reader of a major alteration; Hughes has drawn attention away from the *remains*, and insisted that instead, we focus on Elmet. Gifford writes:

In his introduction to Elmet he adds the First World War and Methodism to the 'cataclysms' that contributed to his sense that, growing up in this place, 'gradually it dawned on you that you were living among the survivors.' The difference between the two books and their introductions, and perhaps the reason for dropping the title and poem 'Remains of Elmet,' is the difference in emphasis between 'empty sockets' and 'survivors.' This might also be seen as the difference between the destructive and creative tensions in nature, or between, as the later introduction puts it, 'pressurised stagnation' and 'fermenting independence' in the region's history.<sup>323</sup>

Under its new title, one is invited to appreciate the Calder Valley at large, its atmosphere, its idiosyncrasies, its failures, its histories and so forth. In short, with the accompanying photographs, it is a gallery which stimulates visual perception through Godwin's photographs (one is not only able to see large

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<sup>323</sup> Gifford, 'Dead Farms, Dead Leaves,' Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons, 42.

scale bleak landscapes, but also, on one occasion, someone's front room) and conjures inner sense through Hughes's evocative poems. Without wanting to undermine the achievements of the book, it is a guide to the area written by someone who comes from within.

There is another significant addition to Elmet. Neil Roberts writes of the 'opportunistic recycling of poems as far back as The Hawk in the Rain.'<sup>324</sup> For a poet who was very precise about when his work should be published,<sup>325</sup> perhaps the word 'opportunistic' is unfair, but Roberts is nevertheless correct about the fact that Elmet contains a number of poems previously published in different books. Aside from the poems which originate in Remains of Elmet, a majority of the 'new' poems come from Wolfwatching. Of these, most are poems which feature the effect of the First World War on Hughes's family as inspiration.<sup>326</sup> This arrangement reinforces Hughes's suggestion that the Calder valley, at least during his lifetime, was perpetually mourning those lost on the battlefields. The presence of Hughes's most striking early war elegy, 'Six Young Men', is justifiable because in the poem Hughes openly admits that he knows 'That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,' featured in the background, 'Which are there yet and not changed.' (11-3) With these war elegies and a number of other poems, Elmet makes plain the connections

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<sup>324</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 139.

<sup>325</sup> In a letter to his publishers at Faber and Faber, Hughes asks, 'can Crow be brought out on October 1<sup>st</sup>? It's a Thursday...Newton and Kepler are in agreement, that is a great day in heaven. Why not exploit it?' 'To Frank Pike,' Undated 1970, Letters, 305.

<sup>326</sup> Wolfwatching and Hughes's later war elegies are discussed in Chapter Seven.

Hughes and his family have with the area; in conversation with Ann Skea, he admits to 'deliberately [making] this version a collection about family'.<sup>327</sup>

As the book no longer deals with Elmet's 'remains', is one to assume that the contents are no longer elegies or laments for a bygone era? The fact that the poems of Elmet seldom consider the future, instead choosing more frequently to focus on the past (and the past in relation to the present), leads to a sense of loss throughout the sequence. This is compounded by the fact that, at the time of its publication, key figures in the poems (Hughes's mother, father and Uncle Walter) had been dead for several years.<sup>328</sup> The photographs which feature the valley's residents usually depict an elderly populace, and the buildings are either in a state of decay, or are architectural anachronisms dating from a bygone era of industrial promise. For these reasons, it is possible to still consider that one is viewing the remains of the Calder Valley, and by implication, to see that many of the poems carry forth the elegiac tone of Remains of Elmet.



Moortown Elegies<sup>329</sup> is concerned with a culture and a way of life in remission; farms such as Hughes's Moortown Farm in Devon are 'dwindling

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<sup>327</sup> Ann Skea, 'A Timeline of Ted Hughes's Life and Work,' Laughter of Foxes, xxxi.

<sup>328</sup> Edith Hughes d. 1969, William Hughes d. 1981, Walter Farrar d. 1976. For a comprehensive reading of the role played by family in Remains of Elmet, Wolfwatching and Elmet, see Neil Roberts's chapter 'Return to the Calder Valley' in Ted Hughes: A Literary Life, 129-39.

<sup>329</sup> Moortown Elegies was published in 1978 as a limited edition by The Rainbow Press. This study refers to this edition. However, it also acknowledges the fact that Moortown Elegies

and stand for as way of life once central to England but now pushed to the peripheries.<sup>330</sup> As in Remains of Elmet, there is an ancient society which is on the verge of being lost forever. It also considers the day-to-day interrelations of life and death overseen by the poet/farmer who is made manifest in the pastoral figure of Hughes's farming mentor and father-in-law, Jack Orchard. The sequence's final six poems elegise his death.

An accusation which might be levelled at an elegiac study of Hughes's sequence is that some of the poems do not read like elegies, nor do some of Hughes's concerns sound worthy of lament. However, the sequence reads as a foil to the sense of hopelessness presented in Remains of Elmet; there *are* adversities to overcome, but there is a sense of triumph for both the natural and the human spirits equally. Where Remains of Elmet traced the themes of ruin and decay, and was about deaths of differing sorts, so Moortown Elegies is about life, be it new life, sustaining life, or the survival of traditions and values that may otherwise be lost. In this sense, the Moortown Elegies rage against the dying of the light. Attempts are made to restore a harmonious relationship in 'a working laboratory of co-operation between man and nature'<sup>331</sup> which was lost in Remains of Elmet. But the sequence is not an opulent vindication of nature's ferocity. This is expressed at its best in the poems which depict the births and deaths of livestock. But Hughes also cites

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was reprinted as a part of Hughes's Moortown (Faber and Faber, 1979) collection, and then later as Moortown Diary (Faber and Faber, 1989). The 1989 edition was presented with an extensive preface and explanatory notes.

<sup>330</sup> Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd,' Achievement, 263.

<sup>331</sup> Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd,' Achievement, 262.

'the EEC Agricultural Policy'<sup>332</sup> as one enemy to overcome; for this reason, Paulin suggests that the poems concurrently lament the interference of more sinister machinations, so that by turns, they 'elegise an island economy and polemicize the Common Market.'<sup>333</sup> As life struggles into life, one is reminded of the grip death has on the natural world; in his continuing elegiac effort not to dilute the 'actual' by using his unfalsifying dream of a mimetic, elegiac language, it is necessary to highlight where life succeeds in realising its potential, and where it fails.

The struggle to be alive comes in a variety of forms. 'Tractor', according to Roberts and Gifford, is 'a rather unusual but entirely appropriate elegy to one man's way of life', one which also highlights the sequence's archetypal trial between man and the elements.<sup>334</sup> With 'Tractor',<sup>335</sup> Hughes looks at birth outside of the natural world and the struggle to start this weathered machine. The animalistic qualities of the vehicle are expressed by Hughes's use of binary oppositions: cold becomes heat, bone becomes iron, the inanimate becomes animate and, ultimately, dead frozen iron becomes life.<sup>336</sup> Parallels can be drawn here with the birth of livestock, the tractor's 'open entrails' anticipate the image of the afterbirth which covers a new-born lamb, in 'February 17<sup>th</sup>',<sup>337</sup> in which Hughes is forced to tie a rope around the

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<sup>332</sup> Ted Hughes, *Moortown Diary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989) ix.

<sup>333</sup> Paulin, *Minotaur*, 271.

<sup>334</sup> Gifford & Roberts, *Critical Study*, 249.

<sup>335</sup> Hughes, *Moortown Elegies*, 22.

<sup>336</sup> Raymond Briggs, 'Tractor,' *The Epic Poise*, 75.

<sup>337</sup> Hughes, *Moortown Elegies*, 30.

animal's head in order to pull it out into the world. Further still, he compares his actions in trying to start the tractor to that of 'a lamb / Trying to nudge its solid-frozen mother' (22-3), and squirting 'commercial sure-fire / Down the black throat' (27-8). There is a likeness here with Hughes feeding an ailing lamb with 'Warm milk and whisky down his throat' in 'Struggle'.<sup>338</sup> There is an endless struggle for new life trying to live, be it natural or artificial.

The pre-Orchard elegies repeat the difficulties faced by the tractor. 'February 17<sup>th</sup>' depicts the birth of a lamb, but from the outset, life has conspired against it. A 'noose of mother flesh' (13) wrapped around its neck strangles it at the point of birth, its tongue is 'stuck out, black purple, / Strangled by its mother' (11-2). The 'Ice wind' and 'mudded slopes' compound the bleak situation. Hughes is forced to put both the mother out of her pain, and the lamb out of its misery:

I went  
Two miles for the injection and a razor.  
Sliced the lamb's throat-strings, levered with a knife  
Between the vertebrae and brought the head off  
To stare at its mother, its pipes sitting in the mud  
With all earth for a body.

(25-30)

The implication that the lamb's body is now the earth stresses the wider elegiac belief of an ecological consolation and transferral of energy into the natural world. Consider, by contrast, the pig of 'View of a Pig' and Hughes's

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<sup>338</sup> Hughes, *Moortown Elegies*, 14.



indifference towards what will become of it. With the act of killing the lamb, Hughes remains omniscient. Gifford and Roberts write, 'The actions represent the necessities of a particular way of life...it leads to our admiration of the uniquely human engagement in the creative-destructive processes of nature that farmers undertake in their daily work'.<sup>339</sup> But Hughes's actions also symbolise the language of the Moortown Elegies poems. Scigaj notes:

[The language] attains a depth commensurate with subjective and objective experience richly lived and powerfully felt. Hughes's considerable linguistic and observational powers work at full tilt, often restoring to language...clarity and stringency of meaning.

Hughes has striven to construct the language of 'honest actual experience and deep states of consciousness in words that are neither flattened nor inflated'.<sup>340</sup> Again, there is no attempt to falsify here, or adorn the scene with an ornate language removed from the immediacy of experience as might be the case in elegies of old. It does call into question the role of a spirit of sorts; is there room for the 'unbelievable' in a sequence whose virtue is its expertly constructed conveyance of actuality? 'Orf'<sup>341</sup> explicitly engages with the spirit of a lamb whom Hughes is forced to shoot in order to end its suffering. He confesses:

I shot the lamb.

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<sup>339</sup> Gifford & Roberts, Critical Study, 251.

<sup>340</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 120.

<sup>341</sup> Hughes, Moortown Elegies, 37.

I shot him while he was looking the other way.

I shot him between the ears.

(9-11)

Hughes's guilt is one born out of attachment to this creature to which he administered a prolonged course of treatment, but it is assuaged by the spirit of the lamb 'Asking to be banished, / Asking for permission to be extinct,' (17-8). Robinson writes:

the informing spirit...cannot simply pass elsewhere. Such has been Hughes's involvement over the months that the [lamb's] energy remains attached to him, seeking a new pathway, through his art...the period of corpsehood and physical decay is an interim between lives, between being a lamb and having the flesh reabsorbed by nature and reused.<sup>342</sup>

The need for verisimilitude in Hughes's poems or for a poetic born out of mimesis does not completely negate his connection to the supernatural spirit in nature. 'Roe-deer'<sup>343</sup> exemplifies this:

In the down-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the year  
Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted.

They had happened into my dimension  
The moment I was arriving there.

(1-4)

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<sup>342</sup> Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd,' *Achievement* 273.

<sup>343</sup> Hughes, *Moortown Elegies*, 37.

The collision of 'dimensions' and the distorted vision of the early morning implies a disjointed dream-like state, 'the snow-screen vision of the abnormal // ... all the way disintegration' (6-7). The deer, however, just 'stare' back at him with clarity. Hughes abstracts the scene further and endows it with a theatrical quality, the actual world becomes even more distorted into an unrecognisable and unfamiliar landscape: 'the curtain had blown aside for a moment / And there where the trees were no longer trees, nor / the road a road // The deer had come for me.' (11-3) The meaning of this visitation and the awe-struck tone of Hughes's 'daydream' is swiftly cut short by the deer's departure:

Then they ducked through the hedge, and upright they rode their  
legs

Away downhill over a snow-lonely field

Towards tree dark – finally

Seeming to eddy and glide and fly away up

Into the big boil of flakes.

(14-8)

The return 'Back to the ordinary' (21) does not cause Hughes to dismiss his spiritual connection with the event. Scigaj writes, 'The potentially transcendent events of 'Roe Deer' and 'Coming down Through Somerset'<sup>344</sup> only confirm that the limits of absorption in the actual are severe; the actual

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<sup>344</sup> Hughes, *Moortown Elegies*, 39.

sustains a 'dimension' that is very ordinary and restricted to the temporal flow.<sup>345</sup> 'Coming Down through Somerset' acknowledges the very real processes of decay and a conjuring of the natural spirit. Hughes's emotional attachment to a dead badger he discovers on the road and takes home with him, like his attachment to the lamb of 'Orf', destabilises the 'white-hot moment of experience'<sup>346</sup> operating in a majority of the Moortown Elegies poems. He admits early on to bringing the badger 'close / Into my life' (9-10) and placing him on a defunct beam 'Torn from a great building' (11). This beam, which has been 'waiting two years / To be built into new building' (11-2) is an early indicator of disrupted potential for the badger; it awaits a higher purpose which Hughes supposes the dead badger anticipates. But here Hughes withdraws from imagining what afterlife awaits the badger by instead contemplating its decay in a manner which suggests something ceremonial. In doing so, he keeps true to the factual descriptions of nature, whilst leaving room for something esoteric to be interpreted:

His skeleton – for the future.

Fangs, handsome concealed. Flies, drumming,  
 Bejewel his transit. Heatwave ushers him hourly  
 Towards his underworlds.

(13-6)

Hughes's calls to 'Get rid of that badger' (15) and 'Get rid of that badger today' (21) suggest that he is aware that in bringing the corpse of the animal close

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<sup>345</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 124.

<sup>346</sup> Dyson, 'Ted Hughes,' Critical Quarterly, 222.

into his life has made him question his belief in systems of natural decay. It is a call to get rid of the badger so it no longer affects the factual nature of his poetry, but also to speed the process of decomposition which is ugly in comparison to the 'Beautiful, warm secret beast.' (8) Robinson writes that Hughes's will to get rid of the badger suggests a 'desire to rescue something.'<sup>347</sup> The preservation of the beast in the form of the poem is a familiar elegiac strategy, but Hughes goes further: 'I want him / To stop time.' (29-30) Hughes expresses his awareness that, in this case at least, elegising is an insufficient weapon in the face of time, insufficient because of Hughes's want to preserve his affection for the creature as it is, not as it will be. As Twiddy acknowledges, 'emotion displaces the ability to record naturally, and this matches the manipulation performed in subsuming "natural events" to a human relevance.'<sup>348</sup> Hughes's conclusion is part-resentment, part-appeal; it is also part of an unfinished argument, but it is wholly resolved: 'Something has to stay.' (38) That 'something' might be the poem, or something arbitrary depending upon the emphasis the reader brings to the poem, but whatever it is, it must make a stand against time and death.

It is with the final six poems of Moortown Elegies<sup>349</sup> that there occurs a shift; now man is at the centre of Hughes's attention rather than nature.

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<sup>347</sup> Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd,' Achievement 277.

<sup>348</sup> Twiddy, 'The Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry,' 50. Twiddy's remarks, in their original context, refer to the poem 'Last Night' from Moortown Elegies. However, his comments seem quite appropriate for this discussion of 'Coming Down Through Somerset'.

<sup>349</sup> Hughes, Moortown Elegies, 53.

'The Day He Died' is one of Hughes's most accomplished elegies. The 'He' is Jack Orchard, Hughes's father-in-law, who worked the same farm as Hughes and gave him agricultural guidance. The heartfelt loss which the poem betrays is felt by both the poet and nature. Orchard died on 'the silkiest day of the young year' (1), but the evening of the same day is described as being 'as hard as any of all winter' (5). Immediately after Orchard's death, nature recoils as if it has lost an integral mechanism to its working:

...The snowdrops battered.  
 Thrushes spluttering. Pigeons gingerly  
 Rubbing their voices together, in stinging cold.  
 Crows creaking, and clumsily  
 Cracking loose.

The bright fields look dazed.  
 Their expression is changed.  
 They have been somewhere awful  
 And come back without him.

(9-17)

The sense of loss in Moortown Elegies is in contrast to the loss expressed in Remains of Elmet; the same nature that sought retribution against man in that sequence now appears to show regret and remorse at his passing. The poem bears a likeness to pastoral counterparts; Orchard is the shepherd figure whose death causes the 'battered snowdrops' (flowers, a frequent elegiac emblem) and 'trustful cattle' (the procession of mourners) to appropriately

mourn and lament the shepherd's death. But although Hughes uses certain pastoral conventions, his lamentations are for a man who dealt with a *rural* world, one which could be adverse and challenging as it is beautiful and rewarding. Orchard fulfils certain pastoral convictions; as a custodial figure his oneness with nature ensures his return to the fold when he dies. But his passing is not transitional; he is lost, leaving a 'great blank' instead of appearing in a dazzling transit to fresh woods and pastures new. Nature is bereft that he has died, but remains utilitarian: the land 'Will have to manage without him' (22), but it *will* manage, it will go on nevertheless. As Iain Twiddy suggests, there remains an equilibrium: 'Mourning humans in Hughes's work consists not of transposing the human into the natural, but of opening up the human to the natural, placing the human within the cosmos, relegating them to the wider scheme rather than elevating them into an enduring figure.'<sup>350</sup> This is how Hughes balances elegiac rhetorical expectations whilst remaining true to his own poetic voice; Orchard is described in relation to the nature of his work to ensure that Hughes remains true to his employment of rural poetry, hence the absence of gods, nymphs, fauns and mythological figures. It is not a pastoral idyll where Orchard begins his afterlife, unlike those mourned in elegies of the past; Hughes has worked the image of nature throughout the sequence, so it is only natural that Orchard should remain in situ, albeit not visibly. For Orchard to die in spring,

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<sup>350</sup> Twiddy, 'The Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry,' 35-6.

with its obvious regenerative associations, is a morbid irony. He is 'escorted to his underworlds by the land he served, which only on its return realises its loss'.<sup>351</sup>

Paulin notes that with his 'all-off-the-top-of-the-head' linguistic inventiveness and authenticity, Hughes has paid homage to 'the heroic figure of...Jack Orchard.'<sup>352</sup> Orchard harnesses his ability and skill in order to maintain this balanced relationship with the land just as Hughes uses his skill to write poetry. Evidence of this relationship is given in 'A Monument'.<sup>353</sup> It is this memory by which Hughes wishes to remember his late father-in-law:

And that is where I remember you,  
Skullraked with thorns, sodden, tireless,  
Hauling bedded feet free, floundering away  
To check alignments, returning, hammering the staple  
Into the soaked stake-oak, a careful tattoo  
Precise to the tenth of an inch

(21-6)

Hughes has painted the picture of a man he emulates not only in terms of agricultural labour, but also in the plight of his verse, something which requires energy, particularity and patience. The cenotaph, which Hughes repeatedly uses in his verse, has been replaced by a fence – unusually, and unknowingly, Orchard is building a monument to himself. Robinson notes, 'to call this fence a monument is to draw attention to the disparity between

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<sup>351</sup> Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd,' *Achievement*, 282.

<sup>352</sup> Paulin, *Minotaur*, 260.

<sup>353</sup> Hughes, *Moortown Elegies*, 51.



civic and rural virtues. For it is the exact opposite of a conventional monument: informal, useful, anonymous, self-erected, hidden'.<sup>354</sup> The monument does not present itself to Hughes with the same problems as the cenotaph; this is a monument to the 'truest, and only just' grief.<sup>355</sup> It does not betray Orchard's memory. It also aligns itself with the unfinished sheepfold ('Beside the boisterous brook of Greenhead Ghyll') in Wordsworth's 'Michael' as a very rural monument.

But with 'A Monument', Hughes undercuts his poem's ability as a memorial for the deceased. It is the images which accompany the scene, the erection of the fence in difficult conditions, which are 'memorable'; the poem attempts to shy away from itself as if its own process of mourning is too synthetic. It shifts mourning away from itself, citing Orchard's own practical and determined rationale as a more appropriate means of remembrance. The monument to Orchard is obscured, 'Deep under the roadside's car-glimpsed May beauty, / To be discovered by some future owner' (15-6), so unlike the more common elegiac gambit of elevating the deceased, 'A Monument' prefers to place the deceased in his own agricultural context and not in a matrix of poetic contrivance. This ruse (that of leaving the dead 'where they are' as opposed to fitting them into a context of literary norms and practices) is present in several of the elegies for Orchard. 'The Day He Died' leaves Orchard among the landscapes and livestock which he attended to, and 'Now

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<sup>354</sup> Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd,' *Achievement*, 282.

<sup>355</sup> Hughes, 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers,' *Hawk*, 52.

You Have to Push<sup>356</sup> leaves Orchard 'Coaxing the last knuckle embers' (21) of a fire. But whereas he would normally 'linger late into the twilight' (20) watching the fire before returning home, now he has 'to *stay* / Right on, into total darkness' (22-3). In 'Hands', the final poem of the sequence, Hughes remembers Orchard's 'strange...huge' hands which after a life of action and toil, 'lie folded, estranged from all they have done / [As if] they have never been' (26-7). For the elegy, however, this is a state of limbo; normally a transitional phase renews and enlivens the deceased again. But Hughes does not do this; he takes up the gauntlet of 'Coming Down through Somerset': 'Something has to stay.'

The title of the final poem, 'Hands',<sup>357</sup> might refer not only to the folded hands of Orchard, but also the poet's hands, which, at the conclusion of the sequence, have now ceased to write poetry. This would signal Hughes's collusion with established narratological frameworks. In doing so, the sequence draws attention to itself *as* a sequence, not a series of loosely connected/independent poems. It is not the first time that a sequence has been used within the elegiac tradition, and it is worth asking why the poets consistently choose this formal arrangement. In Memoriam, with its expansive shape and numerated verses, establishes a powerful relationship between the nature of the sequence and the nature of grief. Sacks's reading of Tennyson's poem might also be applied to Hughes:

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<sup>356</sup> Hughes, Moortown Elegies, 54.

<sup>357</sup> Hughes, Moortown Elegies, 56.

There is, first of all, the poem's extreme length... Written during seventeen years, the poem narrates an almost three-year-long mourning period, a period unprecedentedly long for any elegy. The poem's length, moreover, represents no smoothly unfolding process, no strictly unified development to which all parts are organically subordinated.<sup>358</sup>

The dates Hughes provides as footnotes to many of his elegiac works are evidence that he has been writing the poems over a period of at least three years. They also point to the fact that they are not arranged in his volume chronologically, but rather loosely collected under the differing seasons. Sacks continues by writing that In Memoriam is an accretion of moments:

'[Tennyson] collects and elaborates rather than strips and refines; he accumulates rather than lets go.'<sup>359</sup> Again, we see this in Hughes and the effect of this is the same as in In Memoriam:

[Tennyson] is not merely trying to cling to the lost object of his love; he is also resisting the very passage of time that makes loss so irreversible. The accretions may therefore be seen as attempts to congeal the flow of time in order to preserve personalities or moments whose definitions are threatened by change.<sup>360</sup>

In Remains of Elmet, Hughes is documenting. So it is with Moortown Elegies, where he is making 'a fleeting snapshot'<sup>361</sup> of a time which is dwindling into

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<sup>358</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 168.

