

From Prospero to Orpheus.

A relief map of a poet's childhood landscape is often an amazingly accurate map of that poet's psyche and imagination. That landscape is available to the poet not only as subject matter and 'local colour'; it can provide him with a fund of vital images, and with a paradigm for his understanding of life itself and his own inner being. If the business of the poet is, as Hughes has claimed, to find metaphors for his own nature, then the earliest images to present themselves as such metaphors are likely to be the contours, climate, flora and fauna of the first familiar place, especially if that place has been the family home for generations. Both Hughes and Plath became very aware of this, and wrote their own accounts of it. Plath's 'Ocean 1212-W' and Hughes' 'The Rock' appeared in *The Listener* within three weeks of each other in 1963.

The rock in Hughes' essay is Scout Rock, near his birthplace, Mytholmroyd, in the Calder Valley, from which the moors rise steeply on both sides, to the North stretching as far as Haworth.

The most impressive early companion of my childhood was a dark cliff, to the South, a wall of rock and steep woods half-way up the sky, just cleared by the winter sun. This was the **memento mundi** over my birth: my spiritual midwife at the time and my godfather ever since - or one of my godfathers. From my first day, it watched. If it couldn't see me direct, a towering gloom over my pram, it watched me through a species of periscope: that is, by infiltrating the very light of my room with its particular shadow.

One feature similarly dominated Plath's childhood:

My childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land - the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic. I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own.

And again, the sea reached her when she was out of sight by infiltration:

Even with my eyes shut I could feel the glimmers off its bright mirrors spider over my lids. I lay in a watery cradle, and sea gleams found the chinks in the dark green window blind, playing and dancing, or resting and trembling a little.

This was not the sea of Melville. It was a sea not of depths (the 'whaled monstered sea-bottom' which fascinated Hughes) but of surface and

mirrors, prismatic, not of relics but of jewels, not of sharks but of mermaids. Though this sea was capable of great violence, leaving spectacular wreckage and a dead shark in the geranium bed, ‘my grandmother had her broom out, it would soon be right’. Nothing could disturb her sense that the sea’s role in relation to herself was to bring her blessings, to lay its coloured magical tribute at her feet - ‘the purple “lucky stones” I used to collect with a white ring all the way round, or the shell of a blue mussel with its rainbowy angel’s fingernail interior’; nothing until the final sudden betrayal, the triumph of the real world:

My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle - beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.

Hughes, on the other hand, records that his first seven years were a struggle to escape from a curse, a shadow-trap:

If a man’s death is held in place by a stone, my birth was fastened into place by that rock, and for my first seven years it pressed its shape and various moods into my brain. There was no easy way to escape it. I lived under it as under the presence of a war, or an occupying army: it constricted life in some way, demanded and denied, and was not happy. Beneath it, the narrow valley, with its flooring of cricket pitch, meadows, bowling greens, streets, railways and mills, seemed damp, dark and dissatisfied. ... The final sensation was of having been trapped.

He remembers the first time he made that escape, the climb with his brother, at about six, to the top of the rock. He felt ‘an alarming exhilaration. I felt infinitely exposed, to be up there on the stage I had been trying to imagine for so long’. Then, behind the immediate barrier, were the high moors:

Ultimately, the valley was surrounded by moor skylines, further off and higher than the rock, folded one behind another. The rock asserted itself, tried to pin you down, policed and gloomed. But you **could** escape it, climb past it and above it, with some effort. You could not escape the moors. They did not impose themselves. They simply surrounded and waited.

Already the boy is being shaped to see life as a quest to discover and reach whatever is over the edge of the known world.

If any word could be found engraved around my skull, just above the ears and eyebrows, it would probably be the word 'horizon'. Every thought I tried to send beyond the confines of that valley had to step over that high definite hurdle. In most places the earth develops away naturally in every direction, over roads and crowded gradients and confused vistas, but there it rose up suddenly to a cut empty upturned edge, high in the sky, and stopped. I supposed it somehow started again somewhere beyond, with difficulty. So the visible horizon was the magic circle, excluding and enclosing, into which our existence had been conjured, and everything in me gravitated towards it.

The spirit of the high moors was 'the peculiar sad desolate spirit that cries in telegraph wires on moor roads, in the dry and so similar voices of grouse and sheep, and the moist voices of curlews'. The light up there was very different, 'at once both gloomily purplish and incredibly clear, unnaturally clear, as if objects there had less protection than elsewhere, were more exposed to the radioactive dangers of space, more startled by their own existence'. The spirit was eerie, unpleasant, disastrous, too close to the stone, too close to death, yet, like Lorca's *duende*, ultimately exultant.

From there the return home was a descent into the pit, and after each visit I must have returned more and more of myself to the valley. This was where the division of body and soul, for me, began.

The moors became, as for Emily Bronte, a spiritual home. His imagination needed the thrust of the Pennines:

Those barrellings of strength are heaving slowly and heave
 To your feet and surf upwards
 In a still, fiery air, hauling the imagination,
 Carrying the larks upward. [‘Pennines in April’]

The flora and fauna of the region carried a clear message to the boy, that life was a continual struggle, against all the odds, merely to survive. Yet the fact that it did, barely, survive was miraculous - that the curlews could, apparently, live on air, that the polluted canal beside his house could one day produce a trout ('an ingot', 'a treasure', 'a free lord')

A seed
 Of the wild god now flowering for me
 Such a tigerish, dark, breathing lily
 Between the tyres, under the tortured axles
 [‘The Long Tunnel Ceiling’]

that what humbled these hills had also raised

The arrogance of blood and bone,
 And thrown the hawk upon the wind,
 And lit the fox in the dripping ground. [‘Crow Hill’]

Hughes told Ekbert Faas that all the forms of natural life were ‘emissaries from the underworld’. In the 1995 *Paris Review* interview, Hughes was asked why he chose ‘to speak through animals so often’. He replied:

I suppose, because they were there at the beginning. Like parents. Since I spent my first seventeen or eighteen years constantly thinking about them more or less, they became a language - a symbolic language which is also the language of my whole life. It was ... part of the machinery of my mind from the beginning. They are a way of connecting all my deepest feelings together. So, when I look for, or get hold of a feeling of that kind, it tends to bring up the image of an animal or animals simply because that’s the deepest, earliest language that my imagination learned. [81]

A year later, in the Negev interview, he added: ‘It was a symbolic language that became attached to my own emotions and remained. My first six years shaped everything’.

The fox quickly became Hughes’ personal totem, the perennial victim but also the unquenchable flame. His attempts to keep orphaned fox cubs were disastrous. He was fascinated by those men who chose (like his own ancestor Crag Jack) to renounce the complacencies of the civilized world and throw in their lot with the non-human creation; and by those whom the turmoil of history had thrown over the top into the no-man’s-land of trench warfare. The images with which his father and uncle, both wounded hair’s-breadth miraculous survivors of the first world war, filled the imagination of the growing boy were not difficult to match with those flooding his experience from the natural world around him.

That is one way of looking at those first seven years; but it is only part of the truth, a part perhaps more coloured by self-conscious adult recollection than another view, which seems closer to the consciousness of such a young child, and much closer, remarkably parallel, to the experience of Sylvia Plath over those same first seven years.

By far the most important relationship of Hughes' Mytholmroyd years was with his brother Gerald, ten years his senior. Gerald was adept at all the things Ted wanted to do, camping, lighting fires, using a rifle. Ted was his eager retriever as he shot anything that moved. They went camping together in the nearby beautiful valleys, such as Hardcastle Crag and Crimsworth Dene. These times were bliss for the young Ted; these places paradisaical:

Two stepped down from the morning star.
 The stolen grouse were glowing like embers.
 The dew split colour.
 And a cupped hand brimmed with cockcrows.
 ...

Then the stream spoke oracles of abundance
 And the sun poured out at their feet.

But when Hughes was seven and his family moved to Mexborough in South Yorkshire, Gerald did not go with them. He cut loose to become a gamekeeper in Devon - the happiest year of his life. He spent most of the war in Africa. After the war he married and went to Australia. Gerald had been his guide, not only physically, to the secret, magical places, but the spirit guide into the unfallen animal world for the apprentice shaman:

The guide flew up from the pathway.

The other stood still.

The feather fell from his head.
 The drum stopped in his hand.
 The song died in his mouth.

[‘Two’]

This loss of the elder brother was, of course, nothing like as traumatic an experience as Sylvia Plath's loss of her father at the same age. But, combined, as it was, with the loss of the whole landscape of his childhood, it was a watershed, sealing off those years as a dream of innocence.

In the event, there were equally magical places near Mexborough, such as Old Denaby, where Hughes tried to sustain the dream, at first alone, later with a school friend who shared his obsession with fishing and shooting. Though the landscape of South Yorkshire was less dramatic than that of West Yorkshire, the fauna was even more so. Hughes lived within walking distance of both the Don and the Dearne, and would frequently leave home early enough in the morning to give himself time to investigate the wild life of these rivers. There was a stretch of the Don where the river in spate had scooped out large hollows between places where the root systems of trees held the soil in place. Hughes found that if he silently climbed up the side of one of these hollows and peeped over the edge, there would frequently be some creature there. On one occasion, as he climbed one side of the hollow, quite unknown to him a fox was climbing the other. They arrived at the ridge simultaneously, and looked into each other's eyes from a distance of a few inches. For a split second, which seemed timeless, Hughes felt that the fox had leapt into his head, supplanting his own provisional human nature with its own definitive foxhood. This was the kind of experience he most wanted from the natural world, encounters with another, deeper reality, with something so totally other as to be sacred, yet also able to speak as nothing else could to his own depths, depths below all conditioning and education. Indeed, school and nature came to seem opposites, one the place where he should be incarcerated and disciplined according to artificial rules, the other the place where, in Emily Bronte's words, his 'own nature would be leading'; and this became the subject of some of his boyhood poems:

But when evenings came for working where was I? - In some place
lurking
In the woodlands, always shirking any thing that needed ink.