<sup>359</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 168.

<sup>360</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 168.

<sup>361</sup> Hughes, Moortown Diary, x.

obscurity. Hughes writes of the ancient world and its spirit which vanished with the last generation of traditional North Devon farmers and how 'the financial nightmares, the technological revolutions and international market madness' took over devastating 'farmers, farms and farming ever since'.<sup>362</sup> Hughes admits that he does not let this play an overt role in his Moortown Elegies poems, but its implication in the preface to the sequence, and the poems which do their best to ignore the encroachment of modernity serve to emphasise the underlying and malevolent force of change. This is perhaps another reason why the sequence seems well equipped for the elegy. The implication of structure which a sequence offers has links with order and chronological order; in this respect it can appropriately digress on the end of one era (or a death for example), consider the transitional process (whatever form this may take), to contemplate what may lie ahead (an afterlife perhaps, or how the mourner will continue). Whilst this may be achieved in a shorter elegy ("The Darkling Thrush"<sup>363</sup>) the sequence gives the poet room for manoeuvre. The sequence also seems better equipped, not only to comprehend grief and melancholia, but allow the poet sufficient room in which to meditate on the passing of time. Smith notes that In Memoriam mentions three Christmases and recurring springs; 'they are fixed points at which progress can be reviewed by the reader and, as such, they are rather as

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<sup>362</sup> Hughes, Moortown Diary, viii.

<sup>363</sup> Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poems. ed. James Gibson (London: MacMillan, 1976) 119.

a specific development of the elegiac convention of “the revolving year”.<sup>364</sup>

The sequence as a formal pattern identifies the need to understand the wholeness of the subject; hence the intricacy of description for poems which seem relatively mundane – these mundanities are a part of the farming way of life; this warrants their inclusion, even if they are not as compelling as some of their counterparts. The expectation comes with anticipating how these experiences will conclude.

Death is less of an abstract concept in Moortown Elegies than in Remains of Elmet. It is described in relation to a sympathetic earth; nature is a part of death and mourns it; man does not dwell upon it alone. Scigaj remarks:

Unlike traditional elegies ... the concluding elegies of ‘Moortown’ restrict their focus to the actual. Hughes avoids all conventions that emphasise technical mastery over actual observation: here are no invocations to the muse, personifications of natural forces, processions of mourners, digressions on the church, or enlargements of context to include pathetic fallacy invectives against death or consoling hopes for immortality. The boundary of the poet’s penetration is the actual event. Yet the restricted gaze produces poetry that steps the reader in the lush redolence of the actual...the poetic line is simple, effective, and satisfying because the images are neither crammed into the line nor insisted upon.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Smith, By Mourning Tongues, 129.

<sup>365</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 123.

According to Scigaj, "The depiction of the cattle standing in a "new emptiness," and the uprooted farmland left with "a great blank in its memory" after the death of Jack Orchard, is sober and unsentimental, earned by the entirety of the sequence."<sup>366</sup> The right to reject certain elegiac conventions has been earned by acknowledging but not exploiting these conventions throughout the sequence; birth, spirituality, hope and, of course, death all feature prominently.

What Hughes sees is the potential of new life; the individual characteristics of each new born 'thing' are just as individual as birth itself. One never seems more aware of the potential of death than in birth. It is important for Hughes as a poet and a farmer for struggle and for effort to be matched with equal reward. The urgency of new life is persistent, not repetitious. Hughes's personal feelings are seldom expressed; he writes poems entirely focussed on responses to necessity.<sup>367</sup> 'Life is trying to be life', he wrote, 'Death is also trying to be life'.<sup>368</sup> There is the same 'frayed, fraying-hair fineness' dividing life and death here that is present in Remains of Elmet. Although it is not in the same accelerated state, it is still a fine line. Scigaj notes of 'A Monument', that death 'is presented as the fulfilment of a deep commitment to the living'.<sup>369</sup> This is true of most of the poems in the

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<sup>366</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 121.

<sup>367</sup> Roberts & Gifford, Critical Study, 251.

<sup>368</sup> 'Life is trying to be life' from the sequence 'Earth-Numb' which appeared in Moortown (1979)

<sup>369</sup> Scigaj, Ted Hughes, 122.

sequence as traditions and agricultural methods are kept alive instead of being folded away as they were in the Calder Valley.

‘The prime-directive,’ Scigaj writes, ‘always implied but never actually stated, is to act as fully in accord with the cycles of nature as possible.’<sup>370</sup>

Hughes accepts responsibility for the landscape as he accepted the responsibility of becoming a documenter of the demise of the Calder Valley, with a poetry which records ‘the moment of direct experience, or what Hughes calls “the authentic fingerprints of the day itself”’.<sup>371</sup> Here in Moortown Elegies he is able to make a difference to the microcosm which he was unable to do in the Calder Valley, a place that was in a state of decay long before Hughes could do anything about it. Roberts and Gifford rightly claim that in this sequence, for the first time in Hughes’s work, there is ‘no division between man and animal, which was such a dominant theme in Hughes’s early poems, and which often tended to be expressed to man’s discredit’<sup>372</sup> Hughes has rediscovered and restored the harmony of man’s relationship to nature that was lost in the discordant world of Remains of Elmet, and in keeping with the elegy, he has also offered hope for the living and for the dead.



Hughes wrote in 1970: ‘Nature’s obsession, after all, is to survive. As far as she is concerned...civilised man, the evolutionary error, is still open to

<sup>370</sup> Scigaj, ‘Ted Hughes and Ecology: A Biocentric Vision,’ Challenge, 170.

<sup>371</sup> Paulin, Minotaur, 271.

<sup>372</sup> Roberts & Gifford, Critical Study, 251.

correction, presumably she will correct him. If he is not open enough, she will still make the attempt'<sup>373</sup> Such a statement offers hope to the Calder Valley, a place whose absences compromise the viability of a satisfactory lamentation. But as Sagar writes, the renewal process comes at a cost: the total destruction of what remains:

It is not only the chimneys and chapels of the Calder Valley which must collapse before there can be any new building. The image of stone returning to earth is one of many images in Hughes for the restoration of nature of its own, the healing and rededication of the holy elements before man can approach them again with clean hands, with respect and humility, and for purposes, one hopes, rather more natural, sane and worthily human than the enslavement of the body and spirit which has characterised Protestantism and capitalism in England.<sup>374</sup>

Perhaps this is the type of 'correction' that Hughes alludes to in his quote, and one which he strongly suggests in Remains of Elmet. The suggestion is that nature will police itself. In his sequence, it displays enough of a consciousness to be able to curtail man's ruinous activities. But there is more at stake here than the destruction of the Calder Valley; the attitudes which perpetuated its demise could, by Hughes's implication, eventually be responsible for ruin on a larger scale if unchecked.

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<sup>373</sup> Ted Hughes, Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 135.

<sup>374</sup> Sagar, 'Hughes and his Landscape,' Achievement, 13.



There is hope if the Calder Valley is prepared to embrace the creative-destructive energies Hughes invokes in his poetry, and which allow him to free the spirits of his family from the cemetery in Heptonstall. Absence is manifest in the valley and replicated in Hughes's inability to create a 'successful' elegy; wholeness cannot be forged, 'As the fragments / Of the broken circle of the hills / Drift apart.' ('Heptonstall') The 'broken circle' ruptures the cyclical process of decomposition and renewal embodied in the elegy, and the possibility of consolation is annulled.

The title Moortown Elegies implies a more cohesive aesthetic than the 'remains' of Elmet. Hughes confounds the expectation that Moortown Elegies is to be a series of laments, instead presenting a world and a landscape which is both brutal and unforgiving, and tranquil and inspirational for the poet. Here, there is a wholeness which is absent in the Calder Valley, the cyclical processes of decomposition and renewal are not only present, but in very close proximity to the farmer who interacts with these extremes day-to-day. Hughes, the poet-farmer, is 'a sensitive but practical man who responds emotionally to the suffering of the animals, but asks no metaphysical questions about it.'<sup>375</sup>

Moortown Elegies is not perfect; for example, 'A Monument' deflects remembrance away from the poem and towards the monument built by Hughes and Orchard. Furthermore, Hughes is troubled by the fact that the

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<sup>375</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 123.

dead decay; he yearns for 'something' to stay preserved against death which is perhaps why Orchard is left in situ in the concluding elegies, blocking the common elegiac transitional process.

Remains of Elmet and Moortown Elegies do have common ground.

Both are laments for a particular locale and a particular way of life which is diminishing. Both areas are relevant to Hughes as a boy and as a man. In both cases, 'the pastoral world exists only to be violated'.<sup>376</sup> This may be the case *in extremis* with Remains of Elmet, but each sequence rejects any poetic discourse which Hughes sees as distorting his vision of the 'actual' in his elegy.

This chapter has brought to the attention of the reader the problems which face Hughes's elegies as they simultaneously reject and embrace existing modes in order to subvert or reinforce the overall strategy of each sequence. It has stressed that Hughes has openly reduced his focus from national events of war, to a more intimate locale, a reduction which continues through to Birthday Letters. Stylistically, Hughes's elegies also evolve. With Remains of Elmet, it is one of the first times that Hughes writes about the real world with his uniquely innovative verse which was developed since Wodwo in his mythological sequences. Moortown Elegies, whilst it has a more formal appearance, is still invested with an energy and vivacity common to Hughes's elegies, but virtually unheard of in the established elegiac canon. These

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<sup>376</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 85.

sequences are among his most challenging and engaging elegies. They are a testament to the poet willing to embrace stylistic and thematic complexities, not only to reform the elegy, but also to reform our engagement with the worlds depicted therein, so that we might no longer be considered an 'evolutionary error' and be more 'worthily human'.



Chapter Five:  
The Fruitful River

In Hughes's Tales from Ovid,<sup>377</sup> 'To satisfy Jove's fury', Neptune

Brought up the tidal waves,  
And assembled every river  
...  
And ordered them to open their aquifers  
Ignoring all confines.  
The rivers raced back to their sources  
And erupted.  
...  
Now flood heaps over flood.  
Orchards, crops, herds, farms are scooped up  
And sucked down  
In the overland maelstrom.

(544-5/547-550/555-8)

The message is one of divine reclamation/cleansing using the forces of the natural world. It bears a similarity to the idea of the Christian God purging his creation with a flood ('And behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh...and every thing that is living in the earth shall die.' (Genesis 6:17)). Hughes's Remains of Elmet may have offered similar calls to evoke nature's spirits ('Where the Mothers'), including the White

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<sup>377</sup> Ted Hughes, Tales from Ovid: Twenty-Four Passages from the Metamorphoses (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) 21.

Goddess ('The Angel') to perform a similar task, but his approach in River<sup>378</sup> seems altogether different. Gone is the river as a weapon of the gods; now it is a complicated, almost reclusive, living organism, which, though still a powerful element, is susceptible to the threat of man's ecological negligence.

But in what respect is River elegiac? Like Remains of Elmet and Moortown Elegies, one of the sequence's chief concerns is the environmental degradation of waterways across the world; but as with its predecessors, River's elegiac significance is a lot deeper than an environmental showcase. It is not difficult to locate River in a tradition of elegies and elegists who use rivers, streams, the seas and oceans as powerful motifs in their verse. Hughes does not completely overlook the opportunity to capitalise upon such rich and multifarious images. Wordsworth's 'The River Duddon' is a sonnet sequence which foreshadows many of the themes which feature in River. The river is often used as a deeply symbolic allegory of the human condition; this usually takes the form of the journey of the river from its source (birth) to its eventual communion with the sea (death). However, Hughes is clearly intent on establishing a strikingly original conception of his own; he again infuses his poems with a determination to portray the river vividly, without forging sensation, sensuality or experience. Thomas West captures the essence of River when he writes, 'The poet simply surrenders to sensations: as the inner

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<sup>378</sup> References to River relate to both the 1983 edition with photographs by Peter Keen, and the revised edition included in Three Books (Faber and Faber, 1993). Clearer indication as to the specific edition being referenced will be indicated if necessary. For a thorough and comprehensive publishing history of River, see Paul Keegan's notes in Collected Poems, p.1286.

drama recedes, the importance of poetry as description grows, but a description where ideal interference is so reduced as to let Nature become radiant before it becomes symbolic.<sup>379</sup> As Hughes narrows his focus from the war poems of The Hawk in the Rain and Wodwo, to the individual communities of Remains of Elmet and Moortown Elegies, he looks towards a particular element and natural feature. Within this specification, one has the opportunity to situate River in an elegiac lineage and to see the effect of Hughes's interpretations against those of his predecessors. From Milton's 'Lycidas',<sup>380</sup> to Andrew Motion's 'Fresh Water', the use of streams, rivers and seas in the elegy has been frequent enough for one to assume that the mention of water in elegy is integral to the genre.

Although Hughes's use of fluvial imagery is original and striking, its appearance in earlier verse has never been formulaic. In the twentieth-century, T.S. Eliot remarks in 'The Fire Sermon'<sup>381</sup> (The Waste Land) that 'The nymphs are departed' (174), so he instead evokes Spenser's refrain from 'Prothalamion'<sup>382</sup> for the 'Sweet Thames [to] run softly, till I end my song.' (175). 'Sweet' is the word, as Eliot's Thames 'bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends, / Or other testimony to summer nights.' (176-8), but it 'sweats / Oil and tar' (266-7) so that the river bank is inhabited only by vermin and images of death and

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<sup>379</sup> West; Ted Hughes, 117.

<sup>380</sup> John Milton, 'Lycidas,' The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Mary Ferguson and Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, eds (London & New York: Norton, 1996) 354.

<sup>381</sup> T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems: 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1974) 60.

<sup>382</sup> Edmund Spenser, 'Prothalamion,' Norton Anthology of Poetry, 181.

decay. This metaphor for a state of decay (in which the river appears to remain untouched) is further elaborated by the presence of 'the three Thames daughters'.<sup>383</sup> Their song is one of environmental ruin ('The river sweats / Oil and tar'), unfulfilled historical romance ('Elizabeth and Leicester ... Carried down stream / The peel of bells / White towers' (279, 287-9)), promiscuity, dissatisfaction and psychological inertia. These images are presented against a river which is not only preserved from these trappings, but continues in spite of them, 'running softly' to the end of Eliot's song and no doubt beyond. Its figurative cleanliness as it meanders against the backdrop of decay cannot help but suggest that something malevolent is occurring. So, too, Dylan Thomas's Thames of 'A Refusal To Mourn The Death, By Fire, Of A Child In London'<sup>384</sup> seems both remote and detached in the face of death:

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,  
 Robed in the long friends,  
 The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,  
 Secret by the unmourning water  
 Of the riding Thames.  
 After the first death, there is no other.

(19-24)

Sacks explains the 'unmourning' as recalling 'the river deities whose daughters were transformed to reeds or laurel'<sup>385</sup> and suggests that the mythologizing of the child negates the need for mourning. In a selection of

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<sup>383</sup> Eliot, 'Notes on The Waste Land,' Collected Poems, 73.

<sup>384</sup> Dylan Thomas, 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire of a Child in London,' Norton Anthology, 1463.

<sup>385</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 306.

the River poems (discussed below), Hughes also presents rivers which seems omnipotent as if they have transcended their apparent limits. To return to The Waste Land, whereas Eliot openly presents his poem as a composite of literatures, Hughes's only explicit literary allusion in River is in the poem 'Ophelia'<sup>386</sup>. Eliot himself utilises Ophelia's own lines ('Goodnight, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, goodnight, / goodnight' (172-3)). But this is where the connection between Eliot's poem and Hughes's ends. Hughes's 'Ophelia' appears to re-imagine Queen Gertrude's valediction for her would-be daughter-in-law, which reports that during her drowning, Ophelia was briefly 'like a creature native and endued / Unto that element' (4.VII.151-2)<sup>387</sup>

By contrast, in Hughes's poem:

If a trout leaps into the air, it is not for a breather.  
It has to drop back immediately

Into this peculiar engine  
That made it and keeps it going

(5-8)

The trout may briefly appear 'native and endued' to the air, but like Ophelia, it cannot survive in its elemental dispossession. With this poem, Hughes stresses the 'otherness' of the water on which his sequence fixates, but he also

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<sup>386</sup> Hughes, River, 52.

<sup>387</sup> According to the footnotes in The Norton Shakespeare, 'The willow leaf is grey-white ("hoar") on the undersides (reflected below from the water). The willow was an emblem of mourning and of forsaken love.' The footnotes go on to give a comprehensive explanation the symbolic resonance of the other flowers mentioned in Gertrude's speech. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard & Katherine Eisaman Maus, The Norton Shakespeare (London & New York: Norton, 1997) 1740.



reinforces an image that the poems of River repeatedly iterate: that the river is essentially a feminine element, yet as Scigaj notes, 'the river's engine carries within its ghostly makeup the taint of death'.<sup>388</sup>

The gendering of the river as seen in Eliot's poem and Thomas's elegy points towards the feminine; the river embodies the elegiac motif of a beginning/end of sexual awareness/activity, which is a part of the dual creative/destructive *modus operandi* of the Earth Mother featured in Remains of Elmet. The laws of nature which govern(ed) the ancient kingdom of Elmet were under the control of one goddess, and according to Bo Gustavsson, so are the rivers of River:

Repeatedly in these poems the river I [Gustavsson] imaged as a beautiful woman, a goddess who presides over her own cult administering a 'love-potion' ('Low Water') to her initiates, whether they be sea-trout, an eel, 'The nun of water' ('An Eel'), or salmon. It is of course the Great Goddess who as the Goddess of fate appears both in her gentle and terrifying characters ruling over the ritual drama of the mythic round of the year, a drama that involves the whole of nature and ultimately man as well.<sup>389</sup>

As Gustavsson remarks, the rivers of River appear to be a composite of disparate feminine personalities. 'Japanese River Tales'<sup>390</sup> uses the Japanese

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<sup>388</sup> Scigaj, Form and Imagination, 298.

<sup>389</sup> Bo Gustavsson, 'Ted Hughes's Quest for Hierophany: A Reading of River,' Critical Essays on Ted Hughes, 238.

<sup>390</sup> Hughes, River, 14.

folklore myth of Yuki-onna. 'Fairy Flood'<sup>391</sup> features the 'moving beauty' of water, with her 'whole glass castle melting about her / In full magic' (7-8), tossing her hair and hiding her eyes. But Hughes's personification is of a *femme fatale* who is flooding the 'fatherly landscape' (15) which 'Claws weakly at her swollen decision' (16). Hughes's diction suggests that the river is both raping the fatherly land and being impregnated by it; it is an 'elopement without finery / ...Of accusative love and abandon' (12-4) which leads to the river's swollen appearance. 'Fairy Flood' stresses the creative/destructive qualities Hughes imbues in his feminine river as it bleeds the landscape empty remorselessly. 'Low Water'<sup>392</sup> explicitly indicates the relationship between the river, women, sex, and death. 'The river is a beautiful idle woman' (2) the poem begins, she is 'bored and tipsy. // She lolls on her deep couch. And a long thigh / Lifts from the flash of her silks.' (5-7) Hughes indulges in the imagery of the river as a seductress, but, like his other images of the female river, there is an underscore of irony and unpleasantness; on the one hand, 'She stretches – and an ecstasy tightens / Over her skin, and deep in her gold body // Thrills spasm and dissolve.' (10-2) Yet, on the other hand, she exposes her 'half-dreams', revealing her 'Love-pact suicides. Copulation and death' (14) fostered by a love-potion 'of balsam / Thickened with fish-mucus and algae.' (15-6) Whilst these poems do not appear to be elegies (even though they follow a tradition of the feminisation of the river) they do mirror the

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<sup>391</sup> Hughes, *River*, 106.

<sup>392</sup> Hughes, *River*, 88.

creative/destructive processes which the elegy captures. It is not the first time Hughes has linked women, death and rivers together as we see in 'Cadenza'<sup>393</sup> from Wodwo, a poem which Stuart Hirschberg suggests, retells an ancient myth.<sup>394</sup> Within this myth, which has several variants, we are told of a woman who is said to be dead, but actually remains alive outside of the coffin where she is supposed to be located. But, as Hirschberg intimates, as a part of Hughes's duties as a shaman, he (that is, the persona) 'cures the injured soul by taking onto himself the crisis which is preventing the person who is dead from passing successfully into the other world.'<sup>395</sup> Hirschberg indicates that this accounts for the following lines:

The full, bared throat of a woman walking water,  
The loaded estuary of the dead.

And I am the cargo  
Of a coffin attended by swallows.

And I am the water  
Bearing the coffin that will not be silent.

(4-9)

Because of Hughes's/the persona's shamanistic flight, the passage to the afterlife (in this case, the river) has been blocked. 'The river (both the river Styx and the Thames – following the pattern of the elegy in 'Lycidas') is

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<sup>393</sup> Hughes, Wodwo, 20.

<sup>394</sup> Hirschberg, Myth, 29.

<sup>395</sup> Hirschberg, Myth, 29.

literally choked with the dead. The woman's soul cannot be accommodated.<sup>396</sup>

The abundance of fluvial imagery in elegies (and the incorporation of the feminisation of these images) can be traced back throughout the genre. We see in Milton's great elegy that, because of Henry King's drowning, images of water abound in 'Lycidas'. Just as the female river is associated with and responsible for death in River, so Milton chastises the nymphs and muses (who are female) for not preventing King's death in 'Lycidas'. 'Where were ye, nymphs, when the remorseless deep / Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?' Milton asks. He chides them for not having foreseen or intervened in King's death and deliberates on their whereabouts at the time:

For neither were ye playing on the steep,  
Where you old Bards, the famous Druids lie,  
Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high,  
Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream

(52-5)

Deva further illustrates how Milton's elegy utilises pagan lore amidst its Christian imagery. Deva (actually the river Dee) is 'wizard' because in pagan tradition it was believed that the river's changes of course were thought to prognosticate the fortune of the country.<sup>397</sup> Not only is the Dee relevant in terms of its geography (it discharges into the Irish Sea where King drowned),

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<sup>396</sup> Hirschberg, Myth, 30.

<sup>397</sup> Norton Anthology of Poetry, 355.

but it would seem that Milton is implicitly suggesting that the river, indeed the topographical landscape, is in some way intertwined with fate. One can see that this makes sense if one were to utilise the river as metaphor-for-life model; the river is fated to flow from its source, rising at its spring, along its streams and the meanders of its course, to the sea. It is an immovable definite, which, when applied to the life of the individual, has obvious metaphorical parallels.

But unlike Hughes's River, Milton's elegy does not solely personify the river as a woman. The 'reverend sire', Camus, attired in academic regalia delivers his condemnation of the 'corrupt clergy'. Similarly, Milton summons 'Alpheus' to 'call the vales, and bid them hither cast / Their bells and flowerets of a thousand hues' (134-5) so that they may be strewn upon 'the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.' (151) Alpheus, according to the myth, was a god who fell in love with the nymph Arethusa. When she fled to Sicily, he pursued her by diving under the sea and emerging on the island. There she was turned into a fountain and their waters mingled.<sup>398</sup> 'Alpheus' takes the form of 'Alph' in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan',<sup>399</sup> a 'sacred river' (3) running 'Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea' (4-5), later described as 'a lifeless ocean'. Although the poem is subtitled 'A Fragment', the river provides it with a thread of continuity, resurfacing prominently in the first two thirds of the poem. Whilst Milton's 'Alpheus' and Coleridge's

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<sup>398</sup> Norton Anthology of Poetry, 357.

<sup>399</sup> Ted Hughes (ed.), A Choice of Coleridge's Verse (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 118.

'Alph' seem to have no apparent similarity other than their name, they demonstrate how the river is used as a cohesive device, a through-line, by which the poem is linked together.

Two other mythological rivers have exerted a similarly strong influence on poets: the Styx and the Lethe, both of which run through the Ancient Greek underworld. The river Styx forms the boundary between the living and the dead, crossed by Phlegyas the ferryman who transports the souls of the newly deceased across the river. In this instance, the river is both a topographical boundary and a symbol of transition. Though primarily a feature of the Greek afterlife, the Styx is also present in the Christian hell as described in Dante's *Inferno*,<sup>400</sup> where it is the river that forms the fifth circle of hell inhabited by the wrathful, dour and indolent who continually drown in the foul water. The Lethe is used on several occasions in English elegiac poetry. Supposedly, when its waters were drunk, the souls of the dead would forget their life on earth. Tennyson uses the Lethe in *In Memoriam*. The poet asks the deceased Hallam, 'How fares it with the happy dead?' (XLIV, 1) Tennyson assumes that, as Hallam is living an eternity in heaven, that time has no meaning there, and as a result, 'he forgets the days before / God shut the doorways of his head.' (XLIV, 4) But Tennyson hopes that Hallam will occasionally remember 'A little flash, a mystic hint' (XLIV, 8) of his former life on earth:

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<sup>400</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Henry Francis Cary (Ware: Wordsworth, 1998).

And in the long harmonious years  
 (If Death so taste Lethean springs),  
 May some dim touch of earthly things  
 Surprise thee ranging with thy peers.

If such a dreamy touch should fall,  
 O turn thee round, resolve the doubt;  
 My guardian angel will speak out  
 In that high place, and tell thee all.

(XLIV, 9-16).

Tennyson subtly references the Styx in his 'self-elegy', 'Crossing the Bar'.<sup>401</sup> He alludes to the setting of the sun ('Sunset and evening star, / And one clear call for me!' (1-2)) over the ocean ('And may there be no moaning of the bar, / When I put out to sea,' (3-4)) to represent his own passing. He continues, 'For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place / The flood may bear me far, / I hope to see my Pilot face to face / When I have crost the bar.' (13-6) In In Memoriam, 'Arthur's loved remains' are transported aboard a 'Fair ship, that from the Italian shore / Sailest the placid ocean-plains' (IX, 1-2) bringing Hallam's body back to England where, 'The Danube to the Severn gave / The darken'd heart that beat not more; / They laid him by the pleasant shore' (XIX, 1-3). For Tennyson (and other poets) death is a journey in itself. So, like the journey across the Styx to the afterlife, and the seaward journey from Italy to

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<sup>401</sup> Tennyson, Selected Poems, 131.

England, a body of water is a transitional element for the soul as much as it is for the corpse.

Whilst mythical waters provide inspiration for elegists, there is still a place for rivers of the real world in the imagination. Tennyson uses the Danube on a number of occasions in *In Memoriam*. It passes through Vienna where Hallam died. Wordsworth's 'The River Duddon' charts the river's progress from 'the birthplace of a native stream' (I, 9) to where the river and the sea converge and 'mingle with Eternity' (XXXIII, 14). The analogy is proposed early on in the sequence. Of the river's fast flowing waters / the passing of time, Wordsworth writes:

How swiftly have they flown,  
Succeeding – still succeeding! Here the Child  
Puts, when the high-swoln Flood runs fierce and wild,  
His budding courage to the proof; and here  
Declining Manhood learns to note the sly  
And sure encroachment of infirmity,  
Thinking how fast time runs, life's end how near!

(IX, 8-14)

The dead accompany Wordsworth along the banks of the Duddon: 'friends and kindred tenderly beloved; / Some who had early mandates to depart / ...Once more do we unite' (XXI, 3-4, 5). Rather than acting as a physical/psychological barrier, the river in this case brings together the living and the dead. Wordsworth notes that the river's 'function was to heal and to



restore, / To soothe and cleanse, not madden and pollute!' (VIII, 13-14) This maddening and pollution is touched upon later in the sequence:

And what if Duddon's spotless flood receive  
 Unwelcome mixtures as the uncouth noise  
 Thickens, the pastoral River will forgive  
 Such wrong; nor need we blame the licensed joys,  
 Though false to Nature's quiet equipoise:  
 Frank are the sports, the stains are fugitive.

(XXIII, 9-14)

The pastoral river may forgive 'uncouth noise' as its fictitious waters are not susceptible to real degradation. The comments foreshadow Hughes's own concerns with man's encroachment upon real rivers:

If the sky is infected  
 The river has to drink it

If earth has a disease which could be fatal  
 The river has to drink it

If you have infected the sky and the earth  
 Caught its disease off you – you are the virus

If the sea drinks the river  
 And the earth drinks the sea

It is one quenching and one termination

('IF', 1-9).<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> Hughes, *Three Books*, 137.

For the poet concerned with environmental damage to the waterways, there is very little merit in evoking a fictional or even mythic river. But the river (real or not) has a symbolism outside of its more obvious associations. The real river (be it the Duddon or otherwise) to a degree embodies the poetic imagination, and, according to Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats',<sup>403</sup> poetry itself:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
 In the valley of its saying where executives  
 Would never want to tamper; it flows south  
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
 A way of happening, a mouth.

(40-5)

The 'mouth' implies that the poem and the dead poet live through his work and in the tongue of the speaker, but it also completes the river metaphor by using the word in terms of where the river meets the sea. This echoes Wordsworth's use of a similar image in sonnet thirty-three of 'The River Duddon' where the soul can 'mingle with Eternity' in the sea. But like Auden's lines, Wordsworth's do not have an immediate clarity. Wordsworth is suggesting that the sea is metaphorical for the end of life's 'journey', and the soul/river is free of its course; it can '*be*' without limit or restriction. But the

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<sup>403</sup> W.H. Auden, Selected Poems, 80.

'mingle with Eternity' actually concludes an evocation for the poet/wanderer persona to embrace their craft:

...lowly is the mast  
 That rises here, and humbly spread, the sail;  
 While, less disturbed than in the narrow Vale  
 Through which with strange vicissitudes he passed,  
 The Wanderer seeks that receptacle vast  
 Where all his unambitious functions fail.  
 And may thy Poet, cloud-born Stream be free –  
 The sweets of earth contentedly resigned,  
 And each tumultuous working left behind  
 At seemly distance – to advance like Thee;  
 Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind  
 And soul, to mingle with Eternity!

(XXXIII, 3-14)

It is an urge to continue through total immersion in one's skill. The poet/wanderer must transcend the 'unambitious functions' of the body physical, and strip themselves of their preconceptions. With the 'tumultuous working' left behind, then the poet/wanderer is truly free to advance with their poetry and their thought, prepared as they are with a peace of mind, heart and soul, there to perhaps 'mingle' with the great poets who have already achieved this, and in doing so, overcome death, and attain immortality.

This is perhaps the central idea in the much anthologised Hughes poem, 'Go Fishing',<sup>404</sup> which commands:

Join water, wade in underbeing  
 Let brain mist into moist earth  
 Ghost loosen away downstream  
 Gulp river and gravity

Lose words  
 Cease

(1-5)

In his Blakean/Taoist reading of River, Scigaj links this immersion to Eastern philosophy:

'Go Fishing' presents Chuang Tzu's advice of 'losing', of divesting oneself of the analytical intellect in order to cultivate the immediacy of first-hand experience. Hughes finds immersion in the suchness of precognitive, concrete experience at once refreshing, healing, and necessary. To be 'supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles' in 'Go Fishing,' one must 'Let brain mist into moist earth' and be 'dissolved in earth-wave.' To grasp the mind's creative flow one must 'Lose words / Cease.'<sup>405</sup>

In 'A Cormorant',<sup>406</sup> a poem which appears to retell 'The Hawk in the Rain', Hughes (or his persona) remarks at the Cormorant's ability to dissolve itself 'into fish' in order to catch its prey whilst he is left 'high and dry', a 'deep-sea

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<sup>404</sup> Hughes, River, 42.

<sup>405</sup> Scigaj, Form and Imagination, 294.

<sup>406</sup> Hughes, River, 38.

diver in two inches of water' with his embarrassing, 'optimistic, awkward' equipment. But gone are these inhibitions in 'Go Fishing'. Now the poet/fisherman is a part of earth's wholeness, at one with the 'Eternity' of Wordsworth's poem, just as the cormorant and the hawk operate 'effortlessly at flight'. But as Wordsworth suggests, this eternity does not specifically apply to an everlasting afterlife; in this case, it is the attainment of a total consummation with the Earth so that from this vantage point, one can be attuned to all of nature's organic mechanisms which enable it to function - functions which would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Not only is eternity a seemingly *eternal* process of decomposition and renewal, but it is an unquantifiable vastness which challenges, in Wordsworth's idiom, the poet/wanderer to contemplate their own position within this. In Hughes's poem, such is this 'heaven on earth' that a return to the world from which the poet/fisherman has escaped, is a laboured process:

Crawl out over roots, new and nameless  
 Search for face, harden into limbs

Let the world come back, like a white hospital  
 Busy with urgency words

Try to speak and nearly succeed  
 Heal into time and other people

(22-27)

Paul Bentley writes of 'Go Fishing':

...the poem reads like a series of notes, as if anything more structured would necessarily foreclose the experience, which is essentially one of *loss*: “Become translucent – one untangling drift...*nameless*”. The ego reconstitutes itself in relation to *other* people, to a conceptual world that by the end of the poem seems disturbing: “like a white hospital / Busy with urgency words”.<sup>407</sup>

If the poem is about loss, then it bears an elegiac quality disguised by the clever metaphor of becoming utterly absorbed in fishing. ‘Busy with urgency words’ not only reads as a play on ‘emergency wards’, it also repeats the ‘*busy* griefs’ of Auden’s elegy for Yeats.<sup>408</sup> To use Auden’s line, the poet/fisherman has had to leave the ‘ranches of isolation’ behind him as he re-emerges into the hectic modern world. ‘Go Fishing’ repeats the river metaphor that Wordsworth used to encourage the poet/wanderer to become at one with their subject. Of course, Hughes’s poem is as much about writing poetry as it is about fishing; a skill which requires a total engrossment, so that the poet/fisherman may renew their ability, a process which reflects nature’s own capacity to decompose, in order to be reinvigorated. This theme is carried over in the concluding sonnet of ‘The River Duddon’, sonnet thirty-four, subtitled ‘After-thought’:

I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,

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<sup>407</sup> Bentley, *Language, Illusion and Beyond*, 114.

<sup>408</sup> It may be that ‘urgency words’ replicates the sound of ‘emergency wards’, but if Hughes is in fact leaving out a comma after ‘urgency’, then the meaning of the lines changes slightly.

As being past away – Vain sympathies!  
 For, backward, Duddon! As I cast my eyes,  
 I see what was, and is, and will abide;  
 Still glides the stream, and shall forever glide;  
 The Form remains, the function never dies;  
 Whilst we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,  
 We Men, who in our mourn of youth defied  
 The elements, must vanish; - be it so!  
 Enough, if something from our hands have power  
 To live, and act, and serve the future hour;  
 And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,  
 Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent dower,  
 We feel that we are greater than we know.<sup>409</sup>

(XXXIV, 1-14)

This verse endorses the prior plea of sonnet thirty-three, for the poet/wanderer to redouble their efforts. Here, however, is a more universal appeal, not only to the poet/wanderer, but to the reader as well. At his vantage point in the 'After-thought', Wordsworth/his persona can see in the waters of this metaphor for life, 'what was, what is, and will abide'. The stream and life 'shall forever glide', so we should, instead of gloomily mourning the loss of youth, rather embrace 'the future hour' as we progress towards 'the silent tomb' aided and abetted by the knowledge that faith in a 'transcendent dower' will bring one the reward of a heavenly afterlife; this investment in faith should make our present lives 'greater than we know'.

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<sup>409</sup> Wordsworth, *Collected Poetry*, 384.

Wordsworth presents a conflicting argument in the final two sonnets of 'The River Duddon': one sonnet appeals to an eternity achievable through being dedicated to one's art, while the other offers eternity as being attainable through one's devotion to religious faith. Sonnet thirty-three reads like early Wordsworth, with an absolute conviction about the healing and intellectual powers brought about by poetry. The 'After-thought' reads as it is entitled. It reads like later Wordsworth, conservative and more cautious, now placing hope of his own perpetuity in the hands of the Christian God rather than his own poetry. In doing so, he satisfies his loyalties to poetry on the one hand, and his 'duty' to religious belief on the other.

Though a conflation of real rivers features centrally in Hughes's *River*, the themes and ideas are as individual as those featured in 'The River Duddon', and do themselves offer confictions. *River*'s 'salmon poems'<sup>410</sup> conform with Hughes's continued investigation into the conflict between vitality and death. Whereas in 'Salmon Eggs',<sup>411</sup> 'the river's whorls' echo the salmon's own dictum that '*only birth matters*', the river of 'An August Salmon'<sup>412</sup> is witness to the salmon's 'ghoul decor' as it

Sinks to the bed

Of his wedding cell, the coma waiting

For execution and death

In the skirts of his bride.

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<sup>410</sup> By the term 'salmon poems', I refer to the following: 'Salmon Eggs', 'An August Salmon', 'September Salmon', 'October Salmon'.

<sup>411</sup> Hughes, *River*, 120.

<sup>412</sup> Hughes, *River*, 64.



(46-49)

The salmon poems have a number of thematic similarities, recurring images, and motifs which are elegiac in tone. Hughes reiterates that all the salmon's actions are worked in the shadow of death; in a word, the salmon is fated.

From the moment they hatch, 'They curve away deathwards' ('Salmon Eggs', 5) and are 'Waiting for time to run out' ('An August Salmon', 8). The salmon 'serves his descendants' ('September Salmon',<sup>413</sup> 7) with 'the clock of love and death in his body.' ('August Salmon', 19). But it is River's most explicit elegy, 'October Salmon',<sup>414</sup> which most effectively presents the salmon's fate:

Death has already dressed him  
 In her clownish regimentals, her badges and decorations,  
 Mapping the completion of his service

(26-28)

...

Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg.  
 This chamber of horrors is also his home.  
 He was probably hatched in this very pool.

(50-52)

...

All this, too, is stitched into the torn richness,  
 The epic poise  
 That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom,  
 so patient

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<sup>413</sup> Hughes, River, 98.

<sup>414</sup> Hughes, River, 110.

In the machinery of heaven.

(58-62)

'September Salmon' has the persona imagining how the salmon sees its final moments as 'He is becoming a god':

At the right angle of sun  
 You can see the floor of his chapel.  
 There he sways at the altar –  
 A soul  
 Hovering in the incantation and the incense.

Over his sky skeeters traffic, god-like and double-jointed.  
 He lifts  
 To the molten palate of the mercurial light  
 And adds his daub.

(16-24)

It is a moving evocation. The tone is remote from the usual elegiac norms, for the salmon's passing is not bewailed; instead Hughes implies great respect for the salmon who plays its part in the vitality/death processes of nature with blind obedience and determination. He has been rewarded for his devotion to his instinct. But the salmon does not desire eternal life, rather eternal rest. It is as if it yearns to be a part of the natural fabric which bore it, to decompose and literally become a part of the environment. The 'palate' acts as an emblem of creative potential; his death, a 'daub' on the river's surface is a part of an unfinished and continually evolving painting that is the natural world.

Hughes sees a beauty in the salmon's utilitarian 'only birth matters' dogma. Taking his cue from nature's *modus operandi*, his descriptions like those in Moortown Elegies are unsparing, yet tender and appreciative. It is a necessary detachment which gives the poems their power. The salmon of 'September Salmon',

...ignores the weir's wrangle. Ignores  
 The parochial down-drag  
 Of the pool's diphthong. Ignores  
 Festivals of insect fluorescence

(3-6)

It simply drives at getting back to its breeding ground in order to procreate. The salmon embodies nature's persistence and desire to continue living. If the river is a good metaphor for life, then the need to live sustains the importance of the regenerative qualities of the elegy.

The combination of the river and the poetry of mourning are by no means consigned to elegies of the past. Andrew Motion uses this combination in 'Fresh Water',<sup>415</sup> an elegy for Ruth Haddon, who died in the *Marchioness* disaster of 1989. The poem follows the Thames from its source near Cirencester, to central London in the region of Tower Bridge. Motion recounts instances of his own life where he has encountered the river, from a boy of 'not twenty yet' to a man with children of his own; with each encounter with the river, there is a different story to be told. Part four, the

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<sup>415</sup> Motion, Salt Water, 3.

climactic part of the poem, has one of Motion's children asking if people drown in the river. His thoughts turn to Ruth Haddon at this point, and he recalls having met a survivor of the disaster:

[He] fumbled his way out along the flooded corridor, his shoes  
 and clothes miraculously slipping off him, so that when he at  
 last  
 burst into the air he felt he was a baby again  
 and knew nothing, was unable to help himself, aghast.  
 (IV, 22-6)

This memory causes the theme of the poem to turn back on itself. Earlier in part four, Motion explains how 'the river starts many miles / inland / and changes and grows, changes and grows, until it arrives / here' (IV, 6-9). This is mirrored in the changing landscape ('this was a / brewery // and that was a warehouse' (IV, 4-6)), but change and growth are effectively manifestos for the poem as a whole. But Motion seems to be playing on this metaphor for life of growing and changing; the story of the man escaping the disaster naked and baby-like reverses the metaphor and reverses the process of aging as if to rebuke the assumption that death affects primarily the elderly. In doing so, the man has been 'reborn'. The elegy concludes with 'Ruth swimming back upstream, her red velvet party / dress / flickering round her heels' (IV, 37-8), swimming past all the instances and encounters with the Thames which Motion has detailed in the elegy until this point:

...she has passed the ponderous diver at Folly Bridge  
 and the reed-forests at Lechdale, accelerating beneath bridges  
   and willow branches,  
 slinking easily among the plastic wrecks and weedy trolleys,  
 speeding and shrinking and slivering until she is finally sliding  
   uphill  
 over bright green grass and into the small wet mouth of the  
   earth,  
 where she vanishes.

(IV, 41-9)

Wordsworth's line, 'For, backward, Duddon! As I cast my eyes' in the 'After-thought' of 'The River Duddon', and the final verse of Motion's elegy bear a similarity. There is a defiance of mortality by looking, and indeed, swimming upstream to the very source of the river. Haddon's disappearance at the source of the river, a place associated with birth and beginnings, implies that she is not lost among the tumult of dead souls at sea, as has been stressed by her journey up-river. By occupying a position at the river's source, she remains a part of the Thames's waters, forever living in the river and running through Motion's memory whenever he thinks of, or makes some form of contact with, the Thames. This sentiment is in line with Tennyson's reflections on Hallam:

Thy voice is on the rolling air;  
     I hear thee where the waters run;  
     Thou standest in the rising sun,  
 And in the setting thou art fair.

...  
 Far off thou art, but ever nigh;  
     I have thee still, and I rejoice;  
     I prosper, circled with thy voice;  
 I shall not lose thee tho' I die.

(CXXX, 1-4/13-16)

The 'waters' in this case act as a means of communication rather than segregation between the quick and the dead.

Like Motion, Hughes uses an apparently drowning woman as his muse in 'Japanese River Tales' where she is 'hurrying / To [a] tryst' (I, 3-4) when she falls into the 'tattered curtains / Of the river's hovel, and plunges into his grasping bed' (I, 15-6) where she drowns. In this case, Hughes identifies the river as masculine. But the drowned woman is transfigured in part two of the poem, and as a result, she usurps the male river and turns it into 'a gutter of death' (II, 24) before, finally, 'she flies' and ascends 'Through the shatter of space and / Out of being' (II, 28-9). Like Ruth Haddon in Motion's elegy, the transcendent woman of 'Japanese River Tales' disappears into a nothingness, an inexplicable otherworld shut off from our own, but clearly in some way connected to the more esoteric elements of the river. By applying this mythical rationale to the river, Hughes also attempts to comprehend the duality of the river's fatal attraction; this is a metaphor extended throughout the River sequence and is often accompanied by the image of a figurative black-widow. We see in Hughes's 'Low Water' that the river is at the

beginning of creation: 'You stand under leaves, your feet in the shallows. / She eyes you steadily from the beginning of the world.' (17-8) Just as Hughes's river relates femininity to birth and beginnings, so Motion, in having Haddon disappear at the source of the Thames, signifies the idea that the river continually embellishes itself. The disappearance of these women at the river's source slightly explains the absence which they inhabit; it is a place to renew the spirit and propagate life in the waters issued from the source, waters which are also laced with death as they flow their course and accumulate death in all its forms and guises.

Whilst the poems of River depict the river as having an awareness, if not an outright guilty hand in propagating death, the poem 'Torridge'<sup>416</sup> suggests that the river itself is unaware of mortality: 'She who has not once tasted death'. Conversely, as Scigaj observes, the river of 'Last Night'<sup>417</sup> has the persona wading into a river and feeling 'how it slimes, its old roots and holes, and its "blood-dark, old blood-dark" evil reminds [Hughes/his persona] of the decay in all organic matter'.<sup>418</sup> Scigaj continues:

The feel of this river is like being in a sick-bed or a grave, and repetitions of the words 'dark' and 'evil' throughout the poem intensify this feeling. So do the images of the toxic hemlock, and of the alder and oak, trees associated with the sacrificial heroes Bran and Hercules. Images of oaks and alders similarly appear in 'August Evening' to convey the first inklings of

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<sup>416</sup> Hughes, River, 118.

<sup>417</sup> Hughes, River, 76.

<sup>418</sup> Scigaj, Form and Imagination, 303.

deathly winter, after summer fires and 'the barley disaster' have spent their force and left the land charred and bare. The river's last 'ghostly trail of smoke' completes an extended metaphor of summer's sacrificial blaze having reached its end, leaving the fumes of mortality. In these apparently easeful riverscapes the extended metaphors reveal decay, the fate of all participants in nature's seasonal cycle.<sup>419</sup>

Why should the river of 'Torrige' not have once tasted death? For Hughes, rivers are 'Primitive, radical / Engine[s] of earth's renewal' ('Four March Watercolours', II, 15-6) which rid themselves 'Of all dead ends [with] an all-out evacuation / To the sea' ('Four March Watercolours', II, 18-9). Lines from 'The Vintage of the River is Unending'<sup>420</sup> depict the river as an 'Unending rover' (7) which 'Swells from the press / To gladden men.' (8-9) But it is the lines from part four of 'Four March Watercolours'<sup>421</sup> which truly define the regenerative capabilities of the river: 'The river-epic / Rehearses itself. Embellishes afresh and afresh / Each detail.' (IV, 1-3) Thus, the likes of Haddon, and others who have drowned in the river's waters are a part of its very constitution, which means they are continually renewed in the mind of the poets who remember them. Perhaps this explains why the Torridge has not tasted death, because it is constantly renewing itself. Whether it is irony, the river's arrogance, or its own determined maxim, the river, as Hughes

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<sup>419</sup> Scigaj, *Form and Imagination*, 303-4.