At eleven, Hughes discovered in the school library Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*, which became his bible for two years until he almost knew it by heart. That book showed him how the poetic imagination could not only express but deepen and enrich one's response to the natural world. Alongside Kiplingesque sagas about Zulus or the Wild West, he began to write his own poems about fishing and shooting. Miss McLeod, his first form mistress at Mexborough Grammar School took an interest in his writing. Then a young English teacher, Pauline Mayne, picked out a line in a poem he had shown her about a wildfowling expedition, a line describing the hammer of the wildfowler's gun breaking in the cold 'with a frost chilled snap'. 'That's poetry', she

said. ‘If that’s poetry’, he thought, ‘I can give you no end of it’. Since writing poems about nature needed ink, such poems became the link between his truant disposition and his developing literary interests.

After the departure of Gerald, Hughes’ older sister Olwyn became an important influence. Hughes wrote to me:

His absence left me to my sister – who took his place as my mentor. She was the prodigy at school. – And I see now she had marvelously precocious taste in poetry. When my teacher began to make remarks about my writing my mother went out and bought a whole library – 2nd hand – of classic poets. All the Warwick Shakespeares, & everything after. Eventually Olwyn got me into the Shakespeare. They coached me, somehow – perpetual expectations. ... So all that started up alongside my shooting & fishing obsession. The later teachers – Pauline Mayne and John Fisher – became close friends of my mother’s & Olwyn’s & of mine, of course. So, I was in that cooker from age of about eleven – and totally confident that I belonged in it, so by 16 I have no thought of becoming anything but writer of some kind, certainly writing verse.

In one sense, this was a wonderful education for a budding poet. But in another, it meant that, like Sylvia Plath, Hughes was now ‘in the cooker’ of the high literary and academic expectations of the women who surrounded him, women he loved and admired. By the time he was sixteen, he had no thought of becoming anything but a writer. Yet there has remained throughout his adult life a hankering for the lost dream world, a suspicion that in going down the road of grammar school and university he had sacrificed another life altogether, the possibility of emulating his brother by becoming a gamekeeper or emigrating to Australia. What he later found most attractive about Henry Williamson when he met him was that ‘he was untamed, and he was free’.

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Writing poems, even when they were not about animals, was capturing animals by other means:

In a way, I suppose, I think of poems as a sort of animal. They have a life of their own, like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. And they have a certain wisdom.

they know something special ... something perhaps which we are very curious to learn. Maybe my concern has been to capture not animals particularly and not poems, but simply things which have a vivid life of their own, outside mine. [*Poetry in the Making*, 15]

Another boyhood poem is called 'On catching a 40 lb. pike'. Not far from his home was the site of an ancient monastery, with a pond 'as deep as England' in which were huge and ancient pike, which the young Hughes would fish for at night (since it involved trespassing):

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

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

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

Fishing became, very early, the perfect metaphor for the poetic act as Hughes came to understand it. Concentration on a float has the same effect of dissolving the ego as concentration on a poetic subject.

All the little nagging impulses, that are normally distracting your mind, dissolve. They have to dissolve if you are to go on fishing. If they do not, then you cannot settle down: you get bored and pack up in a bad temper. But once they have dissolved, you enter one of the orders of bliss. ... At every moment your imagination is alarming itself with the size of the thing slowly leaving the weeds and approaching your bait. Or with the world of beauties down there, suspended in total ignorance of you. And the whole purpose of this concentrated excitement, in this arena of apprehension and unforeseeable events, is to bring up some lovely solid thing like living metal from a world where nothing exists but those inevitable facts which raise life out of nothing and return it to nothing.

(*Poetry in the Making*, 60-1)

The imagination is an antenna projected from the known self into the darkness of the unknown, from which it can haul into consciousness and articulation whatever horrors or marvels live there. And the metaphor works equally well whether the darkness is the world beyond the human or the darkness of the poet's own unconscious. The results suggest that the Great Outer Darkness (which spells God), is the same as the small inner darkness, since 'what you find in the outside world is what's escaped from your own inner world' (as Hughes said in an interview). What might rise from the depth of a pond and what might rise to consciousness in a dream are the same thing. Every gaze into outer darkness is also a 'shut-eyed look / Backward into the head' ['The Bull Moses']. Every fox is a thought-fox.

The poet's job is hence to release as many as he can of the caged beasts of his being, at least as a prerequisite, before he can do anything else, such as understand, control or recognize those energies. The opposition between those caged energies and the world of analytical intellect came to a head in Cambridge. Cambridge English stopped me writing poetry for sixteen years. It has had the same effect on many others, including Hughes. Exhausted by the effort to start an essay on Dr. Johnson, Hughes at last gave up and went to bed. Immediately he dreamed that his door opened and there entered 'a figure that was at the same time a skinny man and a fox walking erect ... Every inch was roasted, smouldering, black-charred, split and bleeding. Its eyes ... dazzled with the intensity of the pain' It left its bloody footprints on the unwritten page, then said to him: 'Stop this - you are destroying us' [*Winter Pollen* 9]. The following night an erect leopard entered his bedroom and silently pushed him backwards over a chair.

I connected the fox's command to my own ideas about Eng. Lit. , & the effect of the Cambridge blend of pseudo-critical terminology and social rancour on creative spirit, and from that moment abandoned my efforts to adapt myself. I might say, that I had as much talent for Leavis-style dismantling of texts as anybody else, I even had a special bent for it – nearly a sadistic streak there, but it seemed to me not only a foolish game, but deeply destructive of myself. (Letter to KS, 16 July 1979.)

Hughes took these dreams so seriously that at the end of the year he transferred from English to Archaeology and Anthropology, a study which introduced him, among many other things, to the international currency of theriomorphic images. The fox, the wolf and the jaguar escaped from the furnace into his poems.

Sylvia Plath continued to feel an alien in a world she had been systematically unprepared for, like the protagonist of Lawrence's 'The Princess'. At eighteen she wrote:

After being conditioned as a child to the lovely never-never land of magic, of fairy queens and virginal maidens ... the beautiful dark-haired child (who was you) winging through the midnight sky on a star-path in her mother's box of reels ... all this I knew, and felt, and believed. All this was my life when I was young. To go from this to the world of 'grown-up' reality ... To feel the sex organs develop and call loudly to the flesh; to become aware of school, exams, bread and butter, marriage, sex, compatibility, war, economics, death and self. What a pathetic blighting of the beauty and reality of childhood. [*Journals* 20-21]

Apart from the sea, nothing in Plath's childhood landscape seems to have impinged on her. It seems to have been a landscape from which disturbing wildness had been effectively removed, safe, tame, controlled. Nature provided no alternative values to nurture. And the values of nurture were that the purpose of life is personal success earned by hard work and measured in fame and money.

The purpose of Plath's childhood poems was the same as her grandmother's broom, to make everything all right. Her poetic creations provided the insulation of comforting myths, of universal approval. They were part of the process of weaving her 'web of happiness'. They fortified the sense of the centrality and security of selfhood, compensating with their display of the mastery of words and forms for any disturbance life might have caused. At the age of fourteen, Plath astonished her English teacher by handing in a group of poems, of which he most admired a poem called 'I Thought That I Could Not Be Hurt', which contains the lines:

Then, suddenly my world turned gray,
and darkness wiped aside my joy.
A dull and aching void was left
where careless hands had reached out to destroy

my silver web of happiness.
The hands then stopped in wonderment,

for, loving me, they wept to see
the tattered ruins of my firmament.

[*Letters Home* 34]

The devastating experience which had produced this agony was the accidental smudging of one of her pastel drawings by her grandmother. The poems were read in class and highly praised. Sylvia commented:

I was overjoyed, and although I am doubtful about poetry's effect on the little strategy of 'popularity' that I have been slowly building up, I am confident of admiration from Mr. C!

Popularity became part of her larger strategy of 'success', to be measured in terms of fame and money. Her doubts about the contribution poetry could make to this pushed her towards the short story. Hughes writes:

Her ambition to write stories was the most visible burden of her life. Successful story-writing, for her, had all the advantages of a top job. She wanted the cash, and the freedom that can go with it. She wanted the professional standing, as a big earner, as the master of a difficult trade, and as a serious investigator into the real world. ... So her life became very early a struggle to apprentice herself to writing conventional stories, and to hammer her talents into acceptable shape. 'for me,' she wrote, 'poetry is an evasion from the real job of writing prose.' (*Johnny Panic*, 2-3)

She tried to judge her poems by the same criteria of saleability, ('I depend too desperately on getting my poems, my little glib poems, so neat, so small, accepted by *The New Yorker*' she wrote a week before meeting Hughes).

Some of Plath's pre-Cambridge poems were astonishingly accomplished. She had already mastered some of the most difficult forms, such as the villanelle. It was Plath, not Hughes, who consigned everything she had written before their meeting to *Juvenilia*. She knew that her prodigious technical skill was not releasing, was perhaps building an elaborate prison for, the deeper self, the creative energies of the greatest poetry.