<sup>420</sup> Hughes, *River*, 66.

<sup>421</sup> Hughes, *River*, 20.



writes of it, 'is a god and inviolable. / Immortal. And will wash itself of all deaths' ('River',<sup>422</sup> 17-8).

Though the river is capable of washing itself of deaths, it is seemingly incapable of washing itself of its own death. In 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning',<sup>423</sup> Hughes indicates that he or his poetic persona is an observer who has silently stolen into another world; he has broken in, trying to minimise his impact and presence on an alien environment. The intent is to fish for trout illegally. Hughes portrays the countryside as a place where nature witnesses every action, no matter how slight: 'this is no wilderness you can just rip into,' (12) because 'Every grain of soil [is] of known lineage, well connected.' (14) This repeats the message from Remains of Elmet, where on the moors, one can do nothing casual, for all human activity is under the scrutiny of the natural world. The sensitivity and alertness of nature in Hughes's vivid lines make any environmental damage inflicted upon it much more acute; which is why, in '1984: on "The Tarka Trail"',<sup>424</sup> the 'tale of the dying river' (I, 34) is deeply resonant. The assumption that with all the water present, the river will clean itself does not work here:

The tale of a dying river  
Does not end where you stand with the visitors  
At a sickbed, feeling the usual  
Nothing more than mangled helplessness.

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<sup>422</sup> Hughes, River, 74.

<sup>423</sup> Hughes, Three Books, 143.

<sup>424</sup> Hughes, Three Books, 118.

You cannot leave this hospital because  
 Peter, the good corn farmer, with his three plus  
 Tons of quality grain to the acre (behind him  
 The Min. of Ag. and Fish.'s hard guarantee  
 Which is the hired assurance of hired science)  
 Heaps the poisons into you too.

(I, 34-43)

From once being 'Alive and malevolent' ('Stealing Trout...' 50), the river of  
 '1984...' has become

Tresses of some vile stuff  
 That disintegrates to a slime as you touch it  
 Leaving your fingers fouled with a stink of diesel.

The river's gluttoned – a boom of plenty for algae.  
 A festering olla podrida, poured slowly.  
 Surfactants, ammonia, phosphates – the whole banquet  
 Flushed in by sporadic thunderbursts  
 But never a flood enough to scour a sewer,  
 Never enough to resurrect a river.

(I, 5-13)

...

'God! The river's dead! Oh God!'

(I, 31)

With his need for a heightened verisimilitude in his poems, Hughes's  
 descriptions are, again, forthright and unsparing. The plight of the river is  
 linked directly to our own domestic lives so as to emphasise the significance  
 of the pollution:

Pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, the grand slam –  
 Each time twenty gallons to the acre  
 Into you dish, with top-ups. And slug pellets  
 A bonus, with the rest, into your cup  
 (Via the lifeless ditch – meaning your tap).

(I, 61-65)

'The death-rags that she washes and washes are ours' (II, 40) the poem concludes. The pollution of the rivers and streams arises from their other-worldliness. It is a world which man can use, but literally not inhabit, thus the process of 'mourning' the river's dilapidation seems to be annulled because of this psychological/physical distance. It is because of this distance that man feels it excusable to dispose of silage and miscellaneous chemicals in rivers and streams. 'The fundamental guiding ideas of our Western Civilization' Hughes writes, 'are against conservation...The story of the mind exiled from nature is the story of western Man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute for the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost.'<sup>425</sup>

The maxim of 'River', for nature to survive at any cost, may seem arrogant in light of the very real ecological threats to its existence, but there remains a sense in which the waters, in washing themselves of all deaths, may offer consolation. In re-examining 'The Ruined Cottage', one can see that

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<sup>425</sup> Hughes, Winter Pollen, 129.

Wordsworth conveys the consolation which can be found in the natural world. Initially, the process of mourning is brought about by the common recognition of death, safe in the knowledge that it is a fate shared by all:

We die, my friend,  
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved  
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth  
Dies with him, or is changed, and very soon  
Even of the good no memorial is left.

(68-72)

Then, Wordsworth specifies how nature continually emits its healing powers, though these are seldom heard other than through the medium of poetry:

The Poets, in their elegies and songs  
Lamenting the departed, call the groves,  
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,  
And senseless rock – nor idly, for they speak  
In these their invocations with a voice  
Obedient to the strong creative power  
Of human passion. Sympathies these are  
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,  
They steal upon the meditative mind  
And grow with thought.

(73-82)

It is ironic that Wordsworth's poem of rural hardship and tragedy evokes a distinctly pastoral philosophy. Whatever the effect of this, Wordsworth underlines the importance of nature to poetry (specifically the elegy), but also

how it is the poet's responsibility to be attuned to these natural frequencies so that he may relay them to the reader, and to anyone who will listen. Nature's songs seem to come into the range of our hearing only as we die or mourn a death. But who better to consult on life and death than nature itself, whose very processes are a continuous cycle of decomposition and renewal, a process made manifest by the river. But Wordsworth and Hughes know that if we rupture this connection with nature's healing powers, then one is left bereft. Hughes writes, 'Streams, rivers, ponds, lakes *without fish* communicate to me one of the ultimate horrors – the poisoning of the wells, death at the source of all that is meant by water.'<sup>426</sup> Similarly, Wordsworth writes:

Beside yon spring I stood,  
 And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
 One sadness, they and I. For them a bond  
 Of brotherhood is broken; time has been  
 When every day the touch of human hand  
 Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered  
 To human comfort. When I stopped to drink  
 A spider's web hung to the water's edge,  
 And on the wet and slimy footstone lay  
 The useless fragment of a wooden bowl.  
 It moved my very heart.

(82-92)

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<sup>426</sup> Hughes, Three Books, 183-4.

The persona's heart is not just moved by the relic of something which once *was*, something which once served a purpose. It points to a larger melancholy; as we move away from nature towards (in the case of Robert in this poem) war and industry, then we are abandoning our natural roots which nourish, support and console us, just as we do them.



Like a series of divergent streams, the many poems and poets cited above converge to provide influences for Hughes, to enrich symbols in his work, or to contrast with his sequence altogether. But more specifically, this chapter has attempted to prove that Hughes, whilst inheriting an elegiac tradition of using the river as a symbol in laments is, once again, remodelling such symbols in order to lend a new emphasis to their meaning. Certainly, in River, this symbol is evocative, alive, and even wild. It is also reclusive, uncertain and endangered. The chapter has considered how the river operates as a metaphor and has investigated the implications of the 'river as a metaphor-for-life' analogy. The emphasis placed on Wordsworth's 'The River Duddon' is manifold; though its appearance is clearly regimented with the use of individually numbered sonnets, it pre-empts the use of the sequence which Hughes employs with *River*. Its sequential order is also structured by the river as a 'metaphor-for-life'. One cannot discount the influence of nature on both poets, which is considerable, but how does each poet use the river to explore their world view? Certainly, both call for the poet / reader / wanderer to

reject preconceptions and assumed knowledge in favour of a life in close proximity to nature in order to renew their poetry, spirit, and to escape the mechanised world. Here, however, there is a divergence; Hughes anticipates that to 'wade in underbeing' is to wash ourselves of modern day trappings which pollute our contact with the energies of nature capable of renewal. Wordsworth's view, however, is conservatively philosophical: we should consider and be positive about whom and where we are, and keep faith in a 'transcendent dower' to deliver us.

Hughes's approach appears to be in greater contact with the nature of the river, which is why the salmon is a clear choice for him as a symbol of nature's will to continue, thrive and regenerate, whatever the cost. He is not suggesting that one should take after the salmon, it is subdued to its instinct, but there is the suggestion that one should take heed of this natural lesson. The capability to understand and to appreciate nature's mechanisms is one step closer to reconciling the self with the world it inhabits. In doing so, death and consolation need not be at an uncomfortable remove, but made more approachable with their close proximity to the processes of decomposition/renewal at work in nature, and by turns, the elegy.

Like River, Alice Oswald's recently published Dart uses a river to connect the disparate individuals and communities who have lived, worked and died along the Dart's course. She has also used historic and mythic voices in a sequence which she hopes to be a 'sound-map of the river, a songline

from the source to the sea...All voices should be read as the river's mutterings.<sup>427</sup> The presence of the river, as in Hughes's poems, is strongly felt, perhaps no more so than in the form of the poem which appears to mimic the river's eventful course. True to form, River continues Hughes's effort to present his unfalsified dream of language in the elegy. But as Felicity Currie asks, 'Is it ever possible for words to approximate to the objects, emotions, actions or states of being they are supposed to designate? Or is there inevitably a distance between the names we choose to signal the meaning of the universe we are in, and the mysterious selfhood so irreducibly other outside our world?'<sup>428</sup> Like Remains of Elmet, River in its first edition is accompanied by a series of photographs. However, as Bentley writes, 'the relationship between [the] poems and Peter Keen's photographs...seems more incidental.'<sup>429</sup> Roberts agrees with this view:

This collaboration is less successful [than Remains of Elmet]...Keen's colour photos...connect with the poems only on the most superficial level. Indeed there is never a direct connection between an individual poem and its accompanying photograph. It is evident that none of the poems was inspired by the photos, and their presence on the opposite page is, more often than not, a distraction.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Oswald, Preface, Dart.

<sup>428</sup> Felicity Currie, 'Poet as Maker: Reflections on Ted Hughes's 'To Paint a Water-Lily',' Critical Quarterly, Winter 1979, 43.

<sup>429</sup> Bentley, Language, Illusion & Beyond, 107.

<sup>430</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 140.



The supposedly superfluous presence of the photographs would account for the fact that they were not reprinted alongside Hughes's subsequent revision of River as a part of Three Books. In River, however, the poems virtually work alone to achieve Hughes's vision of his unfalsified dream, and, as Currie suggests, 'Nature has 'tutored' Hughes, but he has also, in the Shakespearean/Sidney sense, 'tutored' nature.'<sup>431</sup>

What can be learned by situating Hughes among other poets who have used the river as a symbol or muse in their verse? We have seen how Hughes radically reworks the conventions of elegy, both reaching back to some of its foundational generic properties, but re-presenting these in some new and startlingly complex ways, but this study of River also shows how he connects with other poets in a way which enhances his own verse. River's connection to the elegy at large has therefore been established. Following Hughes's example, I have concentrated on this one element and drawn meaning to it and extracted meaning from it in order to trace patterns of consolation, to expose the mechanics of the cyclical process of decomposition and renewal, and to establish an effective reading of some of Hughes's most impenetrable poems.




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<sup>431</sup> Currie, 'Poet as Maker,' Critical Quarterly, 49.

Chapter Six:  
Nobody Else Remembers

'My book Birthday Letters is a gathering of occasions on which I tried to open direct, private, inner contact with my first wife – not thinking to make a poem, thinking mainly to evoke her presence myself, and to feel her there listening. Except for a handful, I never thought of publishing these pieces until this last year – when quite suddenly I realised I had to publish them, no matter what the consequences.'<sup>432</sup>



In 'Fidelity',<sup>433</sup> Hughes recounts how he had to turn down the advances of a promiscuous flatmate who 'Did all she could to get me inside her' whilst he was beginning his relationship with Sylvia Plath:

And you will never know what a battle  
I fought to keep the meaning of my words  
Solid with the world we were making.

(55-7)

These lines highlight the lifelong battle of words and meaning which Hughes had to fight in the wake of Plath's suicide. Birthday Letters is an encryption of classical mythology, personal mythology, love, death and a myriad of intimacies and experiences locked inside eighty-eight poems. When it was published, Birthday Letters was the *aura popularis* for those wishing to confirm or confound criticism of Hughes. Those wishing to research this volume of poetry soon discover that aside from reviews there is a great shortfall of critical works about this bestseller; at worse, these have been

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<sup>432</sup> Ted Hughes quoted in Wagner, Ariel's Gift, 22.

<sup>433</sup> Hughes, Birthday Letters, 28.

substituted with speculative biographies which capitalise on the infamous Plath-Hughes legend. Erica Wagner's Ariel's Gift is probably one of the more authoritative commentaries on Birthday Letters; the biography is drawn out of the poems instead of clumsily air-brushed over them. One cannot remove biography from the sequence; however, it should not always override critical engagement with the poems.

When reviewing Birthday Letters, Anthony Julius wrote that 'this is love poetry...[which continues the] dialogue within poetry between the poet and his predecessors, the individual talent and tradition'.<sup>434</sup> It is not an unnatural assumption to consider Birthday Letters as a sequence of 'unusual' love poems, but they are perhaps more accurately described as elegies. Julius correctly asserts the dichotomy between individual talent and tradition; this is what Hughes brings to Birthday Letters. He has participated in the dialogue between tradition and innovation and has already reconstituted the elegy throughout his poetic career since The Hawk in the Rain. But not all are convinced. Michael Hofmann has 'one serious reservation' about Hughes's style:

Time and time again, he offers up the machinery of doom, whether it's Ouija sessions, an offended gypsy, a dream, an illness, Otto, poetry. There's a tense – the opposite of the future-perfect, if you like, the posthumous future – where the poems like to take you, the tense of 'I had no idea,' of 'if only

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<sup>434</sup> Anthony Julius, 'New Lost Land,' Poetry Review 88 (1998) 80.

I'd known then what I know now,' the tense of dramatic irony... This wears out.<sup>435</sup>

Whether one regards Hughes's self-reproach as wearisome or not, one must certainly appreciate that Birthday Letters betrays twenty-five years of conscience wrestling and accumulated grief. Hofmann's 'machinery of doom' is rather an appropriate analogy, for whilst Hughes rejects gods and muses in the traditional elegiac sense, he calls upon them to illustrate his own circumstances. The elegies of Birthday Letters are preoccupied with how, in hindsight, Hughes sees that his marriage to Plath was doomed. This is not a means of temporary consolation for Hughes or mere elegiac convention, it is a steadfast conviction. For these reasons, one can immediately link Birthday Letters to the regretful tone of Hardy's 'Poems of 1912-13'.<sup>436</sup> Like Hardy, Hughes recognises that one only notices fate once it has struck; both his hindsight and the poems provide him with indicators of this inevitability.<sup>437</sup> Surely, the nature of fate could not have been far from Hughes's mind having published his Tales from Ovid the year before Birthday Letters.

This volume represents a shift from the mourning of national issues as seen in Remains of Elmet and Moortown Elegies, to an intimate, deeply personal subject matter. Hughes handles the poems in such a way as to make

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<sup>435</sup> Michael Hofmann, 'Stare at the Monster,' Poetry 183 (2004): 288.

<sup>436</sup> Hardy, The Complete Poems, 338-58.

<sup>437</sup> This style is not dissimilar to that used in 'Six Young Men' (Chapter One), a method of foreclosure and restraint ebbing and flowing throughout the verse. See Sacks, The English Elegy, 55.

them appear distanced from elegies in the conventional sense despite employing elegiac conventions on many occasions. Notably, for the first time, he replaces the poetic persona with the first person singular and pronouns representing Plath and himself. David Kennedy notes that 'contemporary poetry is dominated by the speaking 'I'... [it is] a distinctly contemporary phenomenon.'<sup>438</sup> He continues:

The dominance of the speaking 'I' converges with the elegiac because, as Adrian Kear argues in a study of the public mourning of Princess Diana, identity is itself 'a melancholic structure in that, in order to maintain subjective consistency and illusory integrity, the ego has to repudiate or foreclose those identifications that enabled it to come into being.' The self asserts itself by holding loss within itself.<sup>439</sup>

The Birthday Letters poems echo Douglas Dunn's Elegies,<sup>440</sup> which places the poet, rather than a projected image of the self, within the poem. The gods and tropes common to the pre-twentieth-century elegy, which Peter Sacks sees as 'designed not only to avert potential self-accusation but also to create the fictive addressees, substituting the pretence of temporary absence for the suspicion of non-existence or permanent neglect,'<sup>441</sup> are avoided. Hughes, like Hardy before him, is not looking for a fictive addressee. Instead, by using the first person singular, he is directly placing himself in the historical context of

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<sup>438</sup> Kennedy, Elegy, 8.

<sup>439</sup> Kennedy, Elegy, 8.

<sup>440</sup> Douglas Dunn, Elegies (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).

<sup>441</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 103.

the poem. The emotional weight of Hughes's experience is not deferred or deflected as it might be had he called upon a muse; he is not sidestepping his responsibilities, and in doing so, he aids his 'no falsifying dream' of elegiac presentation. This does not mean he concedes to the critics who believe he was directly responsible for Plath's death, rather he acknowledges his fallibilities. Such an acknowledgement can be found in a letter to Plath's mother: 'I don't ever want to be forgiven. I don't mean that I shall become a public shrine of mourning and remorse, I would sooner become the opposite. But if there is an eternity, I am damned to it.'<sup>442</sup>

It would be easy to speculate and to entertain conjecture about the 'truth' behind the poems, but this would not do justice to Hughes, Plath or the poems themselves. The poems deftly invoke the generic properties of elegy without in any way following them slavishly. Perhaps it is because they are written as 'letters' rather than formal elegies that they are not only strikingly original poems, but laments which acknowledge what is already known about the genre and, as the last major collection of elegiac verse, perpetuates questions about the future of the elegy itself.



Birthday Letters is very aware of its story; it is a poetic account of two literary lives. Many of Hughes's poems in this sequence explicitly acknowledge the fact that he reproduces a number of Plath's own titles in

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<sup>442</sup> Hughes, 'To Aurelia Plath,' 15 March 1963, Letters, 215.

order to respond, reinterpret or reappraise her own imaginings or instances. On several occasions the poems allude not only to the Hughes/Plath canon, but to their own individual influences, and especially in Plath's case, what she imagines a literary life *should* be like. How do the literary lives of Hughes and Plath function in the schematic of elegiac conventions? With elegiac epics like 'Lycidas' or 'Adonais' both Milton and Shelley are mourning poets and celebrating their lives in literature. Hughes's Birthday Letters follows suit, but with a peculiarly twentieth-century approach.

'Wuthering Heights'<sup>443</sup> makes explicit this elegiac approach as it recalls a walk over the Yorkshire Moors he made with Plath to Top Withins, 'a ruined farmhouse above Haworth and supposedly the site of Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, in the company of Hughes's Uncle Walter'.<sup>444</sup> The title for Hughes's poem is the same title Plath uses for a poem about the same experience and it is of course indebted to Emily Brontë's novel. The mourning in Hughes's 'Wuthering Heights' is two-fold; Hughes mourns Plath, who in turn, is mourning Emily Brontë. Because 'His mother's cousin / Inherited some Brontë soup dishes' (1-2), and because of his familiarity with the area, 'Walter was guide' (1). Hughes explains how his uncle, who usually regards writers as 'pathetic people', finds Plath's 'transatlantic elation' elating him. Walter imparts, 'A vintage of legends and gossip / About those poor lasses (the Brontë's)' (8-9). His musings foreshadow the myriad of myths, gossip and

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<sup>443</sup> Hughes, Birthday Letters, 59.

<sup>444</sup> Wagner, Ariel's Gift, 80-1.

legends which would follow in the wake of Plath's suicide. She, like Emily Brontë, would die prematurely.

Accordingly, Hughes stresses the parallels between the lives of Plath and Brontë. The moorland, described as 'Emily's private Eden' (15), also 'Lifted and opened its dark flower / for [Plath] too' (15-6). But whereas Hughes sees the area as strangely oppressive with its 'Dark redoubt' and 'Gamma rays and decomposing starlight' (27), he acknowledges Plath's expectations of the moors as presented in Brontë's novel: 'It was all / Novel and exhilarating' (22-3) for Plath in both senses of the word. Hughes appreciates the beauty of the area too, but he is aware of the harsh truth among the ruins of Withens: 'The centuries / Of door-bolted comfort finally amounted / To a forsaken quarry' (29-31) in a place where it is 'So hard / To imagine the life that had lit / Such a sodden, raw-stone cramp of refuge' (33-5).

In the third verse paragraph, Hughes directly addresses Plath:

You breathed it all in  
 With jealous, emulous sniffings. Weren't you  
 Twice as ambitious as Emily? Odd  
 To watch you, such a brisk pendant  
 Of your globe-circling aspirations,  
 Among those burned-out, worn-out remains  
 Of failed efforts, failed hopes –  
 Iron beliefs, iron necessities,  
 Iron bondage, already



Crumbling back to wild stone.

(52-61)

From elation, Plath turns to jealousy, a jealousy of Brontë's literary life. Hughes observes that this jealousy is absurd. 'Weren't you twice as ambitious as Emily?' seems to be a retrospective encouragement in light of her posthumous achievements, but it is uncomfortable because zealous ambition is often regarded as something which undoes an individual. Is the ambition to be successful in literature? Or is Hughes's statement darker? Given that Plath often used poetry to exorcise her own traumas and personal furies regarding her father, is her poetry caught in a double helix where poetry on one strand is coupled with what is an ultimately irreparable psychological instability on the other, a helix which leads only to destruction? She may have been twice as ambitious, but the premature nature of Plath's and Brontë's deaths is tragically the same. Her poetry, in Hughes's view, is fated to destroy her as much as her emotional condition. Plath's 'globe-circling aspirations' are not thwarted but tempered with disappointment. Like the walls of Top Withens, her aspirations are 'burned out...failed hopes', they are 'Iron beliefs, iron necessities...Crumbling back to the wild stone'.

This mournful tone becomes a direct elegiac remembrance of Plath:

You

Had all the liberties, having life.

The future had invested in you –

As you might say of a jewel

So brilliantly faceted, refracting  
 Every tint, where Emily had stared  
 Like a dying prisoner.

...

And your hope? Your huge  
 Mortgage of hope.

(66-72/77-8)

Hughes's feelings are relayed in a very straightforward manner. Plath had much to live for, but previous suicide attempts leave her indebted to death with a 'Mortgage of hope'. The landscape recognises Plath 'like that earlier one', Emily Brontë, as if in the guise of Plath, she had returned to the moor. The landscape is struck dumb and looks at Plath with 'empty eyes' as it takes 'idiot notice' of her. Hughes's account of Plath and the landscape in many of the Birthday Letters poems eschews a foreknowledge of Plath's early death. It is preparing her for it while she is alive: 'the stone / Reaching to touch your hand, found you real / And warm, and lucent' (81-3).

The poem concludes with a concession on Hughes's part. He imagines,

...maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words,  
 Peered from the broken mullions  
 And was stilled. Or was suddenly aflame  
 With the scorch of doubled envy. Only  
 Gradually quenched in understanding.

(84-8)

The ghost, presumably that of Emily Brontë, is 'scorched with double envy', which might perversely please Plath who was 'Twice as ambitious as Emily'. This concession is uneasy, because Plath's own fate has scorched Hughes's memory, his Birthday Letters poems only gradually aid in an understanding of Plath herself.