Plath and Hughes met each other's poetry before they met each other. The first poems Plath published in Cambridge were 'Epitaph in Three Parts' and "'Three Caryatids without a Portico"' by Hugo Robus. A Study in Sculptural Dimensions', which appeared in *Chequer* in January 1956. Hughes and several of his friends, including David Ross, Daniel

Weissbort and Daniel Huws, were circulating a fortnightly critical *Broadsheet* in reaction against the Cambridge poetry magazines, which seemed to them to favour lifeless form at the expense of the charge and charm they recognized as the real thing. They seized on ‘Caryatids’ as representing the worst sort of pretentious arty empty formalism. They ‘concocted / An attack, a dismemberment, laughing’ (‘Caryatids’ 2). In his review of that issue of *Chequer* in *Broadsheet* Huws wrote: ‘Of the quaint and eclectic artfulness of Sylvia Plath’s two poems my better half tells me “Fraud, fraud”, but I will not say so; who am I to know how beautiful she may be’. (In fact both Hughes and Huws had been told how beautiful she was by Lucas Myers, who had already met her.) Unfortunately, ‘Caryatids’ was Plath at her worst:

In this tercet of torsos, breast and thigh
slope with the Greek serenity
of tranquil plaster;

each body forms a virgin vase,
while all raise high with regal grace
aristocratic heads;

these maidens would support with valor
a portico that weighed the pillar
of classic sister,

but such a trial is not granted
by the gods: behold three daunted
caryatids.

It was the only Plath poem Hughes ever read ‘through the eyes of a stranger’:

It seemed thin and brittle, the lines cold.
Like the theorem of a trap, a deadfall - set.
I saw that. And the trap unsprung, empty.
I felt no interest, no stirring
Of omen. In those days I coerced
Oracular assurance
In my favour out of every sign.
So missed everything
In the white, blindfolded, rigid faces
Of those women. I felt their frailty, yes:

harsh reality she cannot live with. So Plath had developed her ceremony of words - a month before meeting Hughes she wrote of her thesaurus 'which I would rather live with on a desert isle than a bible' (*Journals* 97), her penchant for writing about the world reflected in works of art, her architectural imagery and structures, to prevent the 'whirlwind' of real days from breaking into her magic castle. Yet at the same time desperately, fearfully, wanting to be released from it, and recognizing Hughes as 'an ally of the generous creative opposing forces' (97).

After a visit to her psychiatrist, Plath wrote: 'I fear oppressive and crushing forces. ... I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word patterns I make' (131). Hughes used poetry for exactly the opposite purpose, to smash through the layers of protective insulation, of 'order and ordinary', to let in the 'wandering elementals'.

Hughes' already written poem 'Wind' might have been about precisely this. The fragile window trembles to come in under intolerable pressure from a wind which would sweep away books, thoughts, normal human relationships, all sense of the security and centrality of selfhood; shatter the house itself, the carefully built structure of civilization (that Castaneda calls the *tonal*) with which we try to insulate ourselves against the energies without and within (that Castaneda calls the *nagual*, and Lorca the *duende*).

As long as his *tonal* is unchallenged and his eyes are tuned only for the *tonal's* world, the warrior is on the safe side of the fence. He's on familiar ground and knows all the rules. but when his *tonal* shrinks, he is on the windy side, and that opening must be shut tight immediately, or he would be swept away. And this is not just a way of talking. Beyond the gate of the *tonal's* eyes the wind rages. I mean a real wind. No metaphor. A wind that can blow one's life away. In fact, that is the wind that blows all living things on this earth. (*Tales of Power*, 176)

Plath's first impressions of Hughes were recorded in imagery of wind:

We shouted as if in a high wind, about the review. ...He said my name, Sylvia, in a blasting wind which shot off in the desert behind my eyes, behind his eyes, and his poems are clever and terrible and lovely. ... I dream a banging and crashing in a high wind. (*Journals* 111-114)

In 'The Queen's Complaint' she wrote: 'All the windows broke when he stalked in'. And in the journals she recorded the impact of his poetry as

both a release and a violation: ‘Ted can break walls ... and in my mind I am ripped to bits by the words he welds and wields’ (142).

Castaneda’s word ‘warrior’ is perhaps apposite for Hughes, who had already instinctively adopted a view of the poet as quest hero, as one who, on behalf of the race, undergoes an ego-death, purifies himself for the quest into the unknown, the ‘opening’, the pitch dark where the animal runs; who goes, at great cost and risk, to ‘negotiate with whatever happens to be out there’. Such a view of the role of the poet has, of course, major implications for form and language. Far from seeking to perfect a ‘ceremony of words’ to distance and defuse experience, Hughes had from the start sought words that ‘cannot be outflanked by experience’ because they are inseparable from it, exist in the same dimension as rock or wind or blood or death (a kind of language he found in the Border Ballads). While Plath searched her thesaurus, Hughes plundered Anglo-Saxon and dialect for the words and rhythms he needed. He struggled to free himself from ‘the maternal octopus of the English poetic tradition’.

It is a return to an alliterative poetry that, pounding, brutal and earthbound, challenges the Latinate politeness of artificial society with ruthless energy and cunning, and so drags the Latinate words into its unruly, self-ruling world that even *they* come to sound northern and Germanic. The pummelling trochees and lead-weighted, bludgeoning spondees have a mesmeric effect, beating and rooting out of us those once apparently safe underlying rhythms of rhetorical and philosophical discourse, mental scene-painting and nostalgic or evocative reflection, with which the iambic pentameter is so closely associated. Quite literally, by asserting the naked, deeper rhythms of our Germanic (and also onomatopoeic) heritage, Ted Hughes is taking the English language back to its roots.

(from “‘Natural” Rhythms and Poetic Metre’,
an unpublished essay by A.S. Crehan)

It was precisely this diction and these rhythms Sylvia found in the Hughes poems she read before meeting him, poems which made her determined that she *would* meet him, that he might be the one to help her ‘make something tight and riding over the limits of sweet sestinas and sonnets’ (as she wrote a few hours before meeting him, at the launch of the *St. Botolph’s Review*). One of the four Hughes poems in the first and only number of that review was ‘Soliloquy of a Misanthrope’ in which he expresses his preference for ‘every attitude showing its bone, / And every

mouth confessing its crude shire', and the prophetic 'Fallgrief's Girl-friends', where Fallgrief determines to seek no more than a 'muck of a woman' to match his 'muck of a man', only to be frustrated by outrageous fortune:

he meant to break out of the dream
 Where admiration's giddy mannequins
 Lead every sense to motley; he meant to stand naked
 Awake in the pitch dark where the animal runs,
 Where the insects couple as they murder each other,
 Where the fish outwait the water.

The chance changed him:
 He has found a woman with such wit and looks
 He can brag of her in every company.

It was this persona that Plath decided to inflate still further and enrol in the overblown melodrama she records in her journal, not, at first, as the hero, the black panther, but as understudy for Richard Sassoon, who was wisely extricating himself. The real Hughes matched this persona physically, but had assumed it in some of his poems partly to compensate for his actual shyness and reticence, his sense, in Cambridge, of his own provinciality and inexperience. Hughes never saw the journals until after Plath's death.

Hughes' poems (she no doubt soon read all he had written - about half the poems in *The Hawk in the Rain*), were initiations into a world totally foreign to Plath, characterized by what seemed to her a magical closeness to the natural world. She responded to the poems in much the same way as to the creatures he introduced her to or invoked for her. Plain hawthorns were mysteries, common mallards unearthly:

You were a camera
 Recording reflections you could not fathom.
 I made my world perform its utmost for you.
 You took it all in with an incredulous joy
 Like a mother handed her new baby
 By the midwife. (‘The Owl’)

Hughes accepted the role she had cast him in before even meeting him, not the as yet unsuspected role of substitute father, but the role of the hero who would release her real self from its prison, the midwife of that rebirth.

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At the first opportunity after their return from their honeymoon in Spain, Hughes took Plath to Yorkshire, which he believed she would find 'therapeutic'. Her immediate response suggested that this was so. She wrote to her mother of the 'most magnificent landscape', claiming to be a 'veritable convert to the Bronte clan':

I have never been so happy in my life; it is wild and lonely and a perfect place to work and read. I am basically, I think, a nature-loving recluse. Ted and I are at last 'home'. (268-9).

Hughes was not so sure. Uncle Walt took them to Top Withens (the setting of *Wuthering Heights*). Hughes saw this in retrospect as having been something of a test for Plath. How would she respond to what, for him, was holy ground? Would she share any of his sense of spiritual kinship with the ghost of Emily Bronte? '- how would you take up now / The clench of that struggle?' It was, perhaps unfortunately, an idyllic day. Walter encouraged Sylvia's 'transatlantic elation'. She climbed a tree for a snapshot.

What would stern
Dour Emily have made of your frisky glances
And your huge hope? ('Wuthering Heights')

Plath recorded in her journal 'the furious ghosts nowhere but in the heads of the visitors and the yellow-eyed shag sheep' (148-9).

On a later visit to the area Plath found herself out alone at night in less benign weather. The long wind pared her down 'to a pinch of flame'.

All the night gave her, in return
For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
Of her heart, was the humped indifferent iron
Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set
On black stone ... but before the weight
Of stones and hills of stones could break
Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light
She turned back. ('Hardcastle Crag')

Far from being 'home', this was the most alien environment Plath had experienced, the exact concrete embodiment of her recurrent nightmare 'of being crushed in a huge dark machine, sucked dry by the grinding

indifferent millstones of circumstance' (*Journals* 131). The idea of living in Yorkshire was dropped, and they returned to London.