With 'Wuthering Heights', Hughes recognises the beginnings of Plath's realisation that a literary life is not always a romantic, opulent career. It is at odds with a previous poem, 'Your Paris',<sup>445</sup> where Plath wilfully ignores any interruption to her romantic ideal, but her brief life as a poet is surrounded by images and echoes of death. Here, the newly-wed Hughes and Plath on their honeymoon, which began in Paris. The opening of the poem immediately contrasts their opinions of the city. 'Your Paris, I thought, was American', Hughes begins:

Through frame after frame,  
Street after street, of Impressionist paintings,  
Under the chestnut shades of Hemingway,  
Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein...

(5-8)

His own Paris is not a vision of writers and artisans:

I kept my Paris from you. My Paris  
Was only just not German. The capital  
Of the Occupation and old nightmare.

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<sup>445</sup> Hughes, Birthday Letters, 36.

I read each bullet scar in the Quai stonework  
 With an eerie familiar feeling...

(9-13)

Where Plath reads American novelists into her surroundings, Hughes reads the recent history of the city by the scars left behind from an occupation and a war, which at the time of their honeymoon, was by no means a distant memory. He sees 'the waiter's eyes / Clogged with dregs of betrayal, reprisal, hatred' (26-7) and smells 'The stink of fear still hanging in the wardrobes' (30). Hughes relates the war to Plath even though she does not seem to register it herself: 'your ecstasies ricocheted / Off walls patched and scabbed with posters' (19-20). Plath's excitement clouds her recognition of the immediate history of the city patched up by the posters. This also refers to Plath's own psychological scars which are hidden behind her outward ecstasy; Hughes looks behind her facade and draws upon the images of war which were particular to his vision of Paris and interweaves them with his appreciation of Plath:

The underground, your hide-out,  
 That chamber, where you still hung waiting  
 For your torturer  
 To remember his amusement. Those walls,  
 Raggy with posters, were your own flayed skin –

(50-4)

But Plath's lust for a literary life rejects this; for her,

all that

Was the anecdotal aesthetic touch  
 On Picasso's portrait  
 Of Apollinaire, with its proleptic  
 Marker for the bullet.

(36-40)

Hughes, however, knows that beneath the 'raggy' posters, Plath's Paris is a far cry from the novels of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. He reverts to the opening gambit of the poem:

Your Paris  
 Was a desk in a *pension*  
 Where your letters  
 Waited for him unopened. Was a labyrinth  
 Where you still hurtled, scattering tears.  
 Was a dream where you could not  
 Wake or find the exit or  
 The Minotaur to put a blessed end  
 To the torment.

(67-75)

The 'him' is Plath's former lover, Richard Sassoon, whom Plath, prior to beginning a romance with Hughes, went to Paris to find, only to return to Cambridge disappointed and inconsolably upset. Her memory of Paris is a personal history, a city marked with her own 'stray, historic bullet'. Hughes likens himself to 'a guide dog' who is 'happy to protect' Plath from her

'agitation and...stone hours / ...Loyal to correct [her] stumblings' (79-81).

Though Plath is happy to envisage a romantic writer's life, she does not acknowledge that of the troubled writer or poet, a category by which history would best remember her. Perhaps Walter's opinions on writers makes sense here, long before the words are placed in 'Wuthering Heights': 'Writers were pathetic people. Hiding from it / And making it up' (4-5).

The frustrations of a literary life are unmasked in 'The Minotaur'.<sup>446</sup>

Plath, 'Demented by [Hughes] being / Twenty minutes late for baby-minding' (7-8), smashes a mahogany table-top which had been Hughes's mother's 'heirloom sideboard – Mapped with the scars of my whole life' (3-4). Wagner writes, 'Hughes's reaction to her violence, [thought] sarcastic [and] critical, is truer than he knew at the time and his words now have a terrible resonance'<sup>447</sup>:

'Marvellous!' I shouted, 'Go on,

Smash it into kindling.

That's the stuff you're keeping out of your poems!

(9-11)

Hughes uses the Minotaur as an emblem of Plath's tormented creative process. Like her mythological counterpart she is part human, but she is also part beast. It is the conflict between these two halves which create her poems – but they are also the means of her own destruction. Hughes tenders in 'Your

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<sup>446</sup> Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, 120.

<sup>447</sup> Wagner, *Ariel's Gift*, 130.

Paris' that Plath might find a Minotaur in the labyrinthine streets of Paris to 'put a blessed end / to the torment.' (74-5) It is the violence of Plath's verse which made uncomfortable reading for established poets. Hughes recalls an incident in 'The Literary Life'<sup>448</sup> where Plath sent Marianne Moore copies of some of her poems,

Everything about them –  
 The ghost gloom, the constriction,  
 The bell-jar air-conditioning – made her gasp  
 For oxygen and cheer.

(17-20)

Moore's distaste for Plath's verse was, according to the poem, dismissive and scathing:

She sent them back.  
 (Whoever has her letter has her exact words.)  
 'Since these seem to be valuable carbon copies  
 (Somewhat smudged) I shall not engross them'

(20-4)

Hughes takes particular offence to 'engross'. His reaction is to the point: 'I took the point of that "engross" / Precisely, like a bristle of glass / Snapped off deep in my thumb' (25-7). Plath's reaction is more melodramatic, 'hurling' herself 'down a floor or two / Further from your Empyrean' (28-9). For Plath and Hughes, creation is automatically fated to destruction. The physical

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<sup>448</sup> Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, 75.

damage of Plath destroying the table in 'The Minotaur' is a part of her creative process; despite Hughes's 'later, considered and calmer' placation to 'Get that shoulder under your stanzas / And we'll be away' (13-14), he has witnessed the hallmarks of her poetry and her brittle state which result in,

The bloody end of skein  
 That unravelled your marriage,  
 Left your children echoing  
 Like tunnels in a labyrinth...

(17-20)

The reader senses that Hughes's responses to Plath's 'outbursts' are measured and practical. 'I was nursemaid', he reveals in 'Fever'<sup>449</sup>: 'I fancied myself as that. / I liked the crisis of the vital role.' (19-20). Indeed, this transpires in 'The Table',<sup>450</sup> where Hughes wanted to make 'a solid writing-table / That would last a lifetime' (1-2). But even Hughes's practicality is foiled by the all-encompassing nature of Plath's creative-destructive forces both inside and outside of her poetry:

I bought a broad elm plank two inches thick,  
 The wild bark surfing along one edge of it,  
 Rough cut for coffin timber. Coffin elm  
 Finds a new life, with its corpse,  
 Drowned in the waters of earth. It gives the dead

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<sup>449</sup> Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, 46.

<sup>450</sup> Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, 138.



Protection for a slightly longer voyage  
 Than beech or ash or pine might.

(3-9)

Hughes assures himself with the technical, practical aspects of the construction and with the fact that the 'corpse' is safely dispatched. But his hindsight reveals that his pragmatism overlooked a distressing omen, for it is at this desk where Plath writes her 'destructive' poetry: 'Incredulous / I saw rise through it, in broad daylight, / Your Daddy resurrected' (21-3). Plath's obsession with her deceased father is brought out at the table Hughes constructs. Hughes's dreams become nightmares which oscillate around Plath's obsession:

I embraced  
 Lady Death, your rival,  
 As if the role were written on my eyelids  
 In letters of phosphorus. With your arms locked  
 Round him, in joy, he took you  
 Down through the elm door.  
 He had got what he wanted.  
 I woke up on the empty stage with the props,  
 The paltry painted masks. And the script  
 Ripped up and scattered, its code scrambled,  
 Like the blades and slivers  
 Of a shattered mirror.

(36-47)

The inanimate elm table becomes a door to an underworld where Plath can finally come to terms with her fascination for her father. Her father usurps Hughes, who is left only the broken pieces of a marriage, like that of a 'shattered mirror'. As Wagner suggests, Plath 'saw rivals for Hughes's affection everywhere...now her greatest rival seems to be her alter ego, Lady Death, though Hughes's "embrace" of her foreshadows the affair that will mark the real end of their marriage'.<sup>451</sup> The theatrical qualities, especially the script, again stresses Hughes's fated role. That the script is 'Ripped up and scattered' leaves Hughes disorientated; the table has become a prop in the drama of his relationship with Plath and he only realises its significance once she is gone. The table becomes a 'curio' of interest to Plath's followers who would berate Hughes after her suicide: 'And now your peanut-crunchers can stare / At the ink-stains, the sigils / Where you engraved your letters to him / Cursing and imploring' (48-51). There is the suggestion by Hughes that the 'ink-stains' and the 'letters' (Plath's poems) to her father are peripheral to the action described in the previous stanza and it is something which the 'peanut-crunchers' could never comprehend.

The conclusion of 'The Literary Life' has Marianne Moore doing her best to appease Hughes several years after she rejected Plath's poems so discourteously and not long since Plath committed suicide: 'She bowed so low I had to kneel', Hughes recalls, 'And I listened, heavy as a graveyard / While

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<sup>451</sup> Wagner, *Ariel's Gift*, 146.

she searched for the grave / Where she could lay down her little wreath.' (55-7)

With these poems, Hughes has aligned himself with the elegiac tradition of the poet mourning the poet by digressing upon her literary aspirations. Certainly, most of the poems in Birthday Letters would fit into this category, but 'Wuthering Heights', 'Your Paris', 'The Literary Life', 'The Minotaur' and 'The Table' are obvious candidates. They are poems which highlight the struggle to write, the endurance of criticism (which was Keats's undoing, according to Shelley) or success. But more than this, the poems embody the creative/destructive *modus vivendi* which features in the elegy itself. Hughes presents the mechanisms of the elegiac process of decomposition and renewal and is disturbed to find them manifest in Plath.



'Daffodils' is a central elegy in the sequence and is one which openly displays elegiac tendencies. The poem recalls how Hughes, his then wife and his young daughter harvested daffodils in order to convert them into profit. Flowers are prominent motifs in many works of lament – their importance in Queen Gertrude's valedictory soliloquy for Ophelia is one example. The daffodil itself is from the genus *narcissus*, which in turn is said to be named after the mythological figure of Narcissus. This myth concludes with Narcissus committing suicide and a flower appearing where his corpse was

supposed to have fallen. Myth cannot have been far from Hughes's mind, as only the year before the publication of Birthday Letters, Hughes's Tales from Ovid was received to much critical acclaim. One may assume that Hughes is symbolically placing a flower on Plath's grave, because it both continues the use of mythology in Birthday Letters, and the daffodil is a flower which carries with it more intimate associations for Hughes.

But whereas placing flowers on a grave may seem an innocuous act, Sacks stresses that 'few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living...flowers, like the poetic language to which they are so often compared, serve not only as offerings or as gestures for respite but also as demarcations separating the living from the dead.'<sup>452</sup> The warm opening address of 'Daffodils' is directed to the reader as much as it is to Plath: 'Remember how we picked daffodils?' (1) the poet asks. But quickly, Hughes withdraws, and internalises his thoughts by reversing his opening gambit, 'Nobody else remembers, but I remember' (2) he concludes. Already, Hughes has put himself at a distance from Plath and the reader. Hughes's inquiring resembles the questioning which is present in many elegies; but the fact that Hughes has sought to write a verse which is free from contrived images and ornate language makes the distance he places between himself and the dead that much more striking. There are no fanciful nymphs to buffer the vacancy

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<sup>452</sup> Sacks, The English Elegy, 19.

between life and death. If this questioning does represent Sacks's 'Where was I?' model, then one might suppose that Hughes is once again wrestling with guilt, anger and prevailing woe.

There is a sense in which 'Daffodils' is an opportunity to remember something positive. But the poem is imbued with Hoffman's 'posthumous-future'; the poem subscribes to portentous occurrences which might have been seen in the most unlikely omens: 'We thought they (the daffodils) were a windfall. / Never guessed they were a last blessing' (29-30). Yet this line, coupled with the perennial nature of the daffodils, is highly appropriate. The daffodils are, on the one hand, seemingly eternal: 'Every March since...lifted again / Out of the same bulbs' (54-5). So, too, Wordsworth likens the daffodils to the eternal calling them 'Continuous as the stars that shine / And twinkle on the milky way' as they stretch in a 'never-ending line'. Yet, they are also representative of the perishing nature of existence and of moments within that existence. Hughes is less euphoric than Wordsworth; he identifies the daffodils and his marriage to Plath as 'The nuptial flight of the rarest ephemera' (27). Robert Herrick also regards the daffodil as ephemeral:

Fair daffodils, we weep to see  
 You haste away so soon:  
 As yet the early-rising sun  
 Has not attained his noon.  
 Stay, stay,  
 Until the hasting day

Has run  
 But to the evensong;  
 And, having prayed together, we  
 Will go with you along.

(1-10) <sup>453</sup>

The daffodil is now a potent symbol of the mortal, indeed temporal, human condition. 'What a fleeting glance of the everlasting / Daffodils are' (25-6), Hughes writes, repeating Herrick's remarks. Despite this temporality, however, Ramazani notes that the daffodils are figuratively 'on the side of consolation'. He continues: 'many figures of reproduction and imitation, figures that, multiplying and reinforcing one another...override the severance of death.'<sup>454</sup> The flowers are not only figures of consolation but also ones which by their very multiplicity reinforce one another so that their survival is much more likely to continue. The scene which Hughes's poem depicts takes place among a crop of daffodils which, according to Ramazani's remarks, should act as a stay against time and progress, whilst also aiding consolation. On the side of consolation, one might attribute their presence as characteristic of the procession of mourners common to elegy. But at the same time, the effect of the scene occurring among daffodils is almost exactly the opposite; instead of offering consolation, the flowers strengthen the fated nature of the scene and reinforce its temporality.

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<sup>453</sup> Norton Anthology of Poetry, 321.

<sup>454</sup> Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 9.

This study has emphasised that the daffodils are used to *imitate* not only the Plath-Hughes situation, but the mortal human condition at large. However, one should consider what is being *done* to the flowers in the poem; Hughes and Plath are harvesting them, these flowers are being cut with what we later learn to be a pair of scissors. For Sacks, though, this act of cutting should be seen as highly symbolic. He writes, 'we can recognise not only how the relation between cut and returning flowers reflects that between castration and the emblem of immortality but also how both these relations in turn reflect the very real process of consolatory figuration.'<sup>455</sup> Indeed, we recognise the daffodils as being analogous (at least, retrospectively) to Hughes-Plath's 'temporary' marriage, and the imagery associated with immortality has already been acknowledged; but 'castration' seems unusually loaded. Sacks's idea stems from his Freudian critique of elegy, and it translates into his reading of the so-called 'vegetation deity' who he claims is present in most, if not all, elegies. This figure, among its other attributes, is the manifestation of what might be identified as the ecological process of decomposition and renewal. This process is replicated in fiction by the Narcissus myth, where the corpse becomes a flower, and in *Adonais*, for example, where Keats becomes a 'star' at the poem's conclusion. For Sacks, castration is linked to what he believes are oedipal tendencies in the work of many prominent elegists; by turns, castration can be seen as an act of

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<sup>455</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 33.

empowerment and subjugation, but more obviously, as an ending of sexuality and fertility. Therefore, if fertility is at an end, then so, too, the ecological cycle of decomposition and renewal is ruptured. If this occurs, then the spirit of the deceased cannot be renewed in nature.

Applying this to 'Daffodils', to paraphrase Hughes, thickens paradoxes faster than we can thin them. Having identified the flowers as ephemeral, even in their own life span, is one thing; but by *cutting* them, their life is that much shorter. Here, one is at liberty to notice the parallels between the flowers and Plath's own relatively short life. The 'death' of both the flowers and Plath is a clear ending of the fertility cycle, *but more so*, it is an ending of *creative* fertility. In alerting the reader to this, Hughes continues to fulfil a duty as an elegist, that of the poet mourning the poet. The ending of life is one thing, but the cessation, indeed, the *castration* of creative potential has troubling ramifications for any elegist; for who better to understand the measure of creative loss than a poet?

A further paradox is actually a realization of Peter Sacks's remarks about the elegist 'distancing' himself or herself from the deceased with tokens such as flowers. For the flowers are also symbolic of memory; they are delicate, they can be beautiful – but they can also be damaged, they can be cut out, willingly or not. By acknowledging these symbolic alignments, Hughes may be implicitly / unintentionally distancing himself; by reaffirming their temporal nature, he is also recognising how Plath, too, may be lost in the



tumult of the sub-conscience. And it is here that the poem acquires a new, perhaps more symbolically loaded, motif as if to stay against the corrodible nature of memory and the associations of frailty which accompany the daffodils. Paradoxically, it is the 'wedding present scissors', the same scissors used to harvest the crop, which the young couple lose. 'Somewhere your scissors remember', Hughes writes. The scissors carry with them associations with a painful cutting away between people, and between life and death. Furthermore, their blades being 'wide open' are an image of thwarted potential which allegorises Plath's suicide. Their vitality ('Snipping stems') is juxtaposed to their now lying redundant and lost, 'Sinking deeper / Through the sod' (66). Yet for Hughes, despite what he imagines to be their derelict state, they are 'an anchor'. This metaphysical image works on two distinct levels; on the one hand, it anchors Hughes's memory to a particularly happy moment in time; on the other, it might also be seen as symbolic of progress being prohibited, something which, arguably, *Birthday Letters* as a whole bears witness to. By the poem's end it seems that Hughes is resolved that the only true salvageable relic of his memory will be the 'anchor...cross of rust' (67), long after both he and the poem are gone.

It is up to the inanimate (the scissors) to substitute memory, and more so than the flowers can the scissors be likened to the poem itself. For whilst individuals and their memories come and go, the scissors, this 'iron cross of rust', will remain a while longer, perhaps much longer. So, too, will the poem.

However, like the poem, the scissors will inevitably acquire a sort of rust, and in generations to come, they will be distorted, perhaps unrecognisable, perhaps, indeed, useless. So whilst the scissors fortify the poem and the memory it recalls for a while longer, Hughes has also acknowledged that at some unspecified point, all will be lost. This is not to be read negatively; Hughes's use of symbol is both forward thinking and perceptive, not only in terms of its associations with perishing, but also in a way which is discreet and dignified – there is no rage against the dying of the light.

'Perfect Light'<sup>456</sup> is something of an epilogue to 'Daffodils'. The occasion it depicts is similar, if not the same to that of 'Daffodils'. It describes a photograph of Plath among a daffodil harvest. It is this photograph on which the poem meditates. Unlike the opening of 'Daffodils', however, Plath's presence is very immediate:

Sitting among your daffodils, as in a picture  
 Posed as for the title: 'Innocence'.  
 Perfect light in your face lights it up  
 Like a daffodil.

(2-5)

Here, Plath is *directly* presented as being 'Like a daffodil'. This is significant in light of the subsequent reading.

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<sup>456</sup> Hughes, Birthdays Letters, 143

'Daffodils' is a revision of an earlier poem by Hughes which bears the same title. Published in Flowers and Insects,<sup>457</sup> this earlier version of 'Daffodils' has differences and similarities in equal measure. Most noticeably, the 'I'-speaker in the 1986 poem is replaced with accusative pronouns in the 1998 version. In doing this, Hughes omits all references or suggestions that Plath is present at the scene or in the poem. When put alongside the Birthday Letters version, the poem seems cruel in its omissions; yet, the Flowers and Insects poem perhaps allows one to reinterpret aspects of what the poem was to become in 1998.

'Daffodils' (Flowers and Insects) is very similar to its later version for the first eight stanzas, but from the ninth stanza until the end, the daffodils haunt Hughes and are the subject of a great deal of introspection for the poet. Craig Robinson asserts that, "The description of the picking and preparing of the flowers for sale becomes almost that of a rape, then a murder, and is exaggerated and hypersensitive unless we understand the flowers as symbolic of more than themselves".<sup>458</sup> Perhaps they should be identified with and be symbolic of Plath, who, as I mentioned above when discussing 'Perfect Light', is directly likened to a daffodil. The poet reflects on how he 'killed' the flowers by harvesting them:

That night on my pillow,  
My brain was a chandelier of daffodils!

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<sup>457</sup> Hughes, Flowers and Insects, 13.

<sup>458</sup> Robinson, Shepherd of Being, 211.

Wings pouring light, faces bowed,  
 Dressed for Heaven,  
 The souls of all those daffodils, as I killed them,  
 Had gone to ground inside me...

(40-5)

If one is to take into account how Hughes later imagines Plath being 'like a daffodil', then one might assume that he is thinking about her when he writes this poem. If this is the case, it appears that Hughes is unsettled by a guilt which is common among surviving members of a family or marriage. And as we have seen, it is a guilt, not as a result of direct action on the part of the survivor, but rather as a result of *inaction* which informs many of the poems in Birthday Letters and gives rise to Hofmann's 'If only I'd known then what I know now' model. The above lines therefore attain a different worth; Plath is 'dressed for Heaven' but has not made the ascent; instead her soul has 'gone to ground' in Hughes and been the cause of doubt and self-questioning. Again this situates Hughes in the line of elegists who question their role in the death of a loved one or a close friend and looks to assuage their culpability through verse in the hope of conciliation.

Hughes looks for answers by examining the dead. Plath/the daffodils are now 'odourless metals', 'More a deep grave stoniness, a cleanness of stone, / As if ice had a breath' (56-7); they have become uncomplicated. Yet, 'Their cores [are] so alive and kicking'. The vitality of the flowers alarms Hughes as

it is at odds with his vision of the 'simplified' dead. The concluding turn in the poem foreshadows what would later become the 'cross of rust' scissors in Birthday Letters. Here, though, it is Hughes sinking through the 'sod'; he is being judged by the earth. The daffodils assume the likeness of a cathedral and they interrogate Hughes with an 'Empty or all-seeing angel stare'. He 'wrench[es] free' of his dream, whereupon his actions, according to the jumpy possessives, become rather despondent:

I flitted  
 With my world, my garden, my unlikely  
 Baby-cries leached from the thaw –  
                   my shiverers  
 In the draughty wings of the year –  
   (76-80)

This despondency mimics the disorientation of having woken from a surreal dream, and this is reflected in the erratic typography of the verse. The final line concludes with a hyphen, which indicates an unfulfilled continuation. The poem ends with a cold chill whereas it opened with the warming image of a 'cauldron of daffodils'; it is a deliberately dissatisfying and skilfully inconclusive poem. It would be favourable to the Plath/daffodils reading of the poem if the open-ended hyphen represented unfinished business; this would then 'allow' for the revision of this poem and its inclusion as an elegy in Birthday Letters. The earth in the 1986 version of 'Daffodils' spoke to

Hughes as he sunk deeper through it, and this would account for the ambiguous lines in 'Perfect Light' where the earth contains the knowledge of Plath's fate:

And the knowledge  
 Inside the hill on which you are sitting,  
 A moated fort hill, bigger than your house,  
 Failed to reach the picture.

(15-7)

The imagery of earth, hills, sods and so forth is classified in the 1998 'Daffodils' as the 'groundswell of memory', an image which probably alludes to burial and has clear associations with organic decomposition; this is an inevitable process, but the real tragedy are the secrets, the creative potential, and the unanswered questions which the dead take to the grave, which the elegy can only hope to answer at a guess.

Reading 'Plath as a daffodil' in the Flowers and Insects version of 'Daffodils' possibly sheds new light on one of the more challenging and layered elegies in Birthday Letters. The latter poem is one which wrestles with conscience, memory, mortality and renewal using one of the oldest motifs of death, the flower. It is an emblem which is as inspirational to the poet as it is symbolic of the life-death struggle and our own frail temporality, of which Herrick remarks:

We have short time to stay as you;  
 We have as short a spring;  
 As quick a growth to meet decay,  
 As you or anything.  
 We die,  
 As your hours do, and dry  
 Away  
 Like to the summer's rain;  
 Or as the pearls of morning's dew,  
 Ne'er to be found again.

(11-20)



The poem 'Visit'<sup>459</sup> has Hughes recalling the beginning of his relationship with Plath, then ten years after her death. Reading her journals, 'Suddenly I read all this— / Your actual words, as they floated / Out through your throat and tongue onto your page' (48-50). Accuracy is constantly challenged in Birthday Letters, because this sequence is acutely aware of its complicated position. The function of what we see and hear against what we know (perhaps, the actual) is a matter which preoccupies a number of the poems that address preconceptions and stereotypes. 'The Beach'<sup>460</sup> is an excellent example, which contrasts Plath's caustic observations about England in the late fifties and early sixties with Hughes's wonderment as he arrives in the United States for the first time. The poem is placed towards the end of the

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<sup>459</sup> Hughes, Birthday Letters, 7.

<sup>460</sup> Hughes, Birthday Letters, 154.

sequence, where the Plath/Hughes marriage is beginning to dissolve; for Plath visiting the beach is a means of therapy ('now you needed a beach / Like your drug') and it is a visit which is interwoven with her sardonic opinions of England:

England was so filthy! Only the sea  
 Could scour it. Your ocean salts would scour you.  
 You wanted to be washed, scoured, sunned.  
 That 'jewel in the head' – your flashing thunderclap miles  
 Of Nauset surf. The slew of horse-shoe crabs  
 And sand-dollars. You craved like oxygen  
 American earlier summers...

(11-7)

A return to America would not occur: it was 'Some prophesy mislaid, somehow.' (18) The 'life in death' allusions of the poem are not heavy-handed premonitions, but rather brief moments in Hughes's poetry which allow the reader an insight into Plath's death-fuelled life. Indeed, Plath's own despondent state has her not only 'lashing' for release from her physical and psychological confines, but also from England, which is not the America she pines for. The contrast between England and America is thus set; the former is described not only as 'so filthy', but impoverished as well:

England  
 Was so poor! Was black paint cheaper? Why  
 Were English cars all black – to hide the filth?



Or to stay respectable, like bowlers  
 And umbrellas? Every vehicle a hearse.  
 The traffic procession a hushing leftover  
 Of Victoria's perpetual funeral Sunday –  
 The funeral of colour and light and life!  
 London a morgue of dinge – English dinge.  
 Our sole indigenous art-form – depressionist!  
 And why were everybody's  
 Garments so deliberately begrimed?  
 Grubby-looking like a camouflage?

(18-32)

Her acerbic view fits into preconceived stereotypical models of English behaviour and culture, but furthermore, it serves to emphasise Plath's obsessive 'death in life' observations. Queen Victoria's 'perpetual funeral' (whereby she mourned the death of her husband, Prince Albert for the rest of her life) implies that a constant state of mourning is endemic to the English way of life. Viewing a dingy flat in '55 Eltisle' evokes a similar reaction:

It confirmed

Your idea of England: part  
 Nursing home, part morgue  
 For something partly dying, partly dead.

(12-5)

The implication is that Plath is agitated by the death that surrounds her, the death which reminds her of her own psychological state. Hughes tries to

placate her angry observations, “‘Alas! / We have never recovered,’ I said,  
‘From our fox-holes / Our trenches, our fatigues and our bomb-shelters.’” (30-

2) The language of ‘The Beach’ is riddled with violence, fear, and death;

Hughes’s glib explanation for England’s ‘funeral of colour light and life’, does not turn away from matters of death and destruction; in this respect, it could hardly calm a fiercely angry Plath.

A turn in the poem occurs in the second verse paragraph where Hughes remembers his exhilaration upon ‘first sighting / The revolving edge of Manhattan / From the deck of the Queen Elizabeth’ (33-5). America, in contrast to Plath’s vision of England, is described in terms which imply that it is a ‘paradise’ in comparison; ‘The merry-go-round palette of American cars. / Everywhere the big flower of freedom! / The humming-bird of light at the retina!’ (36-8) is juxtaposed with Hughes’s

...weird shameful pain of uncrumpling

From wartime hibernation, cramped, unshucking

My utility habit – deprivation

Worn with the stupid pride of a demob outfit,

A convalescence not quite back into the world.

(39-43)

The economic prosperity of America, when contrasted with the blighted post-war recession economy of England, is a factor which explains the

'depressionist' English culture which strikes a nerve with Plath. Inspired by his experience with America, Hughes wishes to substitute her desire for her specifically American beach with his idea of a beach heaven ('I'd fixed on Woolacombe Sands'). But the attempt to 'set inside [her] head another jewel', is misguided; the seascape is a 'whole scene hopeless' to Plath. It is not the first time that Hughes has used a jewel as a motif of lucid, inspirational thought. In 'Heptonstall Old Church' a metaphysical bird brings 'a crystal from space / And set it in men's heads' (6-7). Like that crystal, however, the jewel of 'The Beach' fails to realise its potential.<sup>461</sup> David Kennedy notes that a setting by the sea features in a number of elegies, including Hardy's 'A Singer Asleep', 'Death by Water' from The Waste Land, as this study has already observed, and Elizabeth Bishop's 'North Haven'. Kennedy writes, 'The sea figures, in the words of Ariel's song from The Tempest, the possibility of a "sea change" into a "rich and strange" consolatory apotheosis. It is a possibility

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<sup>461</sup> The final line of Birthday Letters from the poem 'Red' reads, 'But the jewel you lost was blue'. This appears to be the climax of two symbols which have followed Plath in the sequence e.g. 'Trophies' where Plath looks at Hughes through 'amber jewels', or from 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress' where Plath's eyes are 'great cut jewels.../...truly like big jewels'. The jewel, as I have remarked above, appears to be a symbol of clear unsullied, perhaps, poetic thought, or a symbol of potential. The colour blue has also come to be associated with Plath; 'a sea of lapis lazuli' ('Moonwalk'), the title of the poem 'The Blue Flannel Suit', a 'blue push of sea wind' ('The Rabbit Catcher') are a few examples. The colour blue has associations with peace and fidelity. Blue gemstones are used to soothe ragged emotional states and to cure nightmares and insomnia. Blue jewels, it is claimed, shield the bearer from evil spirits. The connotations in terms of Birthday Letters speak for themselves. The obvious elegiac association is to be found in Lycidas: 'at last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue'. Simon Carnell, in his review of Birthday Letters, suggests that the downbeat last line of 'Red' is 'deceptively simple, because it almost contains an accusation of a failure of imagination – of Plath's own culpability in the loss, as well as a self-accusation, since elsewhere in the book Plath herself is the jewel lost – not kept sufficient hold of – by Hughes.' ('Overheard Dialogue', London Magazine, October/November 1998, 93).

with which later elegists have sought both positive and negative feedbacks.<sup>462</sup>

In the case of Hughes's poem, the attempt to positively reconcile Plath's emotions with a calming, inspiring landscape goes awry, resulting in 'negative' elegy.

Wagner's interpretation of 'The Beach' summarises how the gloom of England and the seaside capture the tone for the later poems of Birthday Letters. They also conjure Plath's own overcast state of mind:

It is a poem that can be linked to the miry gloom of 'Error', in its bald revelation of her unhappiness with England, its greyness 'the reverse of dazzling Nauset...The dourness of England, where every vehicle is a hearse, 'the traffic procession a hushing leftover/ Of Victoria's perpetual funeral Sunday' only accentuates her distance from her 'flashing thunderclap miles / Of Nauset surf', and her distance from her husband. (The funeral imagery, here, is perhaps an echo of their experiences as mourners at a neighbour's funeral ...which she sketched in Johnny Panic and which she alluded to in 'Berck-Plage', written just afterwards. Plath, it should be recalled, did not attend the funeral of her father.)<sup>463</sup>

Wagner highlights the importance of mirroring and reflection in the poem.

The cultural oppositions between England and America are metaphorical for the distance between Plath and Hughes. It is at the conclusion of the poem,

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<sup>462</sup> Kennedy, Elegy, 6.

<sup>463</sup> Wagner, Ariel's Gift, 160-1.

on the dour, wet seascape of Wollacombe Sands, where Hughes seems to confront himself about his now unhappy marriage:

So this was the reverse of dazzling Nauset.  
 The flip of a coin – the flip of an ocean fallen  
 Dream-face down. And here, at my feet, in the suds  
 The other face, the real, staring upwards.

(75-8)

This conclusive first line of this final verse illustrates the resignation to fate which has been written about in the 'posthumous-future' until this point. But similarly, the image of the flipped coin is suggestive of a stochastic element of chance, or luck, which in this case has been bad. It is not fate this time, which has previously inhabited each poem up to this point. It is, arguably, the 'other face, the real' which is where Hughes realises his marriage is fated.

Woolacombe Sands, the dream Hughes wished to place inside Plath's head 'like a jewel', has failed him; his own awe-struck remembrance of America serves as a co-conspirator alongside the already miserable situation in 'The Beach'.

A poem such as 'The Beach' is one of many poems in Birthday Letters which draws attention to some of the difficulties in Hughes's elegies for Plath. Throughout, this study has proposed that Hughes brings to the elegy an originality found in his unfalsified linguistic dream; but with Birthday Letters this dream encounters trouble. Some of the poems, including those extracted

above, complement the common conception of Plath as an emotionally tortured depressive who reads death into her landscape as a projection of her own neurosis. It would be unfair and wrong to suggest that Hughes would capitalise on this perception in order to situate himself in the sub-ordinate position of the passive husband in a troubled marriage, but for the sake of debate, with Birthday Letters we have Hughes not just presenting his side of the story, but offering one which incorporates a retrospective dialogue with the deceased. If one is to question the circumstances Hughes presents in the poems, then by extension, are we not to question the validity of what Plath 'says'? By way of an answer, one should perhaps consider what is *not* said in the sequence. Neil Roberts suggests that Birthday Letters does not report Hughes's 'desertion' of Plath for Assia Wevill, 'It does not link the affair with Assia to difficulties in the marriage, or give any circumstantial detail of the breakdown of the marriage after May 1962.'<sup>464</sup> The problem of reporting the 'actual' stems from Hughes's stylistic contrivance of the poems as 'apostrophic elegies'. Roberts writes:

The peculiar characteristic of apostrophe as a poetic device is that someone who is absent is addressed as if [they] were present...Birthday Letters...centres on a highly circumstantial relationship with an addressee who exists not only in the private world of the poet, but in a public world of ideological discourse, whose own words are constantly quoted in the text,

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<sup>464</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 205.

and who is surrounded by other discourses that are often hostile to the speaker, the dialogism is intense.<sup>465</sup>

Should we not trust the voice of the poet? The elegist is often in the position, or assumes the position, of authority of the chief mourner whose knowledge of the subject (be it the deceased, or emotive states such as melancholia or anger linked to mourning) is usually beyond the realm of public debate. But because Plath's life and death has been requisitioned (in some cases, hijacked) by a multitude of different quarters, laying claims to the truth behind her suicide, or to exemplify the poet as a feminist martyr, the possibility of a personal elegiac remembrance for Hughes has not been allowed to pass without debate. This is one reason why this sequence is unique as a series of elegies. But the word 'trust' implies a false dichotomy, whose antithesis is 'lies' – it is not about who said what and where, nor is it a matter of trust or truth as Hughes has not attempted to whitewash the speculation with the suggestion that his poems are the last word. Hughes has no duty to explain himself to anyone. Roberts writes that Birthday Letters is under no obligation to elaborate any details:

...the expectation that Birthday Letters should do any of these things is based on a number of not necessarily appropriate assumptions: that it should speak to the public perception of events; that it should be 'confessional' in the way a Catholic is

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<sup>465</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 202.

when seeking absolution; and, most fundamentally, that it should attempt to explain the events it reflects on.<sup>466</sup>

The question remains: do the elegies of Birthday Letters compromise Hughes's presentation of the 'actual'? The answer is as vague as 'it depends upon what it is the reader wishes to read into the poems'. Yet, this is part of the sequence's achievement; it courts dialectic between the poet, the deceased, and the reader. In this respect it could be likened to the eclogue. The result is that each party takes away something from the poems to satisfy themselves, or to satisfy their dissatisfaction. While it is the subject of Birthday Letters which is the cause of some controversy, what remains true is the unfalsified dream of Hughes's language. Whatever is described is done so with a commitment to raise the level of elegiac language so that it is sensually accessible and striking in comparison to that of his forebears.

Michiko Katutani noted in her review that, 'the poems seem remarkably free of self-pity, score-settling and spin';<sup>467</sup> this is a testament to Hughes, but also an indictment of the public's almost salacious interest in 'the details'. It is a remarkable achievement for Hughes, who could have used the opportunity to attack (in the elegiac tradition) those who did their best to root through his private life in the search to find 'the answer' to the Plath-

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<sup>466</sup> Roberts, Literary Life, 205.

<sup>467</sup> Michiko Katutani, 'Birthday Letters: A Portrait of Plath in Poetry for its own sake,' New York Times, 13 Feb 1998 <[http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/08/daily/hughes-book-review.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/08/daily/hughes-book-review.html?_r=1)> 7 May 2006.



Hughes marriage. The overall effect is a dignified recollection for Plath and Hughes alike. Perhaps the best description for the elegies is that they 'are not answers to his critics after all, or appeals for understanding, but tender and elegiac acts of remembrance.'<sup>468</sup>



This chapter has argued that Birthday Letters is the maturing and culmination of Hughes's skill as an elegist, if not a poet. The poems transcend the story of Sylvia Plath; like traditional elegies, they are as much an examination of the self as they are of the deceased. Themes which first emerged in The Hawk in the Rain were developed over the forty one years leading up to the publication of Birthday Letters. War, so prominent in Hughes's early poems, followed by disenchantment with Western modes of thought, coupled with the shamanistic explorations of his poetic sequences in the seventies, before a return to matters of the actual world in Remains of Elmet have all played their parts in Birthday Letters. Birthday Letters challenges the predictable, uniformed, and uninformed responses to the Plath-Hughes marriage which came about in the sixties and early seventies and still persists to this day. The language of poetry elevates the story of their marriage beyond biographical clutter. He elevates them both, from poets, to representatives. Sylvia Plath is America ('So this is America, I marvelled. /

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<sup>468</sup> Nicci Gerrard, 'Much further in than we thought,' The Observer (Jan 18, 1998): 25.

Beautiful, beautiful America!'), he is the English 'post-war utility habit'. But as Margaret Dickie Uroff writes, 'Such a division does not account for the actual circumstances of their lives':

...they lived and worked both in America and England; they admit reading and being influenced by American and English contemporaries; and, most significantly, they produced important portions of their major works as a result of their poetic association...Plath's early fastidious control to her late violent freedoms, along with Hughes's growth from rigid formalism to open form, we may see certain parallels in their careers and detect points at which they encourage each other by example and by criticism.<sup>469</sup>

Though Hughes does heighten the difference between their cultural backgrounds, it does not serve as a division. Poetry would draw them together, but also play its part in forcing them apart.

Hughes at times seems to employ a negative capability; the poems reveal his life with Plath to an extent, but at the same time, they offer resistance and there is a withdrawal from explicit intelligence which might otherwise be passed on to the reader. Hughes suggests as much himself: 'Maybe all poetry, insofar as it moves us and connects with us is a revealing of something that the writer doesn't actually want to say, but desperately needs to communicate, to be delivered of.... The real mystery is this strange need [to

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<sup>469</sup> Margaret Dickie Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Illinois: U of Illinois P, 1980) viii.

share]'.<sup>470</sup> It would be impossible for Hughes to write a full poetic account of his marriage down to the slightest domestic detail; but the astrological, shamanistic and occult practices which Hughes uses in his verse suggest that there is a world Plath inhabits beyond his sequence of elegies. To enter this world, one must be absorbed into believing in the healing powers of poetry, a philosophy which stems from the early Romantics.

The publication of Birthday Letters is the accumulation of an ongoing dialectic between Hughes and Plath's poetry after her death. Tracy Brain writes, 'Hughes was writing to and out of Plath's work long before its appearance in 1995. 'Narcissi', 'The Honey Bee' and 'Big Poppy'...are only a few of a number of poems in which Hughes rewrites Plath's own flower and bee poems to engage with her arguments against individualism and comment upon her death.'<sup>471</sup> The publication of this sequence fuels the question as to whether Hughes could have written another collection of verse after Birthday Letters had he lived. The evidence points towards the fact that it was to be a posthumous publication, whenever that might have been. Writing in Poetry Review, shortly after Hughes's death, Carolyne Wright revealed that Hughes had disclosed to her his efforts as far back as 1989: 'What he was writing would clarify the true nature of his and Plath's relationship...and he intended

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<sup>470</sup> Carol Bere, 'Owning the Facts of his Life: Birthday Letters,' Literary Review 41 (1998): 556.

<sup>471</sup> Tracy Brain, The Other Sylvia Plath (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001) 197.

to publish it posthumously'.<sup>472</sup> Furthermore, the evidence that Hughes had been writing his Birthday Letters poems for a considerable amount of time can be found by the presence of an early version of 'You Hated Spain' in his Selected Poems: 1957-1981. This was followed by the appearance of a number of poems (some of which would end up in Birthday Letters) in his New Selected Poems: 1957-1994.<sup>473</sup>

The poems capture Hughes's own description of what constitutes poetry. If he was fighting a battle to keep the meaning of his words true to the world he and Plath were making, then this was his battleplan:

[Poetry consists of] Words that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are, from the momentary effect of the barometer to the force that created men distinct from trees. Something of the inaudible music that moves us along in our bodies from moment to moment like water in a river. Something of the spirit of the snowflake of the water of the river. Something of the duplicity and the relativity and the merely fleeting quality of all this. Something of the almighty importance of it and something of the utter meaninglessness. And when words can manage something of this, and manage it in a moment of time, and in that same moment make out of it all the vital signature of a human being – not of an atom, or of a geometrical diagram, or of a heap of lenses – but a human being, we call it poetry.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Carolyn Wright, 'What Happens in the Heart,' Poetry Review 89 (1989): 3.

<sup>473</sup> Hughes, New Selected Poems: 1957-1994. Poems in this edition which were later collected in Birthday Letters: 'Chaucer', 'You Hated Spain', 'The Earthenware Head', 'The Tender Place', 'Black Coat', 'Being Christlike', 'The God', 'The Dogs are Eating Your Mother'.

<sup>474</sup> Ted Hughes, Poetry in the Making (London: Faber and Faber, 1969) 124.

All these nuances and intricacies can be found in Hughes's elegies. He celebrates these qualities in the technicalities of his composition, without losing sight of the emotional engagement of his poems.



Chapter Seven:

He Became His Admirers: Selected Elegies 1989-1998 and Beyond

Although Birthday Letters eclipsed some of Hughes's later poems because of its significance, it was not the end of his work as an elegist. Both before and after this volume, Hughes published a number of elegies which should not be forgotten simply because they did not receive the same amount of extraordinary critical attention.

Wolfwatching is an irregularity in Hughes's oeuvre because it was the first time in many years that he did not focus on one particular theme, or produce a sequence such as Remains of Elmet or River. In a letter to Keith Sagar prior to its publication, Hughes seems disparaging about what was to become Wolfwatching: 'My hesitation about it is – it's moulted feathers, rather than new flight'. But Hughes's correspondence is revealing, describing the poems as 'Elegiac – obsequies over a state of mind that is to me, now, defunct. It is actually, I suppose, the funeral, & the mourning. So it's sad.'<sup>475</sup> Indeed, the tone of Wolfwatching is reflective and sombre. He again utilizes his recurrent themes of the environment, animals, and the First World War, but there is a sense that in picking up these themes, he is trying to reach a conclusion with them. It is perhaps conclusions which are at the centre of many of the poems.

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<sup>475</sup> Hughes, 'To Keith Sagar,' 14 November 1987, Letters, 541.

‘The Black Rhino’,<sup>476</sup> the longest poem in the collection, is in Hughes’s own words, ‘[A] piece...written to help raise funds for the campaign to save the Black Rhinoceros’<sup>477</sup>, whose systematic extinction is repeatedly emphasised:

Quickly, quick, or even as you stare  
He will have dissolved  
Into a gagging stench, in the shimmer.

(22-25)

...

The Black Rhino is vanishing.  
Horribly sick, without knowing.

She is vanishing. She is infected  
With the delusions of man. She has become a delusion.

Every cell of her body is ruptured with human delusion.  
She is vanishing

(88-93)

Hughes indicts ‘human delusion’ and its destructive capabilities. But extinction in Wolfwatching applies to more than wiping out animals. The collection contains the largest amount of war poems since The Hawk in the Rain; of these, ‘Dust As We Are’<sup>478</sup> and ‘Walt’<sup>479</sup> read like elegies. Like the plight of the rhino, the veterans of the First World War are gradually

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<sup>476</sup> Hughes, Wolfwatching, 26-32.

<sup>477</sup> Hughes, Wolfwatching, 55.

<sup>478</sup> Hughes, Wolfwatching, 10.

<sup>479</sup> Hughes, Wolfwatching, 37.

disappearing because of old age. Both poems are similar to 'Out' with each one focussing on Hughes's immediate relatives, his father ('Dust As We Are') and his uncle Walt ('Walt'), both veterans of the war. Hughes returns to the economical language of 'Out', and war's psychological aftermath on the veterans and their families. Writing to Nick Gammage, Hughes stresses how the First World War left his father and his generation traumatised:

I never heard of anything but the First World War (and it had been over, say, fifteen years). Those towns in West Yorks were still stunned. So I passed my early days in a kind of Mental Hospital of the survivors...it wasn't simply the horrible mud struggle in a terrain more or less composed of liquefied corpses, the stories of how this or that village lost all its men in one day, one attack. It was something much more inclusive – the shock suffered by a species that had thought the world was quite difficult... Those who met the shock in person never got over it, they were never able to assimilate it. My father's whole life was posthumous in some way, after that.<sup>480</sup>

'Dust As We Are'<sup>481</sup> concentrates initially on the destruction of the body itself; the 'bleached montage' of his father's remembrances recalls the 'Swampquakes of the slime of puddled soldiers / Where bones and bits of equipment / Showered from every shell-burst.' (19-21) Though their bodies

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<sup>480</sup> Hughes, 'To Nick Gammage,' 15 March 1991, *Letters*, 593.

<sup>481</sup> The title is from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows  
Like harmony in music; there is a dark  
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, makes them cling together  
In one society

(l.340).



were not spared, Hughes stresses that, at the very least, they were spared the indignity of their families witnessing their physical suffering:

Naked men  
Slithered staring where their mothers and sisters  
Would never have to meet their eyes, or see  
Exactly how they sprawled and were trodden.