* * *

The immediate effect on Plath's poetry had been devastating. Her dissatisfaction with her previous work became a sweeping, self-castigating contempt, so that eventually even her finest poems such as 'Circus in Three Rings' and 'Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea' were rubbished as products of 'the old crystal-brittle and sugar-faceted voice'. Instead she tried to adopt Hughes' voice, with all its aggressive monosyllabic diction and wrenched syntax. There are several striking acts of ventriloquism, such as 'Spinster' and 'Strumpet Song':

Walks there not some such one man
 As can spare breath
 To patch with brand of love this rank grimace
 Which out from black tarn, ditch and cup
 Into my most chaste own eyes
 Looks up.

Hughes knew that this would not do. His job was to help Plath to find her own true voice, and neither of them had any idea what that might sound like.

Of one thing Hughes was sure, that he did not want Plath to become a 'confessional' poet. In 1966 he wrote:

Her poetry has been called 'confessional and personal', and connected with the school of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. She admired both these poets, and knew them personally, and they both had an effect on her. and she shares with them the East Massachusetts homeland. But the connection goes no further. Her poetic strategies, the poetic events she draws out of her experience of disintegration and renewal, the radiant, visionary light in which she encounters her family and the realities of her daily life, are quite different in kind from anything one finds in Robert Lowell's poetry, or Anne Sexton's. Their work is truly autobiographical and personal, and their final world is a torture cell walled with family portraits, with the daily newspaper coming under the door. The autobiographical details in Sylvia Plath's poetry work differently. She sets them out like masks, which are then lifted up by dramatis personae of nearly supernatural qualities. The world of her poetry

is one of emblematic visionary events, mathematical symmetries, clairvoyance, metamorphoses, and something resembling total biological and racial recall. And the whole scene lies under the transfiguring eye of the great white timeless light.¹

In other words, Hughes believed that the best poetry was the most imaginative, and that the closer poetry stayed to the 'facts' of autobiography and the details of daily life, the less scope was left for the operations of imagination. It seemed to him that only by marshalling the full powers of imagination could 'deadly negatives' be transformed into 'triumphant positives'. If a writer were unable to get beyond the autobiographical, they were likely to 'simply stay as they were, a recurrent stuck dream that simply goes on delivering its inescapable blow'. His models were Shakespeare and Coleridge.

This was how, in *Crow*, Hughes began, after a three year silence, to try to escape from the blow of Plath's death.

Hughes later became less hostile to confessional poetry. In the *Paris Review* interview of 1995 he admitted that the masks, the symbols, the analogies, of the kind of poetry he had always preferred, could be seen as a kind of cowardice, a fear of going naked, a 'strategy of concealment, of obliquity':

The novelty of some of Robert Lowell's most affecting pieces in *Life Studies*, some of Anne Sexton's poems and some of Sylvia's, was the way they stripped off the veiling analogies. Sylvia went furthest in the sense that her secret was most dangerous to her. She desperately needed to reveal it. You can't overestimate her compulsion to write like that. She had to write those things - even against her most vital interests. [75]

Yet, even while admiring the courage and recognizing the necessity for such poems, Hughes continues to believe that a less personal and naked expression might have produced even better art:

Once you've contracted to write only the truth about yourself - as in some respected kinds of modern verse, or as in Shakespeare's sonnets - then you can too easily limit yourself to what you imagine are the truths of the ego that claims your conscious biography. Your own equivalent of what Shakespeare got into his plays is simply foregone. [69-70]

¹ Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, 1980, p.180.

And not only better art. It might also have served Plath's 'vital interests' better - even have saved her life.

Of course, the influence of Hughes on Plath was by no means a one-way affair. 'I see now that when we met, my writing, like hers, left its old path and started to circle and search'. She introduced him to American literature.

But our minds soon became two parts of one operation. We dreamed a lot of shared or complementary dreams. Our telepathy was intrusive. [77]

One effect of the relationship on Hughes was to make him much more self-conscious about his own work, more interested in articulating his position and reading works of anthropology and psychology which could provide him with a firm launch-pad. He began to devise exercises they could do together, which proved as useful to himself as to Plath. Hughes tried to take her back to what for him had always been the elements of poetry, as one might teach a complete beginner. We hear his voice in the *Journals* :

Poems are bad to begin with: elaborate ones especially: they freeze me too soon on too little. Better, little exercise poems in description that don't demand philosophic bear traps of logical development. Like small poems about the skate, the cow by moonlight, a la the Sow. Very physical in the sense that the worlds are bodied forth in my words, not stated as abstractions, or denotative wit on three clear levels. Small descriptions where the words have an aura of mystic power: of Naming the name of a quality: spindly, prickling, sleek, splayed, wan, luminous, bellied. Say them aloud always. Make them irrefutable. (163)

Most of the exercises in *Poetry in the Making* probably had their origin as exercises devised primarily for Plath. In 1957 Plath wrote, obviously echoing Hughes:

All I need to do is work, break open the deep mines of experience and imagination, let the words come and speak it all, sounding themselves and tasting themselves. (162)

In the first chapter of *Poetry in the Making* Hughes was to write:

Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it.
(18)

It was a terrible struggle for Plath to wean herself of long-established habits of composition. Several months after the marriage she was planning a novel: 'Then I can write slowly, rewriting each chapter, carefully with a subtle structured style. If I can ever find a subtle structured style' (*Journals* 155). In the 'Writing a Novel' chapter of *Poetry in the Making* Hughes recommends 'letting your imagination go and following it with your pen as fast as you can'. Together they worked at 'headlong, concentrated improvisation on a set theme'. Limits were set, perhaps one side of paper and ten minutes:

These artificial limits create a crisis, which rouses the brain's resources: the compulsion towards haste overthrows the ordinary precautions, flings everything into top gear, and many things that are usually hidden find themselves rushed into the open. Barriers break down, prisoners come out of their cells.
(*Poetry in the Making* 23)

That final image is clearly much more appropriate to Plath than to a class of schoolchildren, and reveals the true origin of these exercises.

Other exercises were more esoteric, less appropriate for schoolchildren, such as efforts to exploit dream material, and to obtain assistance from the stars or the Ouija board. They asked whatever it was that spoke to them through the Ouija board (it called itself Pan, not the Great God Pan, but a little spirit that lived in the bottom of an iceberg) to suggest subjects for poems. To Hughes Pan suggested an otter.² Though he had always been fascinated by otters, he had not yet attempted to write about them. He produced a good poem, and read it to Pan. Pan was not satisfied, and offered to help if he would write a second part to the poem. Part I is an evocation of a creature neither fish nor beast, of neither land nor water, in Lawrencean free verse, half-quoting Lawrence's 'Snake': 'Like a king in hiding'. The second part of the poem as published is a tighter rhyming poem about the even more important frontier the otter straddles, between life and death:

² For further information about the ouija, Pan, and the writing of 'An Otter' see Sagar, ed., *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*, British Library, 2012, pp. 267-8.

The otter belongs

In double robbery and concealment -
 From water that nourishes and drowns, and from land
 That gave him his length and the mouth of the hound.

* * *

In London there was to be another incident which only with hindsight could be seen as an even more crucial, more ominous test than the visit to Top Withens. The title of Hughes' poem 'Epiphany' suggests a sudden revelatory encounter with something recognized as sacred. It is another encounter with a fox, this time a helpless captive cub in the middle of London, in the possession of a man who is trying to sell it for a pound. In both the previous encounters with foxes we have noted, the fox has embodied values alternative to, and under desperate pressure from, the outer conditions of Hughes' life - school, university, now marriage.

Like all the best poetic symbols, like Lawrence's birds, beasts and flowers, Hughes' creatures are very real, even to the 'sudden sharp hot stink of fox'. So Hughes' anecdote of the fox-cub, like Lawrence's of the snake, works perfectly at the level of realism. How could a man take a fox-cub home to a wife, any wife, let alone one completely out of touch with wildlife, trying to cope with a new baby in a tiny London flat? But the poem, as the title tells us, is about something else:

Then I walked on

As if out of my own life.
 I let that fox-cub go. I tossed it back
 Into the future
 Of a fox-cub in London and I hurried
 Straight on and dived as if escaping
 Into the Underground. If I had paid,
 If I had paid that pound and turned back
 To you, with that armful of fox -

If I had grasped that whatever comes with a fox
 Is what tests and marriage and proves it a marriage -
 I would not have failed the test. Would you have failed it?
 But I failed. Our marriage had failed.

Clearly, if Hughes were still talking only of adopting a fox-cub, such a test of a marriage would be grossly unreasonable. The crucial phrases are 'as if out of my own life' and 'whatever comes with a fox'.