(22-5)

Hughes and his family seek to resuscitate his father ('he had been salvaged and washed' (25)) after 'He had been heavily killed' (27). They meet with limited success having 'revived him', but he remains 'killed but alive – so long / As we were very careful.' (29-30). The elegy makes no attempt to seek consolation through itself or with the prospect of an afterlife. It reads as a warning from history, rather than a memorialisation; yet it is mournful in tone, precisely because no consolation *can* be found. The terrors of his wartime experience followed Hughes's father to the grave; his life, not even the 'peace' of his death, would reward or console him. Instead, the psychological suffering is transmuted into Hughes as he combs ('divined') his father's 'wavy, golden hair'. In doing so, he is filled with his father's knowledge. Hughes comes to understand his father's mournful silence ('he taught us silence like a prayer' (28)) and in doing so, he realises the depth of his father's state of semi-permanent shellshock. Diane Middlebrook explains

that Hughes has been 'permitted to "divine" through touch what lies beyond expression in words'.<sup>482</sup> She suggests convincingly:

His father has literally come back from the land of the dead, like a shaman; and he imparts the equivalent of a shaman's spiritual knowledge through his skull, to his son...[the poem] establishes in Hughes's myth that his poems about his father *are* his poems about the twentieth-century's wars, and about his birthright as a poet: he, Ted Hughes, has been ordained to devise speech that might undo the damage.<sup>483</sup>

To this effect, Hughes echoes a remark he made in 'Out' about being his father's 'luckless double'; in 'Dust As We Are', he identifies himself as 'his supplementary convalescent', he is supplementing his father's experiences, trying to fill the silences through poetry. This should not be mistaken for a form of consolation for Hughes anymore than it is for his father; instead, it is more of a reminder of the war's long-term effects that are passed on from one generation to the next.

In his review of Lupercal, Thom Gunn remarks at what he sees as a characteristic of Hughes's poetry: 'the harder a living thing resists the opposition of the elements, of other living things, or of death, the finer the quality of existence.'<sup>484</sup> It is with these words in mind that one should read perhaps the most effective war-elegy in Wolfwatching, 'Walt', which retells

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<sup>482</sup> Middlebrook, Her Husband, 273.

<sup>483</sup> Middlebrook, Her Husband, 273.

<sup>484</sup> Thom Gunn, rev. of Lupercal by Ted Hughes, Poetry XLVII No. 4, January 1961, 268.

'My Uncle's Wound'. It is the same Uncle Walt who guided Plath and Hughes to the ruins which were thought to be the location of Brontë's Wuthering Heights on the Yorkshire Moors in Hughes's poem, 'Wuthering Heights'. Like Hughes's father, Walt is killed but alive. Part one of the poem recounts how his uncle was cut down and injured by a sniper during the First World War, and, like Hughes's father, though his outward pains and scars are healed, his spirit remains in tatters. The sniper's shot 'brought him and his wife down together, / With all his children one after the other.' (I.32/33). From the start, part one places an emphasis on geography, as presented by its title 'Under High Wood'.<sup>485</sup> The elegy mixes the geographies of the battlefield in France and Walt's familiar Yorkshire landscape, switching between them. After Walt was hit by a sniper's bullet, he did his best to hide out of sight, 'He wormed / Deeper down. Bullet after bullet / Dug at the crater rim, searching for him.' (I.9-11). As Walt hides, he imagines himself back in Yorkshire on a long walk in and around the Calder Valley; the third verse of the poem is dedicated to this trail which accurately lists the names of places on his walk. Part one also switches between Walt's past as a soldier, his present as an elderly man with 'His life's hope over' (I, 29), and a future passed off almost despairingly as 'all that was left' (I, 39).

It is what is left which is the chief concern of part two of the poem (subtitled 'The Atlantic'), which explores Walt's trauma. The poem does not

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<sup>485</sup> High Wood is a forest in northern France which was the scene of intense fighting between 14<sup>th</sup> July and 15<sup>th</sup> September 1916 during the Battle of the Somme

presume to explain the inner mechanisms of Walt's tortured spirit; it is a poem of observation. Because Hughes does not attempt to discourse on Walt's psychological condition, the poem is even more of a painful torment than had he ventured an approximation. The outward signs of Walt's pain speak for themselves:

Night after night he'd sat there,  
 Eighty-four, still telling the tale.  
 With his huge thirst for anaesthetics.  
 'Time I were dead,' I'd heard. 'I want to die.'

(II, 1-4)

Hughes describes an occasion where he and Walt stand on top of a cliff, and beneath them:

...two thousand five hundred  
 Miles of swung worldweight  
 Hit England's western wall  
 With a meaningless bump.

'Aye!' he sighs. Over and over. 'Aye!'  
 And massages his temples.

(II, 7-12)

The image of the sea buffeting the land is a pattern Walt has seen before from his experiences in the trenches, where skirmishes and battles cost many thousands of lives in order to acquire a meaningless few metres of land. It might also relate to Walt's sense of hopelessness, what he sees as the futility of

his remaining years, apparently relentless, and of little consequence to him.

But his 'aye' draws attention to the troubled state of language in 'Walt'.

Unusually for an elegy, there is a degree of difficulty in Hughes's expression; this move reflects Walt's increasing despair, but it is actually more effective in illustrating Hughes's own helpless position:

They swamped and drowned  
The synapses, the breath-born spinnaker shells  
Of consonants and vowels

(II, 21-3)

Language has become meaningless thanks to Walt's wartime experience, which accounts for his relative quietness and limited speech; it has been destroyed and has taken away his ability to verbally comprehend his trauma. Hughes's only 'spoken' words conclude the poem ("Walt! Walt!"), but like Walt's 'aye', this is a beleaguered attempt to understand; all his language reduced to a monosyllable. 'Nothing will connect' (48), Hughes writes, and it is because of this reason, that Walt cannot make sense of his trauma; it is unbearable for him: "Why?" he'd cried, 'Why can't I just die?' (40). Hughes observes that Walt has 'survived with a word – one last word', his 'aye'. But even this is being obscured; the rhythm of many of the shorter verses echoes the rhythm of the tide. This is especially true in one instance:

Every weedy breath of the sea  
Is another swell of overwhelming.  
Meaningless. And a sigh. Meaningless.

## (II. 53-5)

The final line of this verse is almost rhythmically symmetrical with line 67: 'And 'Aye!' he breathes. 'Aye!'. If there is more to be read in comparing lines 55 and 67 than their rhythmic similarities, it might be that this echo is more substantial; it could be a suggestion that the 'aye' of line 67 is connected to the 'meaningless' of line 55. If this is the case, then even what remains of Walt's language is subject to deterioration; his words, and his life, like the waves hitting the coast, are both slowly being eroded away. Typically, the figure mourned in an elegy has no wish to die. For this reason, 'Walt' stands out as an unusual variant; as an elegy, it evokes sympathy because of sympathy's very absence – absent only because sympathy is not enough, nor is it strictly appropriate as it requires a fuller understanding than can be gleaned second, or even third hand. Hughes hints in 'Walt' at his inability to console his uncle anymore than he could his father, and how this is the case for the generations who followed those who fought in the First World War. The tone is bleak and mournful; there is a sense that *something* has been lost. Walt's trauma is symptomatic of an afflicted generation of First World War survivors.

'Coming to terms with the past in Wolfwatching', Rand Brandes writes, '...appears in Hughes's poems where genealogy dovetails with history, personal history becomes public history, with the inverse being true as well.' He continues:

In 'Dust as We Are', 'Source', 'For the Duration' and 'Walt', the persona must struggle with the presentness of the past. History as manifest in the First World War, kills the present; thus, the persona recounts the death-in-life experiences of those 'killed but alive'. History asserts its power in the form of silence, nightmares, tears and physical mutilations, where "The whole hoplessness [is] still going on / No man's land still crying and burning / Inside our house." History is 'no man's land' from which one must escape but cannot because it is inscribed in the body...to exorcise history one must talk about it, and the persona attempts to be the therapist working out the 'talking cure' in 'Dust As We Are'...the war poems of Wolfwatching tap some of the same power of Hughes's earlier poems such as 'Out'...What resembles Eliade's 'Terror of history' has been internalised to the extent that the persona feels helpless not simply in the face of present emptiness but, more importantly, in the face of the irreversible past.<sup>486</sup>

*Something* was lost in the battlefields, now irrecoverable under the thick mud and by the passing of each year. Both Hughes's father and his uncle are 'purgatorial shadows'<sup>487</sup> who could be likened to the two wolves caged in a zoo in the poem 'Wolfwatching'; both are in some form of captivity, but have a slight, painful remembrance of something better. They are 'Like doorframes in a desert / Between nothing and nothing.' (117-18)

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<sup>486</sup> Rand Brandes, 'Hughes, History and the World in Which We Live,' Challenge, 151.

<sup>487</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Mental Cases,' The Faber Book of Modern Verse, ed. Michael Roberts, rev. Donald Hall (London: Faber and Faber, 1936 rev. rpt. 1965) 158.

Those who tender that Hughes's poetry is violent may imply a glorification of violence (the common misreading of 'Hawk Roosting', for example) but Hughes depicts death as inglorious, humiliating and painful. As Scigaj notes: 'A poet whose main interest is reputed by some to be violence could never experience the compassion needed to write this poem ['Walt'], nor communicate the pain with such a depth of pity.'<sup>488</sup> This concurs with Owen Johnson's remarks:

'Dust As We Are'...and 'Walt'... have a humanity and alertness which little in Hughes's earlier writing about people led one to anticipate (except his elegies. These people are dead too). With their short precise statements, tender and uncompromising and objective, retreating and trying again when they feel they have betrayed something, the poems possess a beauty which grows with repeated readings...Each poem's series of small images or events – and the human emotions which they subtly, even explicably, do stand for are no longer subjected to Hughes's usual, single, intellectual drift or end; something emotionally complex is built up from quite simple pieces of language.<sup>489</sup>

Of the poets of Eastern Europe, Hughes wrote that their verse 'shows the positive, creative response to a national experience of disaster, actual and prolonged, with an endless succession of bitter events.'<sup>490</sup> This statement may suit Hughes's own war elegies just as well whilst symbolically mimicking the

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<sup>488</sup> Scigaj, *Ted Hughes*, 151.

<sup>489</sup> Johnson, 'Ted Hughes: Speaking for the Earth,' 283.

<sup>490</sup> Ted Hughes, introduction, *Collected Poems* by Vasko Popa, trans. Anne Pennington and Francis R. Jones (London: Anvil Poetry Press, 1997 rpt. 2003) xxi.



elegiac principle of creation being born from the depths of apparent destruction. Wolfwatching presents the reader with Hughes's best attempts at the war elegy. They are both harrowing and haunting in their detail. Moreover, they are a great deal more introspective than his previous efforts. It is his close study of war slowly killing the men who survived it.



Capriccio<sup>491</sup> is the forgotten ancestor of Birthday Letters. Published as a limited edition of fifty copies by the Gehenna Press, it is no wonder its low key appearance did not cause the same excited response that Birthday Letters would eight years later. The poems of Capriccio are largely centred on Hughes's tumultuous (by all accounts) affair with Assia Wevill and her subsequent suicide. The poetic style of the poems pre-empt that of Birthday Letters, with its prose-like drive to the lines laced with extended metaphor and often unmistakable symbols. Capriccio is worth noting because, like Birthday Letters, it is a sequence which mourns and searches for reasons behind a suicide whilst grappling with Hughes's own self-reproach. The opening poem, 'Capriccios',<sup>492</sup> hints at the tragedy. For the most part, the poem is a mixture of lores and folk-myths which surround the supposedly unlucky date of Friday the thirteenth. The Hughes reader is accustomed to his

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<sup>491</sup> Due to the fact that there are no page numbers in this edition of Capriccio, I am forced to introduce a numbering system for the sake of reference. The title page of the first poem, 'Capriccios', will count as page one.

<sup>492</sup> Hughes, Capriccio, 2. Curiously, this poem is re-titled 'Superstitions' when it appears as the final poem of Hughes's Howls & Whispers sequence, ostensibly about Sylvia Plath.

poetry being strongly influenced by his anthropological knowledge of shamanistic ritual, belief and superstition. The poem turns with the line 'You will be laughed at / For your superstition' (26-7) (a line which reads as if it is being addressed to Hughes), the light-hearted tone (befitting a capriccio) suddenly becomes an omen, indeed, an aside which spells out tragic consequences: 'Even so, / Remembering it: will make your palms sweat, / The skin lift blistering, both your lifelines bleed.' (29-30). Though ambiguous, the line suggests that Hughes is reproaching himself for not heeding the superstitions in his life which he has embraced in his poetry. Indeed, the same line does not hint at death, which might be seen as an easy way out from a dire situation, but rather at suffering and slowly applied pain.

To understand the relationship which would cause Hughes this pain, it is worth looking at 'Dreamers'<sup>493</sup> from Birthday Letters, a poem which establishes the relevance of Wevill in the more familiar Plath-Hughes relationship:

We didn't find her – she found us.  
 She sniffed us out. The Fate she carried  
 Sniffed us out  
 And assembled us, inert ingredients  
 For its experiment. The Fable she carried  
 Requisitioned you and me and her.  
 Puppets for its performance.

(1-7)

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<sup>493</sup> Hughes, Birthday Letters, 157.

The stage is quite literally set. Hughes introduces the players and their intertwined fates like a dumb-show, or tableaux from a renaissance play. In these early lines, the reader may well sense that Hughes is attempting to distance himself from his responsibility which was a part of his marital breakdown with Plath. It is a fate that Wevill brought with her, and Hughes is the reluctant participant. The lines which follow describe Plath's apparent fascination with this 'German / Russian Israeli with the gaze of a demon / Between curtains of black Mongolian hair.'(40-2) One cannot help but imagine that these observations are more Hughes's than Plath's, especially with the line which describes Wevill as 'Slightly filthy with erotic mystery' (39). The poem alludes to Wevill's mixed cultural background and, as is often the case in a Hughes poem, offers a wealth of contrasting images in order to achieve a rounded and full description. Alluding to her speech, Hughes describes her German as 'the dark undercurrent / In her Kensington jeweller's elocution' (30), and then further embellishes the contradictory motif of sophistication and ugliness ('Her speech Harrod's, Hitler's mutilations'), painting a picture of Wevill as a *femme fatale*. This mixture of beauty and danger attracts Hughes and Wevill to each other: 'The dreamer in her / Had fallen in love with me and she did not know it. / That moment the dreamer in me / Fell in love with her, and I knew it' (49-52). 'Dreamers' establishes the interplay between Hughes, Plath, and Wevill. With this in mind, it enables one to gain a fuller understanding of the poems of Capriccio.

'Folktale'<sup>494</sup> continues the destructive passion which is outlined in 'Dreamers'. The 'he' and 'she' of 'Folktale' desperately search each other for attributes they have constructed in their own perception of the other:

What he wanted  
 Was the gold, black-lettered pelt  
 Of the leopard of Ein-Gedi.  
 She wanted only the runaway slave.  
 What he wanted was Turgenev's antimassacar.  
 She wanted escape without a passport.

(3-8)

The poem continues in this way, layering image and symbol on top of each other so the effect is mimetic of dizzying passion, echoing 'Lovesong' from Crow. The poem concludes:

So they ransacked each other for everything  
 That could not be found. And their fingers met  
 And were wrestling, like flames  
 In the crackling thorns  
 Of everything they lacked –  
 as midnight struck.

(27-32)

The lines, with their fast paced rhythm, suggest that the climax of the poem is also the climactic moment of physical love. This reaffirms the idea that sex and death are often tightly linked. Ann Skea writes in her perceptive

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<sup>494</sup> Hughes, Capriccio, 22.

Cabbalistic reading of Capriccio, that the poem is an early indication that the relationship between Hughes and Wevill is fated:

...in 'Folktale, as the heart of the relationship is revealed, it is apparent that even when it was most necessary, this couple failed to see beyond their own wants, their own problems, and their own perception of the other. They failed to look deeper and to see each other in a more selfless and accepting way. Ultimately, when the witching hour of midnight struck and the dark energies were at their most disruptive, they still had not learned to balance *eros* and *agape* in their love. So, their relationship was doomed.<sup>495</sup>

The poems repeatedly emphasise the idea that there is something mythic about the Hughes-Wevill relationship, something which is predestined to be fated as if their story is a fable or folklore which has become real. The opening poem, 'Capriccios', alludes to Adam from Genesis, for instance, while 'The Locket'<sup>496</sup> describes Wevill's beauty as a 'folktale wager'. In 'The Mythographers',<sup>497</sup> Wevill is likened to the mythical figure of Lilith.<sup>498</sup> This comparison is unsettling; it suggests that whereas Plath is a tragic figure who was consumed by her own demons, Wevill is instead someone who brings

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<sup>495</sup> Ann Skea, 'Capriccio: The Path of the Sword (2)' The Ted Hughes Homepage <<http://ann.skea.com/Capriccio2.htm>> 24 February 2007.

<sup>496</sup> Hughes, Capriccio, 6.

<sup>497</sup> Hughes, Capriccio, 10.

<sup>498</sup> According to the myth, Lilith is a demoness, or vampire who is thought to harm children. Medieval Jewish legend suggests that she was Adam's first wife; she deserted him, considering him inferior, for which she was punished by God, who ordered that she kill one hundred of her own children. At this point, I would like to suggest Carol Bere's essay 'Complicated with Old Ghosts: The Assia Poems,' (Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons, 29-37.) which is a comprehensive reading of myth and inevitable biographical circumstance in the Capriccio poems.

tragedy with her own destruction. In its exposition of the personal, Capriccio is the immediate forerunner (or perhaps a litmus test) for Birthday Letters. Whilst he uses myth in a number of the poems, this serves to enhance the realities which seem concealed or latent in some of the more dense poems. Each poem reads like a different approach to sufficiently ascertain the truth. Like Birthday Letters, some of the poems do not seem like elegies in the traditional sense; however, they do read like poems written by a person horrified at a death, an 'unmotivated act...without purpose in any mythical or religious sense [with a] a degree of horror'.<sup>499</sup> The poems look to justify these acts and seek consolation but often return empty handed, which lends them an anti-elegiac quality.



After he accepted the role of Poet Laureate in 1984, Hughes fulfilled his duties by commemorating significant events for the Royal Family. His appointment polarised opinions; Neil Roberts notes that Hughes is 'a poet who is pagan in the strongest possible sense, who has described the Christian God as "the man-created, broken-down, corrupt despot of a ramshackle religion"'.<sup>500</sup> Indeed, Hughes's personal beliefs are at odds with those of preceding Laureates, whose beliefs and religious affiliations were of a more

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<sup>499</sup> Carol Bere, 'A Knot of Obsessions,' Boston Review February/March 2004  
<<http://bostonreview.net/BR29.1/bere.html>> 24 February 2007.

<sup>500</sup> Neil Roberts, 'Ted Hughes and the Laureateship,' Critical Quarterly, Summer 1985, 3.

traditional mould. Yet, Hughes's appointment did not hinder his poetry, nor did it provide many moments of revelation. Instead, he brought an integrity to his Laureate poems not seen since Tennyson. Of the Laureate poems which were collected in Rain-Charm for the Duchy,<sup>501</sup> none were elegies. The only elegy he wrote in his official capacity was '6 September 1997', which commemorated the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales<sup>502</sup>. It is here presented in its entirety:

Mankind is many rivers  
 That only want to run.  
 Holy Tragedy and Loss  
 Make the many One.  
 Mankind is a Holy, crowned  
 Mother and her Son.  
 For worship, for mourning:  
 God is here, is gone.  
 Love is broken on the Cross.  
 The Flower on the Gun.

The title is the date her funeral took place. Hughes utilises familiar poetic imagery; the elegy reflects his belief that the Royal Family are responsible for uniting the national 'tribe' spiritually. This is testified by the prefatory poem to his collected Laureate poems entitled 'Solomon's Dream':

A Soul is a wheel.

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<sup>501</sup> Ted Hughes, Rain-Charm for the Duchy (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

<sup>502</sup> Hughes, Collected Poems, 861.

A Nation's a Soul  
 With a Crown at the hub  
 To keep it whole

In his elegy, Hughes repeats this image of national unity; man is represented as many divergent rivers which are made one by 'Holy Tragedy and Loss'. The apparent unity of those grieving Diana's death gives rise to the 'oneness' of Hughes's elegy. But 'the many' is not just a reference to the communal grief which followed her death; it also refers to the 'many' similar deaths in the course of history. James Parker writes:

His point was clear: Di-mania was nothing new, not some freak of media-driven magnification, but rather something ancient, a spasm or blowback from England's buried Catholic memory. Di-mania was Mother-worship, Mariolatry, one of the aspects worn by the Goddess as she passes through history.<sup>503</sup>

The theme of transcendent mothers is at its most acute in *Remains of Elmet*. There, the spiritual mothers 'Gallop their souls', they remind nature of its constant 'cradle-grave'<sup>504</sup> existence; that is, life and death are constantly working to each of their own ends. Hughes builds the oppositions within the poem ('For worship, for mourning: / God is here, is gone.') culminating with 'The 'Flower on the Gun'; these oppositions are symbolic of the natural

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<sup>503</sup> James Parker, 'The Wild Poet,' *The Boston Globe* 21 December 2003, <[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2003/12/21/the\\_wild\\_poet/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2003/12/21/the_wild_poet/)> 10 May 2006.

<sup>504</sup> Hughes, *Remains*, 10.



creative-destructive processes in nature,<sup>505</sup> of which Princess Diana is another victim. The oppositions in his elegy affirm our own mortality, the 'many rivers' become one not only in mourning, but also in death.



Like Capriccio, Howls & Whispers<sup>506</sup> was initially published privately as a limited edition. The poems are a supplement to those featured in Birthday Letters and continue Hughes's investigation into his marriage to Plath. Whilst little more is covered in these poems than one has already read in Birthday Letters, there are still moments of remembrance. The title poem, 'Howls & Whispers',<sup>507</sup> is a candid exposition of the arguments (howls) and gossips (whispers) which Hughes was aware of both leading up to and after Plath's suicide. He reads a letter from Plath's mother, Aurelia, to Plath, "Hit him (Hughes) in the purse,' and 'Be strong / To free yourself: go straight for divorce.'" (13-4). From an anonymous 'analyst', Plath is advised to, 'Keep [Hughes] out of your bed. / Above all, keep him out of your bed.' (15-6). Hughes heightens the tension of the feverish gossips and clandestine conversations by highlighting a 'go-between' who, 'through that last week', did her best 'to prove that only she / Knew the facts and the latest' (29-30). Hughes regards this 'go-between' as a 'double spy', a 'Pretty, innocent-eyed,

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<sup>505</sup> The line symbolises the actual wreath of flowers placed on top of the gun-carriage on which the coffin is borne during a state funeral procession.

<sup>506</sup> Ted Hughes, Howls & Whispers (Hadley, Mass.: The Gehenna Press, 1998). Like Capriccio, this edition is without page numbers. In this instance, the title page of the first poem, 'Paris 1954', will be counted as page one.