In 1915 Lawrence described the cyclamens of Lake Garda as 'little living myths that I cannot understand'. He knew that to come to such understanding was the greatest possible achievement in life or art. It was only by recognizing the superior reality, the sacredness, of unfallen creatures, that their meaning could be released. An adequate response to the blueness of a gentian then requires the question: 'What, in me, can answer to this blueness?' Every creature is a message about God:

In the very darkest continent of the body, there is God. And from him issues the first dark rays of our feeling, wordless, and utterly previous to words; the innermost rays, the first messengers, the primeval, honourable beasts of our being, whose voice echoes wordless and forever wordless down the darkest avenues of the soul, but full of potent speech. Our own inner meaning.
(*'The Novel and the Feelings'*)

And poetry is the nearest we can get to that potent speech. In '*Orghast: Talking Without Words*', Hughes says much the same thing:

The luminous spirit (maybe he is a crowd of spirits), that takes account of everything and gives everything its meaning, is missing. Not missing, just incommunicado. But here and there, may be, we hear it. It is human, of course, but it is also everything else that lives. When we hear it, we understand what a strange creature is living in this Universe, and somewhere at the core of us - strange, beautiful, pathetic, terrible. Some animals and birds express this being pure and without effort, and then you hear the whole, desolate, final actuality of existence in a voice, a tone. There we really do recognize a spirit, a truth under all truths.
(*Winter Pollen*, 124-5)

Hughes asks what in him can answer to this fox-cub. He identifies the fox with his own inner meaning, his authenticity, the ultimate truth of his being, the god or luminous spirit in him, the *nagual*, the *duende*. It is that part of each of us that the pressures of living in our society, the compromises demanded by relationships and domestic responsibilities, force us to walk away from, to ignore or repudiate, to condemn to suffering or death by neglect.

These meanings are reinforced if we make the connection between 'Epiphany' and 'The Golden Bird' as recorded by the brothers Grimm. In our culture we can hardly respond to the word 'epiphany' without registering the more specific meaning of the Feast of the Epiphany, or Twelfth Night, the story of the quest of the three kings (bearing three precious gifts) for a transforming encounter with the divine. In 'The Golden Bird' three men embark on a difficult quest for the golden bird, with no idea where to look or how it is to be caught. The men go one at a time, and it is a doomed quest except for the third and youngest, and almost for him, because far from bearing gifts or seeking the divine, they are impelled by mere worldly greed. Success is possible, but only by listening to the wisdom of the fox, which is the voice of their own innermost being. The fox insists on stripping away all the values symbolized (in a materialistic, spiritless world) by gold. They must not, he tells them, be dazzled by appearances, wealth, comfort, but must choose the 'poor and mean', the dirty and shabby, over the rich, pleasant and beautiful. But the reconstructed self which is capable of choosing the shabby wooden cage over the golden cage, the old leather saddle over the golden saddle, would no longer be capable of devoting a life to obtaining possession of a golden bird, a golden horse, and a golden girl. It is dressed as a poor man that the youngest son finally gains admission to the home from which he has been excluded by his grasping brothers.

The Magi, on the other hand, were questing for a new birth, their own as well as the saviour's. In Eliot's poem, their quest involves a 'cold coming' through unknown territory, at 'just the worst time of the year'. They have sacrificed their former selves and values, 'the old dispensation', the 'summer palaces' and 'silken girls'. They had to overcome the voices in their ears that it was all folly. How otherwise could they hope to recognize as sacred, as King of Kings, a naked child surrounded by beasts in a lowly stable? Their success is not measured in wealth or happiness. They return to their kingdoms to be henceforth alienated from their people, wishing for 'another death'.

On the realistic surface, the main sacrifice Hughes had made in his pursuit of the golden girl was to accept what he took to be Plath's ambitions for himself also. He had been amazed when, on asking the Ouija the question he assumed Plath would want to ask: 'Shall we be famous?', she had reacted with fury:

'And give yourself to the glare? Is that what you want?
Why should you want to be famous?
Don't you see - fame will ruin everything.'
I was stunned. I thought I had joined

Your association of ambition
 To please you and your mother,
 To fulfil your mother's ambition
 That we be ambitious. Otherwise
 I'd be fishing off a rock
 In Western Australia. (‘Ouija’)

The figure of the mother acquires an almost folktale status as she attempts to provide a new wardrobe for the bride and groom appropriate to her ambitions for them. For the wedding she brought Plath a ‘pink wool knitted dress’, but Hughes wore his old thrice-dyed black cord jacket (‘No ceremony could conscript me / Out of my uniform’), so that he felt like ‘the Swineherd / Stealing this daughter’s pedigree dreams’. The blue flannel suit Plath wore for her first class when she began teaching at Smith College Hughes came to see as a ‘mad, execution uniform’:

I watched
 The strange dummy stiffness, the misery,
 Of your blue flannel suit, its straightjacket, ugly
 Half-approximation to your idea
 Of the proprieties you hoped to ease into,
 And your horror in it. [‘The Blue Flannel Suit’]

Seeing her stiffen into it, he saw ‘the lonely / Girl who was going to die’. Proprieties of dress merged into those of behaviour and, of course, poetry. Gently, humorously, for the best of motives, those who were confident that they had Plath’s best interests at heart sought to curb the disturbing new wildness of her verse. In March 1957 Olive Higgins Prouty wrote to her:

Someone remarked to me after reading your poem ‘Pursuit’ in the *Atlantic*, “How intense”. Sometime write me a little poem that isn’t intense. A lamp turned too high might shatter its chimney. Please just *glow* sometimes . . . [Bitter Fame 85]

At the time it seemed to both Hughes and Plath that such comments were inimical to the very distinction of Plath’s work, which lay in the fact that ‘she saw the world in the flame of the ultimate substance and the ultimate depth’. (Faas, 181-2).

* * *

Hughes' first attempt to explain to himself and others what had happened to Plath's poetry during their marriage came with the publication of *Ariel* only two years after her death. He spoke of the compulsive pattern-making of her early work, her 'obsession with intricate rhyming and metrical schemes ... almost perverse, with their bristling hurdles', and contrasted this with the momentum of her late work, 'charged with terrific heat, pressure and clairvoyant precision'.

But the truly miraculous thing about her will remain the fact that in two years, while she was almost fully occupied with children and house-keeping, she underwent a poetic development that has hardly any equal on record, for suddenness and completeness. The birth of her first child seemed to start the process. All at once she could compose at top speed, and with her full weight. Her second child brought things a giant step forward. All the various voices of her gift came together, and for about six months, up to a day or two before her death, she wrote with the full power and music of her extraordinary nature. [*Winter Pollen*, 162]

We know now that the development had been far from sudden or miraculous, but had been worked at assiduously by both Plath and Hughes for the several years of their marriage. Nor does Hughes here even hint that there might be any connection between her nature, her poetic power, and her death. These are precisely the connections which were being made simultaneously by Robert Lowell in his introduction to the American edition of *Ariel*. In the harshest poems (such as 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy') he recognizes 'the strident rasp of the vampire - a Dido, Phaedra, or Medea'. He admires the feverish energy, 'yet it is too much; her art's immortality is life's disintegration. ... These poems are playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder'. He refers to her 'last irresistible blaze', her 'appalling and triumphant fulfillment'. In comparison, Hughes' comments seem evasive.

Five years later, in his 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', the birth to which he refers is not that of Plath's children, but of Plath herself: 'The new birth is requisitioning all nature to its delivery'. Hughes is now more open about his own input:

At this time [1959] she was concentratedly trying to break down the tyranny, the fixed focus and public persona which descriptive or discursive poems take as a norm. We devised exercises of meditation and invocation. [*The Art of Sylvia Plath*, 191]

He describes also deliberate exercises in experimental improvisation on set themes:

She had never in her life improvised. The powers that compelled her to write so slowly had always been stronger than she was. But quite suddenly she found herself free to let herself drop, rather than inch over bridges of concepts. [192]

He describes one such exercise from 1962:

Opposite the front of our house stands a church. Early one morning, in the dark, I saw the full moon setting on to a large yew tree that grows in the churchyard, and I suggested she make a poem of it. By midday, she had written it. It depressed me greatly. It's my suspicion that no poem can be a poem that is not a statement from the powers in control of our life, the ultimate suffering and decision in us. It seems to me that this is poetry's only real distinction from the literary forms that we call 'not poetry'. And I had no doubt that this was a poem, and perhaps a great poem. [193-4]

There is no attempt to explain that sentence: 'It depressed me greatly'. Clearly he was thrilled that she had, as it were, completed her apprenticeship, had produced one of her first great poems, over which he had no control, wanted no control. If she was to fulfill her potential as a great poet, her poems must speak her fate, even when that statement was far from what either of them wanted to hear. The same darker note was sounded the following year in a piece in the *Observer*:

The poetry of the *Ariel* poems was no surprise to me. It was at last the flight of what we had been trying to get flying for a number of years. But it dawned on me only in the last months which way it wanted to fly. [Winter Pollen, 165]

Hughes' introduction to Plath's *Collected Poems* added nothing. Presumably he wanted the poems to speak for themselves. In his foreword to Plath's *Journals* in 1982, Hughes tried to put his finger on the very moment when he first heard the Ariel voice. He claims to have heard it for the first time in the summer of 1959:

Her real self showed itself in her writing, just for a moment, three years earlier [than the *Ariel* poems], and when I heard it - the self I had married, after all, and lived with and knew well - in that brief moment, three lines recited as she went out through a doorway, I knew that what I had always felt must happen had now begun to happen, that her real self, being the real poet, would now speak for itself, and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolized the words up to that point, it was as if a dumb person suddenly spoke. [*Journals* xii]

They were lines from the ending of 'The Hermit at Outermost House' :

Still he thumbed out something else.
Thumbed no stony, horny pot,

But a certain meaning green.
He withstood them, that hermit.
Rock-face, crab-claw verged on green.

Gulls mulled in the greenest light.

It was no great poem, but he wrote of it: 'It has the comic goblin, the tricksterish spirit, the crackling verbal energy, that was the nymph-form - a lot of Caliban in it - of *Ariel*.' [*The Art of Sylvia Plath*, 190].

The first poem-length breakthrough came a few months later, with the final part of 'Poem for a Birthday' - 'The Stones' - 'where the voice of Ariel can be heard clearing its throat' Then a struggle of two and half years, including *The Bell Jar*, before the emergence, finally, of 'the first true Ariel poem', 'Elm', where 'some bigger suggestions pushing through a constricted, suppressive group of lines about an elm tree ... transformed her whole technique, and located her true subject matter' [*Winter Pollen*, 210].

But it was in the long essay on Plath's *Journals*, published in *Grand Street* in 1982, that Hughes developed his position most fully. Here Hughes for the first time puts Otto Plath, Sylvia's father, at centre stage. Here Hughes accepts the imagery of fire, that Plath was 'forcing herself deeper into some internal furnace', that he was deliberately stoking that furnace, but tends to deny, in his prose, that it was other than an alchemical workshop where the crucible was part of a classic Jungian process of individuation:

We have spoken of this process as a ‘nursing’ of the ‘nucleus of the self’, as a hermetically sealed, slow transformation of her inner crisis; and the evidence surely supports these descriptions of it as a deeply secluded mythic and symbolic inner theatre (sometimes a hospital theatre), accessible to her only in her poetry. One would like to emphasize even more strongly the weird autonomy of what was going on in there. It gave the impression of being a secret crucible, or rather womb, an almost biological process - and just as much beyond her manipulative interference. And like a pregnancy, selfish with her resources. ... The process was, in fact, a natural and positive process, if not the most positive and healing of all involuntary responses to the damage of life: a process of self-salvation - a resurrection of her deepest spiritual vitality against the odds of her fate. [*Winter Pollen*, 180-2]

The subject matter of the *Ariel* poems, he says, ‘didn’t alarm her’:

Why should it, when Ariel was doing the very thing it had been created and liberated to do? In each poem, the terror is encountered head on, and the angel is mastered and brought to terms. ... She had overcome, by a stunning display of power, the bogies of her life. [188]

We are perhaps now in a better position to understand the difference between Lowell’s account of *Ariel* and Hughes’. For Hughes it is the story of ‘how a poetic talent was forced into full expressive being, by internal need, for a purpose vital to the whole organism’ [184]. Lowell, reading *Ariel* for the first time as the work of a dead poet, making no distinction, not having the information to make any such distinction, between the pre- and post-1963 poems, assumes a necessary continuity which Hughes denies. This is clearest in his essay on ‘Sheep in Fog’, the crucial importance of which is inseparable from its being Plath’s only poem to span that divide. Hughes there insists that what he means by ‘the Ariel voice’ is the voice of those pre-1963 poems Plath herself collected under that title. The later poems, which he decided to add to her collection, were not the voice of the escaped triumphant survivor, but a new voice, embittered and desperate, disabled by a new fatal combination of circumstances from coping with a last attack by the seemingly defeated forces.

That is the story as Hughes had consistently told it in cool prose, acknowledging the risk and cost, but ultimately not questioning that embarking on and carrying through this process was, in spite of the

ending, of the fact that ‘her new self could not ultimately save her’, vindicated by *Ariel*. That is not to say, of course, that a book of great poems is worth a young life. It is to say that the alternative to that temporary triumph over her fate would have been to go down to it without even the satisfaction of making a fight of it. Hughes’ many descriptions of this process are confidently positive, barely troubled by any doubts that the process was as clearly a moral duty as Prospero’s duty to release Ariel from the cleft pine.

Hughes’ insistence that ‘it was a process of integration start to finish’ involved making a complete separation between Plath’s poetry and her death, and consigning the latter to the realm of pure accident. He claimed in a 1981 letter to me (which must have been written at about the same time as the *Grand Street* essay) that her death was ‘not at all essential to the poems’:

I read all those Ariel poems as a climb – not a fall. A climb to a precarious foothold, as it turned out. But she was knocked off again by pure unlucky combination of accidents.

He enumerated these accidents and developed his case at great length in order to counteract ‘the notion of her as a young woman hurtling to disintegration shedding rags of poetry – leaping into Aetna & bursting into flames as she fell’. Hughes argued this case again and again very persuasively, almost convincingly. But his very insistence perhaps indicated that his main concern was to convince himself, to hold at bay the totally different account which was to erupt in the nineties in the poems he came to call *Birthday Letters*, where the very same images that constituted his positives in the prose (the pregnancy, the ‘internal furnace’) now constitute (particularly in ‘Suttee’ and ‘The God’) the most irredeemably destructive and horrific elements of his vision.

The ‘Sheep in Fog’ essay was written in 1988. But in his most recent account, ‘Sylvia Plath’s *Collected Poems* and *The Bell Jar*’, written in 1995, the balance has shifted a great deal. The positive account is still there, fully and strongly stated: ‘the author’s psychic autobiography, the creation-myth of the new person that had emerged in the ‘Poem for a Birthday’ and that would go on in full cry through *Ariel*’ [*Winter Pollen*, US ed. 468], reinterpreted here in terms of the Osiris myth. But now the positive and negative elements are no longer described as phases, the one replacing the other at a specific date, the end of 1962, but as two levels, the upper, purposive level, and a lower level of ‘unalterable truth’.

The 'positive' aspect of the ritual holds good only on that upper level - where her shaping will is in control, where the ritual magic is choreographed according to plan, and the rebirth is hopeful.

On the lower level it was only a seeming and temporary triumph:

When she tries to impose her protective, positive interpretation and nurse the germ of an authentic rebirth, in her nativity ritual, the material itself is doing something quite different. ... The symbolism discloses a pattern of tragedy that is like a magnetic field in the very ground of her being. ... The simultaneity of the two levels, and the bewildering fact that each level speaks in the equally-real-or-symbolic terms of the other, produces the paradox that makes the novel, the poems and the author truly tragic.[480-1]

When we turn to *Birthday Letters* we find that the lower level, the pattern of tragedy, takes over almost exclusively. Given that the poems were written over a long period, with no thought of publishing them as a collection, let alone a sequence, there is amazing richness and coherence of imagery. All the interwoven strands of imagery - dreaming, sleepwalking, the labyrinth; acting parts in an already written play (or merely dangling as puppets, or manipulated as glove puppets by immense hands); drowning; burning; blood - lead to the same inexorable finale, the same triumph of death (in the person of the dead father) over everything that can be set against it.

The most obvious difference is that the rational and objective accounts in prose take for granted a world in which the actors have a measure of freedom and control. This assumption is completely absent from the poems, which are darker, more confused and doubtful, more fatalistic. The characteristic tone of the poems is of ironic resignation. Everything Hughes and Plath thought they were doing as free intelligent individuals was in fact part of a tragic drama written in the stars before they even met:

Nor did I know I was being auditioned
For the male lead in your drama. [‘Visit’]

That day the solar system married us
Whether we knew it or not. [‘St. Botolph’s’]

In the prose, as we have seen, Hughes argued that the process of releasing the Ariel voice at almost any cost was justified by the outcome,

Alone

Either of us might have met with a life.
 Siamese-twinning, each of us festering
 A unique soul-sepsis for the other,
 Each of us was the stake
 Impaling the other.

['9 Willow Street']

Admittedly, these lines describe a particularly difficult period in the relationship; but even the whole controlling myth, presented in the prose as that of Jungian alchemical rebirth, is here the opposite: 'the myth we had sleepwalked into: death':

'Find the core of the labyrinth.' Why? What opens
 At the heart of the maze? Is it the doorway
 Into the perfected vision? Masterfully
 The voice pushed us, hypnotized, bowing our heads
 Into its dead ends, its reversals,
 Dreamy gropings, baffled ponderings,
 Its monomaniac half-search, half-struggle,
 Not for the future - not for any future -

Till it stopped. Was that the maze's centre?
 Where everything stopped? What lay there?
 The voice held me there, by the scruff of the neck,
 And bowed my head
 Over the thing we had found. Your dead face.

['Fishing Bridge']

In poem after poem we find Hughes sleepwalking, groping, like an actor without a script, or with the wrong script, or finding himself playing the wrong role. The role Hughes had chosen for himself was that of Prospero in *The Tempest*, with Plath, naturally, as Ariel. He spoke of Plath's poetry as 'the story of Ariel's imprisonment in the pine, before Prospero opened it' [*Winter Pollen*, 178]. Plath certainly regarded Hughes as a magician. His familiarity with the animal world was, to her, 'a mystery of peculiar lore and doings':

Anything wild, on legs, in your eyes
 Emerged at a point of exclamation
 As if it had appeared to dinner guests
 In the middle of the table.

['The Owl']

He made his world perform its utmost for her entertainment. His masterpiece was the summoning of an owl. Yet early in *Birthday Letters* Hughes repudiates the role of Prospero, claiming to have been altogether the wrong ‘witchdoctor’ to manage either Plath or her Daddy:

In my position, the right witchdoctor
Might have caught you in flight with his bare hands,
Tossed you, cooling, one hand to the other,
Godless, happy, quieted.

I managed

A wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your nightgown.

[‘The Shot’]

But who is, in fact, the ‘male lead’ in *The Tempest*? Is it Prospero, or Ferdinand, or even Caliban? The Hughes who introduces Plath to all the secrets of his world, which is the natural world, would perhaps have been recognized by someone to whom that world was less amazing as Caliban before he has been brutalized showing Prospero and Miranda ‘all the qualities o’ th’ isle’. When Plath evoked Hughes in ‘Faun’ she brought him close to his beloved wodwo, and Shakespeare incorporated features of the wodwo into Caliban.

Aurelia Plath certainly tried to refashion Hughes as Ferdinand, a more suitable son-in-law. His unwillingness to disrupt his marriage with a fox-cub might be seen as submitting himself to the kind of emasculation Prospero demands of Ferdinand.