<sup>507</sup> Hughes, Howls & Whispers, 32.

gleeful Iago' (35), who, along with her friends, is one of 'the step-up transformers / Of [Plath's] supercharged, smoking circuits' (36-7). Using the familiar elegiac motif of questioning, Hughes asks, 'What did they plug into your ears / That had killed you by daylight on Monday?' (38-9). His resolve is disturbing:

These were the masks that measured out the voltage  
That they wired so tenderly  
With placebo anaesthetic  
Into your ear, and that killed you  
Even as you screamed it at me.

(40-4)

'Howls & Whispers' is a disparaging nod to those who fostered myths and fabricated details about Hughes/Plath in the wake of her death, it also indulges in the elegiac trope of singling out a person or group of people who the poet believes are partly responsible for the death of the deceased.

'The Offers'<sup>508</sup> is one of Hughes's most haunting laments. The poem turns away from those he believed were partly responsible for tipping Plath over the edge, and instead examines himself, a man haunted by the death of his late wife. Like a number of the Remains of Elmet poems, the appearance of the deceased occurs in a mundane situation, in a place where the living are in abundance:

Only two months dead

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<sup>508</sup> Hughes, Howls & Whispers, 46.

And there you were, suddenly back within reach.  
 I got on the Northern Line at Leicester Square  
 And sat down and there you were. And there  
 The dream started that was no dream.  
 I stared and you ignored me.

(1-6)

Hughes juxtaposes the traditional image of the living being unable to see apparitions against the ghost 'ignoring' the person to whom it appears. As a result, Hughes is 'Unable to manifest myself'; he is 'Simply a blank'. The appearance of Plath is 'impossibly real and there', yet, unlike elegies which depict the deceased as forever young in their afterlife, Plath 'seemed older – death had aged [her] a little.' Whilst Plath 'ignores' Hughes, he resolves that should she get off at Chalk Farm station, then he would take the opportunity to speak to her:

I would make some effort to seize  
 This offer, this saddened substitute  
 Returned to me by death, revealed to me  
 There in the Underground – surely as if  
 For my examination and approval.

(42-6)

The labyrinthine tunnels of the Underground continue the use of the Minotaur legend established and associated with Plath in Birthday Letters. Already, the familiar marks of Hughes's anti-elegy are present, not only are the sensory perceptions between the two ruptured, but the chance of dialogue

and communication is not to be found. 'But', as Hughes writes, 'everything is offered three times' (58), so on the second occasion that Plath appears to Hughes, she is 'Young as before, untouched by death' (60). This time, however, the appearance of Plath is less comfortable. Hughes struggles to come to terms with this haunting and finds he is unable to comprehend his 'doubled alive and dead existence.' (89):

I thought: 'This is coincidence – the mere  
Inertia of my life's momentum, trying  
To keep things as they were, as if the show  
Must at all costs go on, same masks, same parts,  
No matter who the actors.'

(90-4)

Once more, instead of the appearance of the dead creating a euphoric response as it might do in elegies of the past, in the case of 'The Offers', it results in Hughes trying to escape, 'Gasping for air' (94), from the apparition of Plath and the unstable reality which her presence has conjured. Her 'gentle ultimatum' relaxes its hold over Hughes: 'It seemed you had finessed your return to the living / By leaving me as your bail, a hostage stopped / In the land of the dead.' (103-5). By the end of Plath's second 'offer', Hughes has relaxed and thinks less about escape, when suddenly, for the third and final time, Plath appears 'Younger than I had ever known you' (110). Finally, she speaks:

...peremptory, as a familiar voice

Will startle out of a river's uproar, urgent,  
 Close: 'This is the last. This one. This time  
 Don't fail me.'

(116-9)

The suggestion from Middlebrook is that this command comes from a variety of voices including Plath, the White Goddess using Plath as a medium, and from Hughes himself.<sup>509</sup> But what is the significance of this voice apparently from beyond the grave, and in what way does it complement Hughes's elegiac output? We are reminded of Hardy's 'The Voice'<sup>510</sup> :

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,  
 Saying that now you are not as you were  
 When you had changed from the one who was all to me,  
 But as at first, when our day was fair.

(1-4)

Like 'The Offers', 'The Voice' reverses the aging of the dead so from an apparent ending, so there is a beginning. It also complements the poet's need to draw on images of youth which carries with it associations of vitality, beauty and innocence. The purpose of the deceased's intervention in both poems seems unclear; for Hardy, one might read into his desperate questioning a sense of guilt and regret. With Hughes's poem there is no explicit conclusion; at its end, the figure of Plath initiates a direct command, whereas in Hardy's poem, the voice might be 'only the breeze' (9).

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<sup>509</sup> Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 282, 288.

<sup>510</sup> Hardy, *The Complete Poems*, 346.

Middlebrook's interpretation of 'The Offers' corresponds with customary elegiac processes. She writes:

The three episodes of his dream in 'The Offers' correspond to phases of a shaman's journey: a summoning of spirits; an ordeal in the underworld; and a return in a new body... Since Plath was, indeed, the form taken by the White Goddess in Hughes's life, it had been her destiny to inflict devastation on Hughes, as well as release his creative fluency.<sup>511</sup>

The creative-destructive processes encountered in elegy are present here in Middlebrook's reading, which includes the acknowledgement of the 'shaman's journey'. As a protégé of the Goddess/Plath, Hughes can also instigate the creative-destructive forces at work as we have seen on several occasions; with Plath he is one of a pair 'who had separated from the other animals by making language that outlasts death.'<sup>512</sup> This lasting of language, an acknowledged product of elegy, is implicitly recognised in 'The Offers', but Middlebrook further suggests that this poem is also Hughes's final word, the legacy of his poetic output. Middlebrook writes, "The Offers' is not only 'the last' of Hughes's marriage poems, it is a 'last' poem in his total oeuvre - a self-consciously performed 'drama of completion' in the evolution of a Poetic Self.<sup>513</sup> It befits the elegy that a lucid completion should occur so that the poet/persona/reader may comfortably tie up the loose ends which death

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<sup>511</sup> Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 282-3.

<sup>512</sup> Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 282.

<sup>513</sup> Middlebrook, *Her Husband*, 283.

leaves behind. But as with Hughes's Flowers and Insects version of 'Daffodils', 'The Offers' is perhaps best appreciated as a piece which is skilfully inconclusive. Similarly Hardy's 'The Voice' is inconclusive; the persona is 'faltering forward' (13) to an unknown destination, the 'Leaves [are] falling' (14) an unknown distance, and 'the woman [is] calling' (16) something undecipherable. This conceit of incompleteness points towards a fragmentary poetic which was certainly prominent in the early twentieth-century; the questions perpetuated by incompleteness mimic the angst of the survivor questioning why someone has suddenly perished.



Hughes's death on October 29th 1998 marked 'the departure of a giant' of post-war English poetry. His obituaries appeared in almost every major newspaper the following day, each one extolling his virtues as a poet; 'after WH Auden, arguably the finest English poet of the century'<sup>514</sup> John Redmond and Alan Sillitoe wrote. For all the journalistic fervour which surrounded Hughes's death, so too the poetic process of memorialising through the elegy continued.

Nick Gammage edited The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes, which collects essays, recollections, anecdotes and poems in praise of Hughes from those who knew, worked, associated with or were influenced by him. Gammage's intention was to invite such people to explain what it was about

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<sup>514</sup> Redmond & Sillitoe, 'Poet of the Spirits of the land,' The Guardian.

Hughes's poetry or prose that appealed to them and to compile it ready for what would have been his seventieth birthday in August 2000.<sup>515</sup> The verse written in memory of Hughes fulfils the prophesy of Auden's line on Yeats, 'He became his admirers'. Many of the elegies for Hughes seem to imitate his own poetic style; for example, the cadence, metre, conjunctives and compound-words of Medbh McGuckian's 'Shannon's Recovery'<sup>516</sup> are reminiscent of his work:

Moon-plunge  
 into the still river-like  
 womb-opening.

Father with your smooth lip  
 my graveless departure,  
 swallow its stillness

(1-6)

...

Its pencil-faint patches  
 drawing small frames  
 in a silver direction

(13-15)

The taut haiku-like verse, the tensile rhythms, and in this instance, the imagery, all bear an uncanny resemblance to Hughes's poetry of the seventies, especially Remains of Elmet and Cave Birds. It seems as if the poetry on the

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<sup>515</sup> Gammage ed., The Epic Poise, xiv.

<sup>516</sup> Medbh McGuckian, 'Shannon's Recovery,' The Epic Poise, 189.



occasion of Hughes's death supports the proverbial: imitation is the best form of flattery. Using Hughes's own poetic idiosyncrasies prolongs his own art, and it also shows appreciation for the poetry he has written by overtly demonstrating his influence. It is as if the elegies for Hughes are filling in a gap left in his absence. However, not all of the elegies imitate Hughes.

Muldoon's 'Herm'<sup>517</sup> reads like a poem *by* Muldoon. It is certainly one of the more successful poems to be found in The Epic Poise. He is more explicit about Hughes's influence and the effect of his loss than McGuckian's elegy:

'We were counting

on you to hold steady, to stay

our consolation and stay.'

'But I've always taken my bearings from you' he'll hear himself  
remark,

'It was you I took for my mark.'

(18-23)

The repetition of 'stay' and the adapted repetition of 'mark' subtly owe themselves to Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night'. 'Stay' also reads as a plea, just as the repetition of 'stone' and 'ash' earlier in the poem can be read as the material of a memorial and of cremation respectively. Furthermore, 'stay' brings to mind one of Muldoon's influences, Robert Frost, and one of his famous remarks about poetry: 'poetry ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded

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<sup>517</sup> Paul Muldoon, 'Herm,' The Epic Poise, 196.

on, but a momentary stay against confusion.<sup>518</sup> Without the subject of the poem, the persona is disorientated and has no one to stay him, the poem alluding to the sense of bewilderment which death often leaves in its wake.

But the elegies for Hughes in The Epic Poise are not just about Hughes's identity, they are about what the writer identifies in Hughes. Adrian Mitchell's pastiche of Wallace Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', entitled 'Nine Ways of Looking at Ted Hughes', was written for Hughes while he was alive, 'to celebrate his work and make him smile'.<sup>519</sup> The poem is technically unremarkable and does little to challenge the reader: 'When you take a photograph of Ted / It's a job to get him all in - / like taking a snapshot of Mount Everest'. This is where many of the elegies in The Epic Poise seem to falter; they seem unable to strike a harmonious balance between more esoteric themes and subtleties on one side, and overt, personal remembrance on the other, which is where some of the poems read like a competition to find those who were most familiar with Hughes. Because the elegies are all concentrated in this 'memorial' book, they lack a subtlety which they may have otherwise attained had they been individually published.

Seamus Heaney's tribute to Hughes, 'Stern', appears in District and Circle.<sup>520</sup> 'Stern' has a depth which the elegies of The Epic Poise seem to lack;

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<sup>518</sup> Robert Frost, Collected Poems, Prose & Plays (New York: Library of America, 1995) 777.

<sup>519</sup> Adrian Mitchell, 'Nine Ways of Looking at Ted Hughes,' The Epic Poise, 192.

<sup>520</sup> Seamus Heaney, District and Circle (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) 46.

this is because the poem has had time to mature. It has a sedate quality which The Epic Poise elegies compromise simply because they seem hurried and uncertain of what they want to say. Beginning *in medias res*, the first verse of Heaney's elegy has the persona (presumably Heaney) recalling a conversation he had with Hughes about his meeting T.S. Eliot:

‘When he looked at you,’  
He said, ‘It was like standing on a quay  
Watching the prow of the *Queen Mary*  
Come towards you, very slowly.’

(3-6)

Heaney recapitulates this image which Hughes provided in order to conclude his elegy:

Now it seems  
I'm standing on a pierhead watching him  
All the while watching me as he rows out  
And a wooden end-stopped stern  
Labours and shimmers and dips,  
Making no real headway.

(7-12)

The function of the lengthy space on the first line of the verse permits a pause as if the poet is drawing a significant breath before a difficult emotional recollection, before it is interrupted by the decisive turn (“Now”). Heaney has cut a clear divide between Eliot (the *Queen Mary*) and Hughes (a rowing boat). The rowing boat is symbolic of Hughes's poetry. There is an organic

quality to it: his poetry 'Labours and shimmers' in terms of effort and the resulting output respectively. Eliot is akin to a great cruise ship, which effortlessly cuts through the ocean. The rowing boat is closer to nature, it requires skill and effort; one must be attuned to the environment in which it operates, and have determination to successfully manage it. Hughes was a poet who consistently developed a close connection with what he was trying to represent through poetry, which is why the rowing boat is a significant motif. Whereas the opening stanza creates an intimate atmosphere, the second stanza creates a feeling of isolation for Heaney, who is left on the pier, watching instead of interacting. The poem cleverly builds the isolation by switching from dialogue in the first verse, to internal monologue in the second. This is then compounded by the fact Hughes is rowing away from Heaney. But it is here that Heaney seeks his consolation. Though Hughes is rowing away from Heaney, he is 'making no real headway'; Hughes may have died, but he is still close in Heaney's memory, and the years which 'labour' since he passed away have made little difference to Heaney's connection with him. For Heaney, the difference between Hughes being alive and being dead is simply a matter of communication; he can no longer hold an actual communicative dialogue with the deceased, though he can see him in his mind's eye.

Andrew Motion, who succeeded Hughes as Poet Laureate in 1999, has written three published works for his predecessor. 'Reading the Elephant' was

published in Salt Water<sup>521</sup> during the penultimate year of Hughes's life. 'In Memory of Ted Hughes' was written shortly after Hughes's death, and was later published in The Guardian<sup>522</sup>, whilst a short prose piece, 'While I Was Fishing', was collected in Public Property<sup>523</sup>. 'In Memory of Ted Hughes' is well titled; Motion's recollection of the last time he met Hughes is very personal, to the extent that it received criticism from some quarters:

Shortly after Hughes died, Motion published an embarrassing poetical tribute to him, recollecting their last meeting, accompanied by their wives, at a riverside pub. Not only did the poem end with Hughes performing a virtual laying on of hands to Motion as his successor... written in an excruciating pastiche of the blank verse of Hughes's own Birthday Letters. Motion has indignantly rejected the suggestion that the poem was not so much an elegy as a job application.<sup>524</sup>

The extract from the poem in Sexton's article is sentimental, perhaps clichéd, but it is too obvious and tiresomely sensational to call it a 'job application'. If the poem has a fault, it might be that it is too literal a transcription of Motion's memory into verse. But then, it is *Motion's* poem for Hughes; it is a way of recording their last meeting in a medium appropriate to his skill. Perhaps this would account for its absence from succeeding collections of his

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<sup>521</sup> Motion, Salt Water, 10.

<sup>522</sup> Andrew Motion, 'In Memory of Ted Hughes,' The Guardian 19 May 1999 <[http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday\\_review/story/0,3605,295982,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,3605,295982,00.html)> 13 May 2006.

<sup>523</sup> Andrew Motion, Public Property (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 37-43.

<sup>524</sup> David Sexton, 'Seeking Poetry in Motion,' Evening Standard (London) 21 May 1999 <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4153/is\\_19990519/ai\\_n11896959](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4153/is_19990519/ai_n11896959)> 13 May 2006.

poetry, because it is too personal. However, Motion's short prose recollection of his own childhood spent fishing is an unusual memorialisation for Hughes. Aside from the dedication ('In Memory of Ted Hughes') Motion's brief autobiography could not be considered elegiac; the sole allusion to Hughes is the fishing, which he was very enthusiastic about. It may not be an elegy, but 'While I was Fishing' seems a slightly more appropriate remembrance for Hughes. It is less about Hughes and more about an impression he has left, which if his deliberate reserve towards the media was anything to go by, he would have preferred.

The successful elegies for Hughes seem to follow his own example. His elegy for Jack Orchard, 'The Day He Died', manages to mourn the deceased without actually referring to him; it draws on what has been left behind. This is where Motion's and Heaney's elegies seem more successful than a number of The Epic Poise elegies: they are not about the legacy he has left behind, but what has been lost because of his passing. At his funeral,<sup>525</sup> Heaney recited 'The Day He Died', an elegy that seems highly appropriate for Hughes himself. But perhaps it is Heaney's moving tribute which best describes Hughes's loss on both a personal and a poetic level:

No death outside my immediate family has left me feeling more bereft. No death in my lifetime has hurt poets more. He was a tower of tenderness and strength, a great arch under which the least of poetry's children could enter and feel secure. His

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<sup>525</sup> Tuesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1998.

creative powers were, as Shakespeare said, still crescent. By his death, the veil of poetry is rent and the walls of learning broken.<sup>526</sup>



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<sup>526</sup> 'Seamus Heaney at Ted Hughes' funeral, North Tawton, Devon, November 3rd, 1998.' Earth-Moon: A Ted Hughes Website  
<[http://www3.sympatico.ca/sylviapaul/hughes\\_memoir\\_biography\\_tributes.htm](http://www3.sympatico.ca/sylviapaul/hughes_memoir_biography_tributes.htm)> 18 August 2007.

### Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to exhibit a largely unacknowledged aspect of the poetry of Ted Hughes, that of the elegist. His work as an elegist could be likened to the geometric pattern of a triangle: developing from the wide base of his war elegies, gradually narrowing in focus with elegies of and for specific locales and ways of life, before finally reaching the pinnacle of his development with Birthday Letters, which is centred on one person alone. The hawk in rain is a potent early symbol of Hughes's commitment to fusing the altercating dimensions of the poetic imagination and authentic, liveable experience in his verse, which he would continue throughout his career. This study tenders the argument that Hughes presents in his elegies a determination to portray a language of 'actual' experience, which is designated as his 'unfalsified dream'. The resulting stylistic choices by Hughes have set him against established traditions of elegy; but in many cases, his approach has not been antagonistic, rather an attempt to bring the elegy forward in the twentieth-century by trading in familiar tropes and invocations for a more immediate relevance, so intensifying the urgency of his poetry.

Rand Brandes acknowledges that Crow's legacy bears an importance worthy of note: 'Without Crow, Hughes could not have gone on to write his most powerful works of rebirth and redemption: Cave Birds, Moortown



Elegies, River and Birthday Letters.<sup>527</sup> But I would insist that Remains of Elmet should rightfully be recognised triumphantly as a work of rebirth and redemption. For all the emotional power that Birthday Letters generates, it does not equal Remains of Elmet as perhaps the most impressive of Hughes's works, and one which is perhaps the most remarkable sequence of elegies to emerge in the post-war period. The striking combination of lament for the country, a commitment to ecological views of decomposition and renewal, and a deft handling of a personal subject matter has Hughes pivoting between the elegist for national issues and the elegist lamenting personal tragedy. He achieves this balance in a verse which unleashes the raw power of nature accurately portrayed. However, the poems of Remains of Elmet show that Hughes is equally capable as an anti-elegist. One of the obvious anti-elegiac tendencies in this sequence is Hughes's refusal to present a sentimental vision of his native part of England. He instead employs a rural mode of writing which is true to his unfalsified linguistic dream in his elegies and at a remove from the idylls of the pastoral mode/elegy. There is a sense in these poems that Hughes resents having to elegise the area at all, as if to say 'it need not have come to this'. As such, the elegies are sometimes scathing and often use common elegiac tropes in order to subvert the verse and draw it into anti-elegy. In defying expectations of the elegy, and producing a sequence of anti-elegies instead, Hughes achieves his most vivid realisation of a poetic which

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<sup>527</sup> Brandes, 'Ted Hughes: Crow,' Twentieth Century Poetry, 522.

rejects established literary codes. Hughes's development as an elegist has involved a reform of the very practice of elegy, which means that his anti-elegiac contributions have, paradoxically, achieved the writing of elegy.

Hughes's elegies have invigorated the existing rituals of elegiac practice. Processions, flowers, rivers, mourners, the poet mourning the poet, are all features of Hughes's elegies, but they are not over-used and do not compromise Hughes's commitment to his presentation of the 'actual'. His is a 'modern elegiac language which combines poignancy and wit, expressing sympathetic involvement with the dying individual, and a firm objectivity about the fact of death.'<sup>528</sup> He does not discount the influence of earlier poets and elegies either, but again, he refuses to slavishly follow their patterns. He has remodelled the English elegy from a very strict form, to a verse of great energy free from the conventional restraints of previous engagements with elegiac poetry. Instead of simply working within the legacy of other writers, Hughes has set a precedent. Hughes's comments on the works of the post-war Eastern European poets may also be read as a self-reflexive commentary on the nature of his own verse:

[Their poetry] seems closer to the common reality, in which we have to live if we are to survive, than to those other realities in which we can holiday, or into which we decay when our bodily survival is comfortably taken care of, and which art,

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<sup>528</sup> Gifford and Roberts, *Critical Study*, 91.

particularly contemporary art, is forever trying to impose on us as some sort of superior dimension.<sup>529</sup>

His message is clear; poetry must be alert and energetic, it must not court the banal or convey a comforting inertia if it is to survive. This does not do justice to human beings or the world in which they live. This is what can be read in Hughes's elegies where consolatory verse is often implied within a complicated arrangement of images and influences from myth and lore; such tales may seem at a remove from the 'common reality' if it is not remembered that such tales are quite frequently metaphors for familiar and shared experience. As a consequence, accessible consolation appears hard to come by in Hughes's verse; his elegies do not submit to pithy moralising and sentimentalising as this would be untrue to the unceremonious natural processes which are a part of the governance of humanity. But at the same time (and this is portrayed most vividly in the poems of Moortown Elegies and Birthday Letters) there is a tenderness in his elegies which recognises and attends to humanity's encounters with this natural world, and the many and varied emotions born out of these encounters which are as much a line of defence against despair as they are a means of comprehension. His elegies often seem to capture the moment where the harsh realities and processes of the natural world meet the emotional engagement which humanity brings to and imparts upon it. Of the same East European school, Hughes also wrote of

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<sup>529</sup> Hughes, introduction, Collected Poems by Vasko Popa, xxi.

their 'careful refusal to seal themselves off from what hurts and carries the essential information, a careful refusal to surrender themselves to any mechanical progression imposed on them by the tyranny of their own words or images, and endless scrupulous alertness on the frontiers of false and true.'<sup>530</sup> Yet, once again, this is as true for Hughes's verse as it is for those of whom he writes. Hughes's continued practice of re-energising his poetry with changes of stylistic direction, and his own steadfast refusal to appear complicit with pre-existing poetic norms, coupled with his presentation of the actual, make his elegies as unique as they are rewarding.

In his own analysis of poetry, Hughes states that, 'One of the great problems that poetry works at is to renew life, renew the poet's own life, and, by implication, renew the life of the people, if they respond to the way he has done it for himself'<sup>531</sup> This is an effective manifesto for Hughes's own elegiac output; he deftly moves from elegies of social observation, to elegies of agonising introspection, leaving behind a unique and distinctive legacy for elegy itself.




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<sup>530</sup> Hughes, introduction, Collected Poems by Vasko Popa, xxiii.

<sup>531</sup> Sagar, Challenge, Preface.

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