There are even glimpses of Hughes in the role of the naive Miranda:

At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh
By my ignorance of the simplest things. [‘Fulbright Scholars’]

A sober star warns him to ‘stay clear’, but in his innocence he rushes to embrace and, of course, be betrayed by, a brave world new to him:

You were a new world. My new world.
So this is America, I marvelled. [‘18 Rugby Street’]

These parallels with *The Tempest* were not imagined by Hughes after the event, but were consciously present to both Hughes and Plath from the beginning. Plath expressed her joy at the wedding in terms of Caliban’s dream:

You said you saw the heavens open
 And show riches, ready to drop upon us.
 Levitated beside you, I stood subjected
 To a strange tense: the spellbound future.

[‘A Pink Wool Knitted Dress’]

The spell that binds that future is not his. Nor can we exclude our knowledge of what came of Caliban’s beautiful dream in his spellbound future, hunted down by Prospero’s hounds Fury and Tyrant.

As we have seen, in 1957/8 Hughes and Plath made frequent use of a ouija board. Pan affirmed that there was a life after this life. When Plath asked how her father was Pan replied: ‘in plumage of raw worms’. Hughes’ Prospero-like plan in using the Ouija had been, according to Plath’s poem ‘Dialogue Over a Ouija Board’:

to dredge up
 Pools, prophecies and such from the unfathomed
 Bottom of your brain.

And of course to give Plath access to similar depths within herself. He recalls that during their sessions at the Ouija board,

‘spirits’ would regularly arrive with instructions for her from one Prince Otto, who was said to be a great power in the underworld. When she pressed for a more personal communication, she would be told that Prince Otto could not speak to her directly, because he was under orders from the Colossus. And when she pressed for an audience with the Colossus, they would say he was inaccessible. It is easy to see how her effort to come to terms with the meaning this Colossus held for her, in her poetry, became more and more central as the years passed. [Winter Pollen, 180]

It seems that to begin with Plath saw Hughes as a Lord of power who could control the world of spirits. In the copy of *The Colossus* which Plath gave to Hughes on its publication in 1960 she wrote: ‘FOR TED of whom Colossus and Prince Otto learn their craft and art’. It is as though she trusted his most potent art to control these rough spirits and tame them for her poetic uses. But things began to go wrong with the ouija sessions. For Plath the ouija served merely as a mouthpiece for her father, now exalted to a potent god of the underworld, the ocean depths:

It is a chilly god, a god of shades,
Rises to the glass from his black fathoms. [‘Ouija’]

Pan’s messages to her were all invitations to join her father in those chilly depths. She intended at one stage to call her first collection *Full Fathom Five*:

It relates more richly to my life and imagery than anything else I’ve dreamed up: has the background of *The Tempest*, the association of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist’s subconscious, of the father image - relating to my own father, the buried male muse and god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted, to the sea-father Neptune - and the pearls and coral highly-wrought to art: pearls sea-changed from the ubiquitous grit and sorrow and dull routine. [Journals 223]

What she does not say in the journal entry is that the poem ‘Full Fathom Five’ ends with her sense of exile from his sea-bed kingdom and desire for death by drowning:

Father, this thick air is murderous.
I would breathe water.

Pan stated that his favourite Hughes poem was ‘Pike’ (‘I like fish’) and his favourite Plath poem was ‘Mussel Hunter’ (‘Kolossus likes it’), a poem about a heroic crab which suicidally turns its back on its appropriate element. Pan suggested that Plath should write about the Lorelei, because they were her ‘own kin’:

The subject appealed to me doubly (or triply): the German legend of the Rhine sirens, the sea-childhood symbol, and the death-wish involved in the song’s beauty. [246]

The poem ends:

At the source
Of your ice-hearted calling -
Drunkenness of the great depths.
O river, I see drifting

Deep in your flux of silver
Those great goddesses of peace.

Stone, stone, ferry me down there.

All this material surfaces in Hughes' poem 'Setebos'. Here Hughes relinquishes the role of Prospero to Plath's mother 'flying her magic in / To stage the Masque and bless the marriage'. Hughes is Ferdinand: 'My wreckage / Was all of a sudden a new wardrobe, unworn'. Ariel 'our aura', Caliban 'our secret'. Sycorax is the presiding goddess 'in the wings / Of the heavens, like director / Studying the scenes to come'. When the script overtook them

I heard

The bellow of your voice
 That made my nape-hair prickle when you sang
 How you were freed from the Elm. I lay
 In the labyrinth of a cowslip
 Without a clue. I heard the Minotaur
 Coming down its tunnel-groove
 Of old faults deep and bitter. King Minos,
 Alias Otto - his bellow
 Winding into murderous music. Which play
 Were we in?

If this is a version of *The Tempest*, it is one in which not Prospero but Setebos is restored to his kingdom, and claims Miranda as his bride. Hughes reverts to a helpless Caliban:

I crawled

Under a gabardine, hugging tight
 All I could of me, hearing the cry
 Now of hounds.

The depression or chill or prickle of nape-hair which had been an aside, a momentary digression in the prose, here becomes the whole subject. In the prose Plath's singing how she was freed from the Elm had been the triumphant birth-cry of Ariel. As recently as the 1995 essay the Elm had been celebrated as the locus of 'the essential mythic drama', the Osirian resurrection, 'the actual achievement of transformation and rebirth, from the despairingly mourned death of love in the father's coffin to the newborn voice and terrible vitality of the bereft love returning to life, the awakening of *Ariel* itself' [U.S. *Winter Pollen*, 475]. And the dead father is still celebrated there as 'the presiding genius of her authentic self'. In the prose the elm is cast in the role of the split pine from which

Ariel is to be released. It is clearly the doorway to the spirit world and the world of the dead of ancient myth. In 'Childbirth', a poem written before he met Plath, Hughes had recognized that the womb-door is a dangerous aperture. Open it a 'furious inch' and 'all the dead could have got back'. Now he records a 'worst dream ... your dream or mine?' in which 'you had to lift / The coffin lid an inch' ['A Dream']. What comes up through the elm-door in the form of a dark malign night-bird 'looking, with its hooks, for something to love', is the spirit of the dead father, seeking not reconciliation and freedom, but total possession:

And I sleepwalked
 Like an actor with his script
 Blindfold through the looking glass. 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. ['The Table']

In 'The God' he writes:

The little god flew up into the Elm Tree.
 In your sleep, glassy-eyed,
 You heard its instructions. When you woke
 Your hands moved. You watched them in dismay
 As they made a new sacrifice.
 Two handfuls of blood, your own blood,
 And in that blood gobbets of me,
 Wrapped in a tissue of story that had somehow
 Slipped from you.

So the whole difficult labour, the attempt to free Ariel, the long alchemical process, has come to no more than 'finding your father for you and then / Leaving you to him' ['The Table'].

* * *

Hughes himself accepted that this was a true account of the central theme of *Birthday Letters*:

And yes, it's true – because I accepted her temperament & its apparent needs as a given set of facts, to be tended, humoured, cared for, cured if possible in the long term, and did not impose on her a whole new pattern of behaviour more actively extroverted & organized towards a disciplined engagement with the world, - I surrendered the chance to change her in other ways than by inward concentrated search for the essential voice of an essential self. If she had married a lawyer, a banker – as her mother wanted her to – well. god knows, maybe that would have been hopeless. God knows what way of life would have been better than the one we followed. Though in retrospect, it does read like the scenario written by her father, that she had to perform – and which I unwittingly directed so vigorously, with such fixed ideas, making such sacrifices, thinking we had all time ahead.

(Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, British Library, 2012, p.273.)

All the other stands of imagery lead to the same disaster. The imagery of fierce flames (in which they trusted the golden lotus could be planted) dominates the cover of *Birthday Letters* in one of their daughter's splendid paintings (balanced by the cool blue of Plath's 'kindly spirit', the jewel she lost). Prouty's image of the lamp turned too high had seemed at the time merely a failure of understanding, nerve and faith. But in *Birthday Letters* Hughes develops that image to the nth degree. The process of burning away the old false self and verse gets out of hand, becomes a holocaust:

I stepped back. That glare
 Flinging your old selves off like underthings
 Left your whole Eden radioactive. [‘Child’s Park’]

In the myth they thought they were enacting, Hughes' role was that of alchemist/midwife:

In the myth of your first death our deity
 Was yourself resurrected.
 Yourself reborn. The holy one. [‘Suttee’]

They were afraid of what they were doing:

Yet it was the only thing you wanted.
 Night after night, weeks, months, years
 I bowed there, as if over a page,
 Coaxing it to happen.

They find themselves in the wrong myth, engulfed by flames, as the new 'babe all burning bright' appears 'scorched with excessive heat', like the sacrificial Christ-child in Southwell's 'The Burning Babe':

And you had been delivered of yourself
 In flames. Our newborn
 Was your own self in flames.
 And the tongues of those flames were your tongues.
 I had delivered an explosion
 Of screams that were flames.

Plath did not want to be Christlike. She wanted fulfilment, not to be sacrificed as a 'child-bride / On a pyre', with the husband performing the part of the father:

Both of us consumed
 By the old child in the new birth -
 Not the new babe of light but the old
 Babe of dark flames and screams
 That sucked the oxygen out of both of us. ['Suttee']

What had gone wrong? Hughes believed unquestioningly in the Jungian process of individuation, derived, as it was, from Jung's study of those same quest narratives from world myth and folklore and literature with which Hughes himself was so familiar. He assumed that in this process Plath's all-too-evident obsessions, with her dead father and with death itself, would fall away as aberrations, products of the suppression of the true self, mere kindling in the pyre of her resurrection. But that did not happen. When Plath's dreams had 'burst their coffin' Hughes

woke upside-down in your spirit house
 Moving limbs that were not limbs,
 And telling, in a voice not my voice,
 A story of which I knew nothing,

Giddy
 With the smoke of the fire you tended
 Flames I had lit unwittingly
 That whitened in the oxygen jet
 Of your incantatory whisper ...
 Then you wrote in a fury, weeping
 Your joy a trance-dancer
 In the smoke in the flames.
 'God is speaking through me,' you told me.
 'Don't say that,' I cried. 'Don't say that.
 That is horribly unlucky!'
 As I sat there with blistering eyes
 Watching everything go up
 In the flames of your sacrifice
 That finally caught you too till you
 Vanished, exploding
 Into the flames
 Of the story of your God
 Who embraced you
 And your Mummy and your Daddy –
 Your Aztec, Black Forest
 God of the euphemism Grief. ('The God')

The true poetic voice, and therefore the true self that both Hughes and Plath had striven so single-mindedly to release, Hughes has consistently referred to as Ariel. This was, of course, the name Plath chose for her horse, and for her unpublished collection of poems. It means, in Hebrew, God's lioness. Hughes knew well that the lioness, any great cat, is an extremely dangerous symbol. In the Faas interview he described his own jaguar poems as 'invocations of a jaguar-like body of elemental force, demonic force':

The tradition is, that energy of this sort once invoked will destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one. In a perfectly cultured society one imagines that the jaguar-like elementals would be invoked only by self-disciplinarians of a very advanced grade. I am not one and I'm sure very few readers are, so maybe in our corrupt condition we have to regard poems about jaguars as ethically dangerous. [Faas 199]

Despite his protestations, Hughes was a self-disciplinarian, poetically, of a relatively advanced grade. He had his methods, in his work, of keeping the energies he invoked under control:

I wrote another jaguarish poem called 'Gog'. That actually started as a description of the German assault through the Ardennes and it turned into the dragon in Revelations. It alarmed me so much I wrote a poem about the Red Cross Knight just to set against it with the idea of keeping it under control ... keeping its effects under control. [200]

Hughes assumed that Plath, with his help, would find adequate controls for the energies they sought to release. Maybe if the crucial point had been reached earlier or later that might have been the case, but the moment was the worst possible, the moment of maximum rage, embodied in God's rampaging lioness. 'The symbol itself', Hughes wrote of the big cat, 'is unqualified, it is an irruption, from the deepest resources, of enraged energy - energy that for some reason or other has become enraged'.

Hughes records that Jung 'claimed to have detected in the dreams of Germans, between the wars, a rapidly increasing population of lions, panthers, big dangerous cats. Retrospectively, one interprets what that meant' [WP 263]. Plath's love/hate relationship with her German father tapped that same vein of Nazism in her last poems.

Retrospectively it is possible now for Hughes to interpret what Plath's imagery meant. His study of the drafts of 'Sheep in Fog', for example, reveals a subliminal myth, the story of Phaeton, connecting that poem with 'Ariel':

Phaeton, son of a mortal woman and Apollo (the god of the Sun and of Poetry), took his father's Sun-chariot for a run, and the solar horses, under his half-mortal hands, ran out of control through the heavens. The chariot, it might be supposed, was wrecked and he was killed. As an image of her Ariel flight in the chariot of the God of Poetry, which was also her attempt to soar (plunge) into the inspirational form of her inaccessible father, to convert her former physical suicide into a psychic rebirth, that myth is the parable of the book *Ariel* and of her life and death. [WP 200-1]

Four years later Hughes made the connection with the disastrous meltdown of Icarus:

In her final correction of the last three lines [of 'Sheep in Fog'], the speaker, who in 'Ariel' had been the Phaeton figure urging the flying horse into the sun (triumphant, albeit 'suicidal' and doomed to fall), suddenly becomes an Icarus, whose melting world threatens to let her through 'into a heaven', not of the sun and freedom, but 'starless, fatherless, a dark water'.³

* * *

The purpose of all serious poetry is to find a shape and meaning in the chaos of experience. For the whole of his career Hughes has sought for appropriate myths, or adaptations or amalgamations of myths, to help him in his effort to place his own little life in the context of permanent or recurrent experience in a world larger than the merely human. Both Hughes and, with his active encouragement and help, Plath made many such attempts. Their successes were temporary and subsumed by the final tragedy. *Birthday Letters* painfully records Hughes' continuing failure to make sense of those years. The alchemical myth of *The Tempest* cannot be made to serve as a template; nor do the models of some of his favourite poems such as 'The Burning Babe' and Owen's 'Strange Meeting' take him far. But the line in 'Otto' where Hughes refers to 'the dark adit / Where I have come looking for your daughter' hints that the true myth behind *Birthday Letters* (perhaps in a sense behind all his poems since 1963) had been the story of Orpheus and Euridice. In a message read for him at the award ceremony of the Forward Poetry Prize, Hughes said that writing *Birthday Letters* over about twenty-five years he had 'tried to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife, not thinking to make a poem, thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself and feel her there listening'.

The Orpheus story was the first that occurred to Hughes after Sylvia Plath's death. He rejected it as 'too obvious an attempt to exploit my situation' (Letter to KS). He did, however, write a version for children in 1970. Here Orpheus' music is the music of happiness only, happiness deriving from Euridice. It makes even the trees and stones dance. But a voice in his ear, like the voice of a spider, tells him that 'everything must be paid for'. When Euridice dies - 'Her voice has been carried away to the land of the dead' - 'Orpheus' hand suddenly becomes numb'. (Hughes wrote no adult poems for three years.) At last Orpheus decides to go the underworld to attempt to recover his wife. He uses his guitar like a shaman to make a road of sound to the bottom of the

³ *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, 2nd ed. Faber and Faber, 1993, p.41.

underworld, one note insanely repeated, gathering volume and impetus, and lands at the feet of Pluto, king of the kingdom of the dead. His wife, Pluto tells him, was the payment for his music. Orpheus plays a new music, a music not of beauty and happiness and life only, but of pain and all the cycles of death and renewal. This music causes Persephone herself to flower, the first time Pluto has seen her open since he snatched her from the upper world. Orpheus demands his own wife in return. Pluto cannot give him his wife: 'Your wife's body is crumbling to dust', but gives him her soul: 'Return to the world. Your wife's soul will be with you'. He returns, like so many of his heroes, 'a step, a step, and a step'. He cannot see or touch his wife, but he can hear her. She asks him to play for her:

The music was not the music of dancing
 But of growing and withering,
 Of the root in the earth and the leaf in the light,
 The music of birth and of death.
 And the stones did not dance. But the stones listened.
 The music was not the music of happiness
 But of everlasting, and the wearing away of the hills,
 The music of the stillness of stones,
 Of stones under frost, and stones under rain, and stones in the sun,
 The music of the seabed drinking at the stones of the hills.
 The music of the floating weight of the earth.
 And the bears in their forest holes
 Heard the music of bears in their forest holes.
 The music of bones in the starlight,
 The music of many a valley trodden by bears,
 The music of bears listening on the earth for bears.
 And the deer on the high hills heard the crying of wolves.
 And the salmon in the deep pools heard the whisper of the snows,
 And the traveller on the road
 Heard the music of love coming and love going
 And love lost forever,
 The music of birth and of death.
 The music of the earth, swaddled in heaven, kissed by its cloud
 and watched by its ray.
 And the ears that heard it were also of leaf and of stone.
 The faces that listened were flesh of cliff and of river.
 The hands that played it were fingers of snakes and a tangle of
 flowers.

Hughes avoided the story for decades in his work for adults, even conspicuously omitting it from his *Tales from Ovid*. But in his very last work, his version of Euripides' *Alcestis*, (a work not commissioned, like all his other 'translations', but a work on which he chose to spend his increasingly precious time), feeling, perhaps, that in the long agony recorded in *Birthday Letters* he had finally paid for the right to lay claim to the story, he expanded a passing reference to Orpheus, a single sentence in Euripides, to a twenty-seven line recapitulation of the whole story.

Admetus has lost his wife Alcestis, and is consumed with guilt. He had mismanaged the situation. He had somehow let his wife's life slip through his fingers. Like Orpheus he had taken his happiness for granted:

So much confidence. So many blessings.
So much time!
So many decades ahead of us.

He finds himself

Thinking about Orpheus – in the thick of all this.
Thinking of the impossible.
How he went down there,
Into the underworld, the dead land,
With his guitar and his voice –
He rode the dark road
On the thumping of a guitar,
A horse of music.
He wrapped himself in his voice,
Death-proof, a voice of asbestos,
He went
Down and down and down.
You remember –
He went for his dead wife
And he nearly got her.

But for Admetus, in a play whose spirit of restoration is very like that of Shakespeare's last romances, the impossible happens. 'What was beyond belief' is accomplished: Alcestis is returned to him. Heracles says: 'She is yours. / All you thought you had lost – she is here'. Admetus' happiness is greater than ever, because now fully paid for:

We have taken the full measure of grief

And now we have found happiness even greater.
We have found it and recognized it.

Out of the sufferings of Prometheus and Orpheus, out of the decades of pain, Hughes finally distills this positive vision. The last words of his last work are:

Let this give man hope.

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Add material from 'On Sylvia Plath' and 'VI'